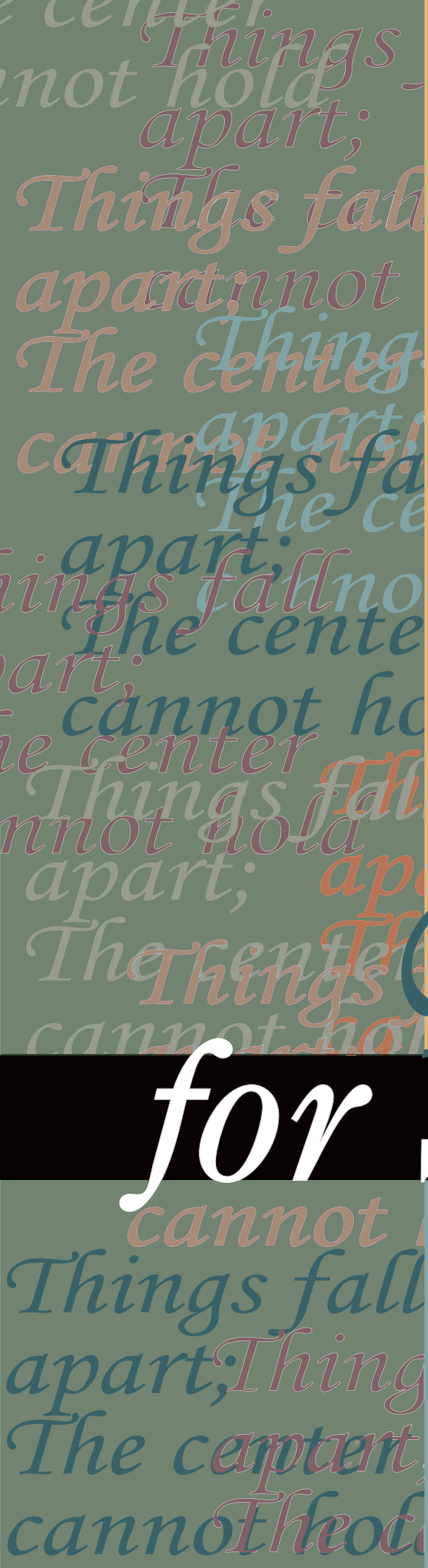
Poetry for Students





Volume 30

POETRY
for Students

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POETRY *for Students*

Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Poetry

VOLUME 30

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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 (if possible); 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. A unique feature of *PfS* is a specially commissioned critical essay on each poem, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each poem, information on media adaptations is provided (if 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 *DfS* are selected by surveying numerous sources on notable literary works and analyzing course curricula for various schools, school districts, and states. Some of the sources surveyed include: high school and undergraduate literature anthologies and textbooks; lists of award-winners, and recommended titles, including the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults.

Input solicited from our expert advisory board—consisting of educators and librarians—guides us to maintain a mix of "classic" and contemporary literary works, a mix of challenging and engaging works (including genre titles that are commonly studied) appropriate for different age levels, and a mix of international, multicultural and women authors. These advisors also consult on each volume's entry list, advising on which titles

are most studied, most appropriate, and meet the broadest interests across secondary (grades 7–12) curricula and undergraduate literature studies.

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: when permission has been granted, 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. 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 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.

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.

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 (if available).

Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.

Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

Media Adaptations: if available, a list of audio recordings as well as any film or television adaptations of the poem, including source information.

Topics for Further Study: 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.

Compare & Contrast: an "at-a-glance" comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century or early twenty-first 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 1990 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.

Other Features

PfS includes "Just a Few Lines on a Page," a foreword by David J. Kelly, an adjunct professor of English, College of Lake County, Illinois. 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**.

A Cumulative Index of First Lines (beginning in Vol. 10) provides easy reference for users who may be familiar with the first line of a poem but may not remember the actual title.

A Cumulative Index of Last Lines (beginning in Vol. 10) provides easy reference for users who may be familiar with the last line of a poem but may not remember the actual title.

Each entry may include illustrations, including photo 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*. Ed. Marie Napierkowski and Mary Ruby. Vol. 2. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 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. Critical Essay on "Angle of Geese." *Poetry for Students*. Ed. Marie Napierkowski and Mary Ruby. Vol. 2. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 7–10.

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* 30.2 (1984): 111–16. Excerpted and reprinted in *Poetry for Students*. Ed. Marie Napierkowski and Mary Ruby. Vol. 1 Detroit: Gale, 1998. 266–69.

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'." *A Life Distilled: Gwendolyn Brooks, Her Poetry and Fiction*. Ed. Maria K. Mootry and Gary Smith. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987. 177–80, 191. Excerpted and reprinted in *Poetry for Students*. Ed. Marie Napierkowski and Mary Ruby. Vol. 2. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 22–24.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editorial staff of *Poetry for Students* welcomes 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 contact the editor via E-mail at: **ForStudentsEditors@cengage.com.** Or write to the editor at:

> Editor, *Poetry for Students*
> Gale
> 27500 Drake Road
> Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535

Literary Chronology

1554: Sir Philip Sidney is born on November 30, in Kent, England.

1586: Sir Philip Sidney dies of an infection from a battle injury on October 17, in Anhelm, the Netherlands.

1593: Sir Philip Sidney's poem "Ye Goatherd Gods" is published.

1661: Anne Finch is born on April 12, in England.

1713: Anne Finch's poem "A Nocturnal Reverie" is published.

1720: Anne Finch dies of failed health on August 5, in England.

1794: William Cullen Bryant is born on November 3, in Cummington, Massachusetts.

1821: William Cullen Bryant's poem "Thanatopsis" is published.

1832: Lewis Carroll is born Charles Lutwidge Dodgson on January 27, in Daresbury, Cheshire, England.

1871: Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass,* which contains "The Walrus and the Carpenter," is published.

1874: Amy Lowell is born on February 9, in Brookline, Massachusetts.

1878: William Cullen Bryant dies on June 12, in New York, New York.

1894: e. e. cummings is born Edward Estlin Cummings on October 14, in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

1898: Lewis Carroll dies on January 14, in England.

1902: Langston Hughes is born James Langston Hughes on February 1, in Joplin, Missouri.

1913: May Swenson is born Anna Thilda May Swenson on May 28, in Logan, Utah.

1914: Amy Lowell's poem "The Taxi" is published.

1914: Octavio Paz is born on March 31, in Mexico City, Mexico.

1925: Amy Lowell dies from a cerebral hemorrhage on May 12, in Brookline, Massachusetts.

1926: Amy Lowell is a awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for *What's O'Clock*.

1926: Langston Hughes's poem "I, Too" is published.

1928: Anne Sexton is born Anne Gray Harvey on November 9, in Newton, Massachusetts.

1934: Wendell Berry is born on August 5, in Henry County, Kentucky.

1939: Seamus Heaney is born on April 13, in County Derry, Northern Ireland.

1940: e. e. cummings's poem "anyone lived in a pretty how town" is published.

1944: Alice Walker is born on February 9, in Eatonton, Georgia.

1947: Yusef Komunyakaa is born on April 29, in Bogalusa, Louisiana.

1952: Gary Soto is born on April 12, in Fresno, CA.

1954: Lorna Dee Cervantes is born on August 6, in San Francisco, California.

1956: May Swenson's poem "The Centaur" is published.

1957: Octavio Paz's *Sunstone* is published.

1962: Anne Sexton's poem "Young" is published.

1962: e. e. cummings dies on September 3, in North Conway, New Hampshire.

1966: Seamus Heaney's poem "Follower" is published.

1967: Anne Sexton is awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for *Live or Die*.

1967: Langston Hughes dies of congestive heart failure on May 22, in New York, New York.

1968: Wendell Berry's poem "The Peace of Wild Things" is published.

1974: Anne Sexton commits suicide on October 4, in Weston, Massachusetts.

1975: Alice Walker's poem "Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning" is published.

1981: Lorna Dee Cervantes's poem "Freeway 280" is published.

1983: Alice Walker is awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for her novel *The Color Purple*.

1985: Gary Soto's poem "Oranges" is published.

1989: May Swenson dies of a heart attack on December 4, in Ocean View, Delaware.

1990: Octavio Paz is awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

1991: Yusef Komunyakaa's poem "Slam, Dunk, & Hook" is published.

1994: Yusef Komunyakaa is awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for *Neon Vernacular*.

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

1998: Octavio Paz dies of spinal cancer in Mexico City, Mexico, on April 19.

Acknowledgments

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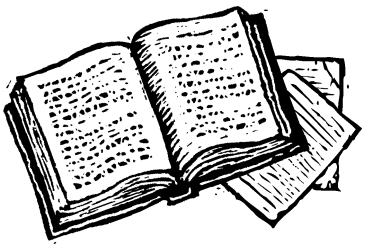
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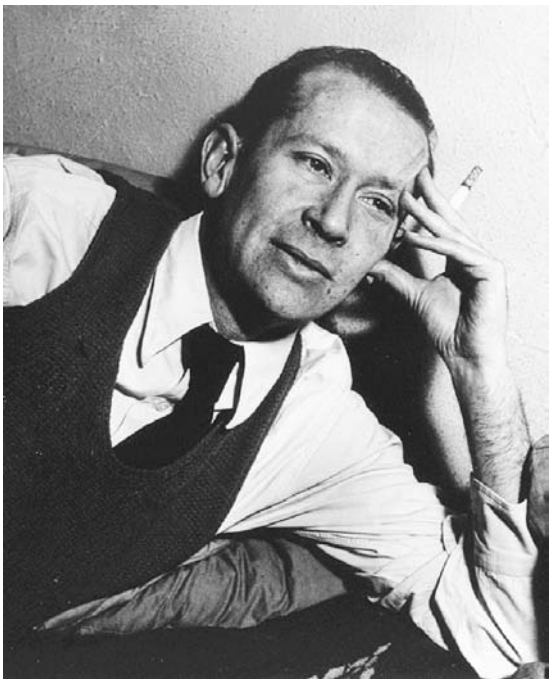
E. E. CUMMINGS

1940

The poem "anyone lived in a pretty how town" is one of the most anthologized works by one of America's most anthologized poets, e. e. cummings. Cummings, one of America's leading modernist poets, was known for his experimentation with capitalization, punctuation, and syntax (the sequence of arranged words) in his work. By playing with these elements of language, cummings challenged the very nature and meaning of language, often resulting in new and surprising meanings. Additionally, cummings rarely titled his poems, perhaps wishing to avoid giving them any added meaning outside of their text. Thus, although his poems were often numbered, they became known by their first lines, as is the case with "anyone lived in a pretty how town." The poem is also characteristic of cummings's style, and due to the syntactical acrobatics in "anyone lived in a pretty how town," the poem can be read in several ways. On one level, it is about the inner self and the individual in conventional (i.e., conformist) society. On another level, it is a love story between a figure named Noone (No one) and a figure named Anyone. On yet another level, the poem is about the passage of time.

First published as "No. 29" in 1940 in cummings's collection *50 Poems*, "anyone lived in a pretty how town" is widely available in anthologies and on the Internet. A recent anthology that features the poem is *Modern American Poetry*, edited by B. Rajan and published by Meyer Press in 2007.





e. e. cummings (AP Images)

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Edward Estlin Cummings, who wrote under the name e. e. cummings, was born on October 14, 1894, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. His mother was Rebecca Haswell, and his father, Edward Cummings, was a Harvard professor and later a well-known Unitarian minister. As a child, cummings wrote stories and poetry, and he also drew and painted. He was educated at Harvard University, earning an A.B. in 1915 and an M.A. the following year. While a student at Harvard, cummings was introduced to the poetry of Ezra Pound and Gertrude Stein, and he began to emulate the modernist aesthetic, publishing poems in the *Harvard Monthly*. In 1917, shortly after college, cummings joined the Norton Harjes Ambulance Corps of the American Red Cross, which allowed him to work as a medic, rather than as a soldier, during World War I. However, while stationed in France, cummings was imprisoned from September to December in a French military prison. This was brought about by his friendship with the suspected spy William Slater Brown, and by his pacifist beliefs. Cummings's first book, *The Enormous Room* (1922), provides a fictional version of his imprisonment.

Cummings's father actively petitioned for his son's release from prison, but when cummings returned to the United States in early 1918, he was almost immediately drafted into the army. World War I, however, was drawing to a close, and cummings never saw any military action in Europe as a soldier. He was released from duty that November. Cummings spent the next several years writing and publishing. He lived in Paris from 1921 to 1923, writing poetry and working on his paintings. Cummings's first collection of poems, *Tulips and Chimneys* (1923), already contained the elements that would become typical of his poetic style. Cummings published several collections of poetry throughout the 1920s, including *XLI Poems* (1925) and *is 5* (1926).

Upon his return to the United States in 1923, cummings moved to New York City. He married Elaine Orr on March 19, 1924. Their daughter, Nancy, was born that December, and the couple divorced that very month. Cummings's first play, *Him*, was published a few years later (in 1927) and it was staged in 1928. The work was dedicated to Anne Barton, whom cummings married on May 1, 1929. The couple soon separated (in 1932). Cummings then met Marion Morehouse, and he spent the rest of his life in a common law marriage with her. Thus, despite a decade filled with romantic turmoil and his father's death, cummings spent the 1930s publishing several volumes of poetry, an untitled collection of stories, a ballet, and the journal *Eimi* (1933). His first artistic exhibition was also held in New York City in 1931. Prints of this exhibition were collected and published as *CIOPW* that same year. Furthermore, the poems cummings produced during this period were his most experimental, playing with the visual representation of words upon the page and even going so far as to rearrange the spelling of individual words. His *Collected Poems* was published in 1938.

Though cummings continued to exhibit his artwork and publish poetry and other works throughout the 1940s, his poetic style had solidified, and his heretofore prolific output began to slow. Indeed, he only published two poetry collections during this decade, including *50 Poems* (1940), in which "anyone lived in a pretty how town" first appeared. By the 1950s, cummings began to receive recognition for his overall body of work. He held the post of Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry at Harvard from 1952 to 1953, and the lectures that he gave there were collected

and published as *I: Six Nonlectures* in 1953. Cummings's comprehensive collected poems were published as *Poems 1923–1954* in 1954. The following year, cummings was awarded a National Book Award special citation for the collection.

Cummings spent the final years of his life traveling throughout the country and giving lectures. He died at his summer home in North Conway, New Hampshire, on September 3, 1962. His remains are buried in Forest Hills Cemetery in Boston.

MEDIA ADAPTATIONS



- A short film adaptation, given the same title as the poem, was directed by George Lucas in 1967. The independent film was written by Lucas and Paul Golding.

POEM SUMMARY

Cummings's "anyone lived in a pretty how town" consists of nine four-line stanzas. The poem is predominantly written in tetrameter, or lines consisting of four feet (each foot represents one stressed syllable and one unstressed syllable).

Stanza 1

The first line of the poem, which is also the poem's title, introduces the character of Anyone and the picturesque village that he lives in. The next line mentions the sound of the bells that can often be heard in the town. Presumably this refers to church bells, which announce holidays, weddings, funerals, and other events that mark the passage of time and of individual lives. The third line lists the seasons, again underscoring the passage of time. The stanza's final line, which is a bit nonsensical, is meant to represent Anyone's exploits as he goes through life.

Stanza 2

The poem then mentions the other townspeople, stating that they do not concern themselves with Anyone. Instead, they go about conducting their small lives. The final line of this stanza mentions celestial bodies and precipitation, natural phenomena that, like the seasons, mark time as it passes.

Stanza 3

In the third stanza, a minority of the youngsters in the town have an inkling that Noone (who is first introduced in the final line of the stanza) is falling in love with Anyone. The children of the town, however, become less aware of those around them and more self-involved as they mature into adulthood. In the third line of the stanza, the list of the four seasons is repeated. Yet the order in which they appear has been changed. This change further emphasizes time and its passage.

Stanza 4

Mentioning trees and their leaves, as if to indicate that it is autumn (the first season mentioned in the list in the previous stanza), Noone's love for Anyone is expounded upon. She is happy when he is happy and sad when he is sad. The third line of the stanza perhaps indicates that the season has changed from autumn to winter. The stanza's final line once again underscores Noone's love for Anyone; anything related to him is of the utmost importance to her.

Stanza 5

Other people in the town, the Someones and the Everyones, wed and live together. They experience the happy and the sad moments of life. They rise in the morning and go to bed at night. They live out their lives in the rhythmic (and somewhat banal manner) in which lives are generally lived. The fourth and final line of this stanza implies that the townspeople die in much the same way as they have lived; i.e., as a matter of course.

Stanza 6

Stanza 6 opens with the aforementioned list of celestial bodies. The order, like the repeated list of the seasons, has been rearranged. In this instance, the changed order suggests that time has moved from day to night. This is reinforced by the second line of the stanza and the mention of winter. Only the winter (i.e., the passage of time) can address why children grow up and are no longer able to see the small mysteries of life around them. The second line of the first stanza, which refers to the bells heard throughout the town, is repeated. Indeed, this stanza mentions

children as they grow up and then links this to the church bells that ring to signify the events that mark the rhythms of life, such as birth, marriage, and death.

Stanza 7

Anyone dies and Noone mourns him. She, too, eventually dies, which is implied by the statement that they are buried beside each other. In a nod to the fact that life goes on, Anyone and Noone are interred by townspeople who live hectic lives and have little (if any) time to stop and reflect upon the burial. In the stanza's final line, time crawls by in small increments.

Stanza 8

As time passes, Anyone and Noone live in their deaths, a sort of slumber that is filled with dreams. Their bodies decompose and fuel the soil and the coming of spring.

Stanza 9

The townspeople are likened to the sounds of the church bells, and the list of seasons repeats itself in yet another variation on their order. The townspeople are born and they die. They live the same lives and this cycle repeats itself endlessly. In the final line, the celestial bodies are listed once more, though they retain the order in which they first appeared in the poem's second stanza.

THEMES

Passage of Time

One of the most prominent themes in "anyone lived in a pretty how town" is that of the passage of time. This is communicated in the thrice-repeated lists of seasons and of celestial bodies coupled with the rain. With one exception, each time the lists are repeated, the order in which they appear has been rearranged. Used to tell time long before the invention of clocks and calendars, the seasons, heavenly bodies, and weather are ancient signifiers of time as it passes. Additionally, there are two references to children growing up, one in stanza 3 and one in stanza 6. There are two references to the bells ringing through the town, and these are presumably church bells. Church bells ring for holidays, births, marriages, and deaths; in other words, all of the major events that punctuate a life as it progresses. The other, less straightforward, instances that capture the passage of time are the life and death of Anyone and Noone, and also of the townspeople, who live predictable and cyclic lives.

Mortality

The theme of mortality is linked to the theme of time as it passes. Death is the final outcome of the passage of time and also the event that most clearly measures time. In the poem, mortality is linked to the seasons (specifically winter) and to the heavens (specifically night, via the stars). These are the phenomena mentioned shortly before Anyone's death is announced. Death as it

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY



- Scanning a poem (identifying its rhythm and marking out the stressed and unstressed syllables) is a difficult but rewarding task. Research how to scan a poem, and then scan "anyone lived in a pretty how town." Write an essay in which you discuss how scanning the poem has enhanced your understanding of its themes, meaning, and structure.
- Study the lives and work of T. S. Eliot and Gertrude Stein, cummings's contemporaries. Give a class presentation in which you provide a biographical overview of all three writers and examine one poem by each of them. How are the poems similar? How are they different?
- Cummings, like many writers of his generation, often lived and worked in Paris. Study the 1920s and the historical context that may have contributed to the creation of an expatriate community of American writers in Paris. Write a report on your findings.
- Write a poem mimicking the style, themes, or form of "anyone lived in a pretty how town" and read your poem aloud to the class. Be prepared to discuss how your poem resembles the original.

is envisioned in the poem is not complete extinction, but rather a dream-filled slumber. In contrast to this pleasant image, life is busy and hectic; the townspeople rush about, attending to their daily business. This is particularly shown in stanza 5. The townspeople marry as a matter of course; they feel joy and sadness as a matter of course; they sleep and rise in the morning, little more than automatons. The life described is one without depth or reflection (as is indicated by the children who forget to notice the world as they age). Yet death is described as just the opposite; it seems that the dead are in a sense more alive than the living.

Individualism and Conformity

In "anyone lived in a pretty how town," Anyone is an individual in a sea of conformity. Anyone sings and dances, but the townspeople do not heed him or care about him. Indeed, they are too busy with their own lives to even notice him. Only the children, who will soon be too old and too busy to notice him as well, are able to see that Noone is falling in love with Anyone. In the midst of the love story of Anyone and Noone, the town life continues unaffected. The routine marriages of the townspeople, when contrasted to the love that Noone has for Anyone, seem small and unremarkable. Even the poem's speaker does not seem to care about Anyone; he mentions Anyone's death in an offhanded, and even flippant, manner. There are no details or dates attached to Anyone's death, only the mention that it happened at some point. Noone is the only person who mourns Anyone, though no one is left to mourn her when she dies. The two are buried by rushed townspeople who do not care for them, or for anyone but themselves and their affairs, for that matter. Whereas Anyone is an individual, the townspeople represent conformity. This is reinforced by the poem's final stanza, in which the people of the town are likened to the ringing bells of the church, i.e., little more than the background noise marking time as it passes. These uniform people come and go as steadily as the weather and the movement of the heavenly bodies. Yet, in death, they are like Anyone and Noone, sleeping in a dream-filled death. Given this reading, Anyone and Noone's names are highly ironic. Anyone's symbolic name makes him at once an individual and everyone.



Sun, moon, stars (Jupiter Images)

STYLE

Repetition

There are thirty-six lines in "anyone lived in a pretty how town," and eight of them are repetitions of or variants on a previous line. These repeated lines have to do with the list of the seasons, the list of celestial bodies and precipitation, and the bells ringing throughout the town. All of these repeated lines are related to the passage of time and therefore establish one of the poem's primary themes. Aside from these straightforward repetitions, there are two mentions of children forgetting things as they mature, and of the dream-filled slumber that describes death. The word *by* is also repeated several times throughout the poem, especially in the second half. The word is used to join similar or identical things, which is a repetition in and of itself. A popular phrase that demonstrates this usage is "one by one," though cummings uses far less conventional constructions in his poem.

Alliteration and Assonance

Alliteration, the repetition of initial consonant sounds in words or syllables placed close together,

occurs in much of the poem, as several lines use words that begin with the same letter. Line 4 is comprised of eight words, three of which begin with the letter *d* and four of which begin with *h*. In line 7, which is also eight words long, four words begin with *th*, and two begin with *s*. One could list almost endlessly the instances of alliteration that run throughout the poem. Assonance, the repetition of similar vowel sounds, is even more integral to the poem's construction. As *Explicator* contributor B. J. Hunt points out, repeated variations of *o* sounds (both long and short) and *ow* sounds are numerous. Even the poem's title contains examples of this particular assonance. Alliteration and assonance, after all, are just a more specific or stylized form of repetition.

Rhyme

Rhyme in all forms runs through this poem, which is more stylized than it at first appears to be. End rhymes (those occurring at the end of a line) appear in the first two lines of stanzas 1 through 4 and stanzas 8 through 9. Additionally, slant rhymes (involving words that almost rhyme) occur in the last two lines of stanza 2 and stanza 9. Internal rhymes (rhymes occurring within the same line) appear in slant form in lines 15 and 20. Because the rhymes in the poem occur with a sporadic regularity, "anyone lived in a pretty how town" avoids sounding too predictable (too sing-song), yet it also is stylized enough to sound mindfully poetic, elevated to a style that exists beyond normal speech.

Syntax

Syntactical inversion, the style for which cummings first became famous (or infamous), is evident throughout "anyone lived in a pretty how town." Even the title is an example of this inversion; its meaning could just as easily be communicated with the statement "Anyone lived in a pretty town." Without "how," however, the playful rhythm of the poem is lost. Brian Docherty, writing in *American Poetry: The Modernist Ideal*, observes that the second line of the poem, a disordered description of the sound of bells ringing in the town, could easily be reordered into a coherent sentence as well, simply by rearranging the words around the subject and the verb. Such unusual arrangements are evident throughout, particularly in line 6, which is perhaps the most straightforwardly disordered line in the poem. According to Docherty, cummings also uses words of all stripes as nouns. This is particularly the case in lines 4, 7, 10, 18, 20, and 35. These devices open up the poem for multiple interpretations while reinforcing its rhythmic form.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Modernism

Modernism is an artistic movement that began in the early twentieth century, reached its zenith during the 1920 and 1930s (coincidentally cummings's most prolific years), and remained a prominent movement well into the middle of the century. Modernism was prominent in both literature and the visual arts, beginning in Europe and later making its way to the United States. Several cultural upheavals gave rise to the movement. In nineteenth-century Western Europe, the dominant ideal exalted the progress of humanity over the concerns of the individual. But this began to change early in the twentieth century, in no small part accelerated by the unprecedented carnage of World War I. Arguably the world's first truly mechanized war, World War I caused artists to question the values of patriotism and politics, and they looked instead to the experience of the individual as a singular being (rather than a representative or part of mankind at large). This theme was also motivated by the question of what it meant to be a human in an increasingly mechanized world. Psychological writings by Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung were also influential, as were philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche (although Nietzsche lived in an earlier period, his last work appearing in 1888) and Jean-Paul Sartre. This paradigm shift in cultural and social values had widespread implications, resulting in new and varying approaches to the perception of reality, and thus to new and exciting modes of expression. For instance, authors such as James Joyce and William Faulkner were pioneers of the stream-of-consciousness style of writing. Writers such as Gertrude Stein and cummings challenged the very structure of language. Painters such as Pablo Picasso and Marc Chagall produced canvases that turned accepted modes of visual expression on their heads. Other influential modernist writers include Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Franz Kafka, and many more. The movement was so widespread and continuous that it is perhaps better described as an umbrella to several smaller movements, including imagism, surrealism, and cubism.

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **1940s:** Before telephone use is common, towns rely on the ringing of church bells as a form of mass communication. Until 1945, in the United States, less than half of all households have phones installed.

  Today: Telephones and mobile phones are ubiquitous, as are other forms of mass communication. Modern churches are rarely built with bells.

- **1940s:** The era of modernist poetry, in which poets challenged traditional poetic language, themes, and structures, is just coming to a close.

  Today: An important poetic movement of the day is New Formalism. The movement entails a return to traditional poetic forms and structures.

- **1940s:** The United States enters World War II following the Japanese attack on the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on December 7, 1941.

  Today: The United States is fighting two wars, in Afghanistan and Iraq. These wars were initiated in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, in New York City and Washington D.C.

Transcendentalism

Though cummings's work was thoroughly modernist in its style, it was often transcendental in its themes and content. Transcendentalism was particularly widespread in New England from 1830 to 1850. Given that cummings was born in New England in the late nineteenth century, it is extremely likely that he was familiar with transcendental writings and themes. Like modernism, transcendentalism was largely concerned with the experience of the individual, though from a far more spiritual angle. Transcendentalists believed in the innate divinity of the natural world and of humankind. Thus, they stressed the individual's insight and intuition as opposed to logical thought or organized religion. Furthermore, the idea that man was essentially divine was a stark departure from the reigning Calvinist philosophy of the day, which posited belief in original sin and man's inherently sinful nature. Prominent transcendental writers include Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

The poem "anyone lived in a pretty how town" is one of cummings's more accessible and popular works, and this is likely why it is so often anthologized. As critics note, the poem is representative of almost all of the characteristics that embody cummings's signature poetic style. One such characteristic is the serious themes that lie beneath what at first appears to be nonsense, both in form and content. For instance, *Explicator* contributor B. J. Hunt states that the poem "rolls across the tongue like a preschool song. . . . Masked, however, is life's monotony and death's certainty . . . everyone dies." Hunt also comments that whenever the sing-song lilt of the poem is disturbed, the disturbance "accentuate[s] death's poignant certainty by [the] negation of rhythmic harmony." Discussing another of cummings's characteristic devices in *American Poetry: The Modernist Ideal*, Brian Docherty indicates that cummings's syntactical acrobatics are particularly apt in regards to the human experience of the space-time continuum. Through cummings's play on word order, readers are "reminded that the normal linear word order in English locks our thinking about time and space into a mode which post-Einsteinian science has shown to be nonvalid, however convenient for mundane use."

More general critical responses to cummings's poetry have largely centered on the question of whether or not it should be seen as famous or infamous. While critics almost unanimously agree that cummings's groundbreaking work forever

changed the course of American poetry, there is considerable contention as to whether or not his poetry had any other merit to speak of. In an essay written just three years after the publication of *50 Poems* (in which "anyone lived in a pretty how town" first appeared), *American Literature* critic John Arthos argues that cummings's work is valuable in its own right. He "should not be allowed to fall from sight, or to be remembered only as one of the wild experimenters who came along after the last war [World War I]. For he represents even now, in a more terrible war [World War II], something that is valid and sweet in the human spirit, and something profound and strong—in short, beauty." Sadly, as the former United States poet laureate Billy Collins observes in his 2005 *Slate* essay, Arthos's admonitions have gone largely unheeded. Collins remarks that "a few of [cummings's] poems . . . are kept breathing due to the life-support systems of anthologies and textbooks, but except for these and a few other signature numbers, the body of his work has fallen into relative neglect." Collins concludes that "no list of major 20th-century poets can do without him, yet his poems spend nearly all of their time in the darkness of closed books, not in the light of the window or the reading lamp."

WHAT DO I READ NEXT?



- Cummings's *50 Poems* (1940), which includes "anyone lived in a pretty how town," contains some of the poet's more accessible and (relatively) straightforward poems. Written after cummings had established his signature style, the collection is a fine example of the poet's maturing work.
- For a look at cummings's more visual poems (those with meaning largely derived from typographical arrangement), see his first collection of poetry, *Tulips and Chimneys* (1923).
- World War I directly affected the modernist movement, and Robert H. Zieger's *America's Great War: World War I and the American Experience* (2001) provides insight on the social and cultural effects of the war.
- Gertrude Stein was a contemporary of cummings's, and she also experimented with syntax in her work. Like cummings, the value of her writing outside of its modernist context is somewhat contested. The *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein* (1990) is an extensive introduction to her work.

CRITICISM

Leah Tieger

Tieger is a freelance writer and editor. In this essay, she places "anyone lived in a pretty how town" in the context of cummings's entire poetic output and argues that the poem is more closely aligned with transcendentalism than modernism.

Several critics comment that cummings's writings are transcendental in their overarching themes of individuality and spirituality (the very touchstones of transcendental thought). Certainly, "anyone lived in a pretty how town" is no exception. The poem's themes of the passing of time and of mortality mirror the transcendentalist ethos of spirituality. Its focus on the individual (whose significance is as lost to society as it is to death) represents the transcendental disgust for conformist society. Furthermore, the exalted love between Noone and Anyone also reinforces a transcendental philosophy. Love, like the seasons, is a driving force in the poem. Anyone and Noone love each other as they age. Their love is set apart from the ordinary marriages of the other townspeople, who marry as mundanely as they live. Certainly, the love between Anyone and Noone becomes the means through which they are further distinguished as individuals.

Noone laughs when Anyone is happy and she cries when he is sad. Their love is so magical it can only be seen by children (who lose their individuality as they become entrenched in, and consumed by, society). Later, Noone and Anyone are hastily buried beside each other, and life simply goes on as it always has. Noone and Anyone did not matter to society when they were alive, and they do not matter when they are dead. Yet their love both does and does not matter in the face of death. For instance, while it does not matter to the townspeople, as the bodies of Noone and Anyone become one with the soil their spirits live on in their love, a



IF NATURE IS EVIDENCE OF GOD, AND IF THE NATURAL PHENOMENA OF SEASONS, CELESTIAL BODIES, AND PRECIPITATION ARE USED TO COMMUNICATE THE PASSAGE OF TIME AND ULTIMATELY OF MORTALITY, ONE COULD THEN CONCLUDE THAT MORTALITY ALSO SERVES AS PROOF OF GOD'S EXISTENCE."

phenomenon that is indicated by line 32. Yet even when they are alive, the exalted love between Anyone and Noone is almost entirely spiritual. The one physical embodiment of the romance between them is the kiss that Noone bestows on Anyone's face after he has died.

This almost complete absence of physical love should be seen in the context of cummings's development as a poet. Rushworth M. Kidder, writing in *E. E. Cummings: An Introduction to the Poetry*, comments on Cummings's earlier love poems, which are far more erotic than "anyone lived in a pretty how town." Kidder makes the following observation about cummings's erotic poems:

> In an odd and inverted way, these poems are pleas for purity and balance, stifled cries for a higher vision of human love coming out of a wilderness of sensual indulgence. . . . These assertions that flesh is at worst gross and at best slightly unsatisfactory prepare the way of his later metaphysic: to show the repulsiveness of carnality is to prove the need for its opposite.

In other words, the presentation of baser physicality underscores the presence of spiritual love in the form of its absence. As cummings matured as an artist, this spirituality became ever more present.

The transcendental undertones of the exalted love between Anyone and Noone are further explained by Brian Docherty in *American Poetry: The Modernist Ideal*. Docherty states that "cummings's love for the natural world and those free individuals who are able to love and be loved, makes him a true heir of [Ralph Waldo] Emerson." Clearly, this statement can be applied to Anyone and Noone, the only named characters in the poem who are undeniably "free individuals . . . able to love and be loved." (Notably, Docherty adds that cummings "represents the end of the New England Transcendentalist tradition.") Kidder goes a step further, positing that the bulk of cummings's work is about love. "If Cummings has one subject, that is it." Tracing the evolution of cummings's poetry from an initial exploration of erotic love followed by "a sometimes amorphous phenomenon seasoned by a not entirely unselfish lust," Kidder states that in his later work, love "has come to be a purified and radiant idea, unentangled with flesh and worlds, the agent of the highest transcendence." Kidder concludes that this "is not far, as poem after poem has hinted, from the Christian conception of love as God."

Love, however, is not the only transcendental motif in "anyone lived in a pretty how town." Nature, which also features in most transcendental themes, is represented in the seasons, the snow, the rain, and the moon (which are repeated throughout the poem in varying order to represent time as it passes). An integral part of transcendentalist thought, nature is believed to be the proof of God's existence. Yet although the poem is less concerned with God's existence than with Anyone's existence, nature is still the driving force of the town and its people; they live, love, and die amidst the passing seasons and the ringing of church bells. If nature is evidence of God, and if the natural phenomena of seasons, celestial bodies, and precipitation are used to communicate the passage of time and ultimately of mortality, one could then conclude that mortality also serves as proof of God's existence. Certainly, the conception of mortality as a dream-filled sleep (a nod toward an afterlife of some sort) gives this idea some validity. This argument is also bolstered by Kidder, who writes that cummings's work gives credence "to intuition, to the sensibilities, to the human capacity for responding to metaphysical reality in ways that are beyond the rational." These very principles are demonstrated in "anyone lived in a pretty how town." One example is the children who notice the love between Anyone and Noone, but are no longer able to see that love as they mature into adults. Another is the description of death as something akin to a dream. Death is described in terms that make it a far more interesting plane of existence than the rhythmic and mundane lives that are lived by the townspeople.

The townspeople, of course, are integral to an understanding of cummings's transcendental

philosophy. The Someones and the Everyones of the town wed and live together. They experience the happy and the sad moments of life. They rise in the morning and go to bed at night. They live out their lives in the rhythmic (and somewhat banal) manner in which lives are generally lived. They also die in much the same way as they have lived, i.e., as a rather dull matter of course. Earlier in his career, cummings coined the term "mostpeople" as a means of expressing his contempt for conformity (another fundamental principle of transcendentalism). Jenny Penberthy, writing in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, describes "mostpeople" as those who "follow orders" and "do their duty," as opposed to "the individual [who] is true to himself." Cummings explained the term himself in the preface to his 1938 volume *Collected Poems*. In an excerpt from that preface (quoted in Penberthy), cummings states:

> The poems to come are for you and for me and are not for mostpeople—it's no use trying to pretend that mostpeople and ourselves are alike. Mostpeople have less in common with ourselves than the squareroot of minusone. You and I are human beings; mostpeople are snobs. . . . Life, for mostpeople, simply isn't. Take the socalled standard of living. What do mostpeople mean by 'living'? They don't mean living.

The form of "anyone lived in a pretty how town" also underscores the poem's transcendental content. Cummings, notably, was a painter, and one could argue that his more visual poems were less inspired by the literary zeitgeist (mode of the day) than the visual arts of the day (such as Cubism). Cummings's visual poems are characterized by broken lines, a lack of punctuation or capitalization, words joined together, as well as words, letters, or punctuation arranged typographically so as to form a discernible image. They are less modernist poetry than they are pieces of modernist art. Because "anyone lived in a pretty how town" is decidedly not a visual poem in this sense, it divorces itself from cummings's more modernist undertakings; thus its transcendental leanings become even more clear. Other poems by cummings written in this vein include "maggie and milly and molly and may,""my father moved through dooms of love," and "the Cambridge ladies who live in furnished soul" (among many, many others). This interesting phenomenon regarding form and content in cummings's work is remarked upon by Penberthy, who observes that, "in general, he reserved the sonnet or metrical forms for his more serious poems which embody a complex, transcendent vision. The looser, more experimental poems, on the other hand, aim to communicate concrete sensations and perceptions in all their existential immediacy." This observation has also been made by Norman Friedman in *E. E. Cummings: The Growth of a Writer* (quoted in Kidder), who states that "there is an organic relation between the poet's technique and his purposes." Friedman adds that cummings typically "uses metrical stanzas for his more 'serious' poems, and reserves his experiments by and large for his free verse embodiments of satire, comedy, and description."

As Kidder notes, "where life for the early Cummings was a matter of birth, maturity, and decay, for the late Cummings it consists in birth, maturity, and transcendence." It would seem that "anyone lived in a pretty how town" lies right on the cusp of this transition. It contains none of the earthy or erotic subject matter, satire, or experimental typography of the earlier works. Yet it is not quite as overtly transcendental as his later works, which were typically shorter, more concise meditations. Nevertheless, "anyone lived in a pretty how town" is squarely grounded in the traditions of transcendentalism. It is equally grounded in cummings's progression as an artist.

Source: Leah Tieger, Critical Essay on "anyone lived in a pretty how town," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2009.

B. J. Hunt

In the following essay, Hunt discusses the masking of monotony and death in cummings's "anyone lived in a pretty how town."

E. E. Cummings's "Anyone Lived in a Pretty How Town" rolls across the tongue like a preschool song. On one hand, the playful rhythm and sound complement nature's sequences where life cycles rotate throughout the nine stanzas like a merry-go-round, life on a proverbial fast-paced playground. Masked, however, is life's monotony and death's certainty as the four-line stanzas, mostly tetrameters that mirror the four seasons, lead, perhaps, to an immutable certainty: everyone dies.

The poem opens with light, harmonious double dactyls in line 1: "anyone lived in a pretty how town." Playful rhythm continues in subsequent dactyls such as "women and men (both little and small)" (5), "someones married their everyones" (17), and "many bells down" (2, 24) that stream into trochees like "pretty" (1), "summer autumn winter" (3), and iambs like "with up so floating"

(2, 24). Bells, which often announce important events in small-town communities such as weddings or funerals, seemingly sway in varied meter that carries a carefree rising and falling as if the "many bells" celebrate life or joyfully acknowledge "anyone," a youthful "he" who "sang" and "danced" (4) in the "spring" of life. But "spring," the only monosyllabic foot in line 3, harbors the undertones of isolation and mortality that begin to emerge. By line 24, which repeats line 3, the bells seemingly toll for death, a solitary journey. Stanza 6 further suggests the human winter in "stars" (21) and especially "snow" (22), which often suggest a metaphorical season of death.

Monosyllabic feet such as "sun moon stars rain" (8), also break the easygoing pace to emphasize certain maturity for "anyone" toward the summer ("sun") of life, which occurs without significance to others who "cared not [. . .] at all" (6) as if to focus on human isolation in the midst of humanity. Only the children in the third stanza notice that "anyone" and "noone" (12), the female persona, fall in love. As "someones married their everyones" (17), the poem increasingly hints of monotony and life's insignificance. Interestingly, line 12 contains three feet rather than four. The trimeter reinforces "autumn" (11), often considered the metaphorical golden years of life as time like the line runs short. Line 23 contains two falling dactyls anchored around a rising anapest that gives a seesaw effect reflective, perhaps, of the children's inevitable maturity and constant cycles of birth and death. The line's extra foot creates contrast between "remember" and the fact that everyone "forget[s]" or is forgotten in time. The "snow" (22) suggests unavoidable death, which occurs in stanza seven as seasons continuously churn. As "anyone" and "noone" die, notably, the seasons turn perpetually to "april" (31) or spring, and back to "summer" (34) or "sun" (34) suggestive, perhaps, that in the midst of life death exist—yet, life goes on.

Also, the poem is highly alliterative and euphonic. Assonance dominates with variations on vowel sounds, especially o as in ow, which occurs three times in the first stanza alone: "how town" and "down." The sound is repeated in "down" (10), "now" (13), and "how" (23). Long os flow throughout in words like "so," "floating," "both," "sowed," "noone," "hope," "snow," and "sowing" (1, 5, 7, 12, 19, 22, 24, 22, 35). A sustained ooo courses along in words such as "moon," "few," "grew," and "stooped" (8, 9, 10, 21, 26, 36). The resulting ow-oh-oo seems playful, yet mournful as they drench the poem in a sense of unhindered progression toward sorrow and death. They might be happy ohs or sad oh nos.

"THUS HE COMBINES IMAGES WHICH ARE SO UNRELATED TO EACH OTHER AS TO BE ALMOST UNIMAGES MERELY BECAUSE OF THEIR ASSOCIATIONAL QUALITY"

Rhymes, internal, end, and slant, hide the immutable force, time that orders human life. "By," "by," and "cried," for instance, seem inconsequential until the reader slows on cacophonous gutturals like ir in "bird" and "stir" in stanza 4, while "grief" or sadness, underscored by "still," imply that by and by grief awaits. "Deep" and "sleep" (29, 30), one of six end rhymes which normally render pleasure, also guide the reader's attention to inescapable death. Some lines end in slant rhymes like "same" "rain" (7, 8), "guess" "face" (25, 26) and accentuate death's poignant certainty by negation of rhythmic harmony.

Source: B. J. Hunt, "Cummings's 'Anyone Lived in a Pretty How Town,'" in *Explicator*, Vol. 64, No. 4, 2006, p. 226.

Philip Green

In the following "unessay," Green mimics cummings's style while commenting on the poet's use of unrelated images and problematic punctuation.

this unessay is for you and me and is not for mostpeople. This unessay is about culturepoetryandlove (not really love it is more about unnotlove) and most people do not understand culturepoetryandunnotlove but you and I will understand it. we!

this unessay is also about communication which is like flowers and moons only not really whom flowers and moons are only for feel (ing o isn't that nice), but communication is more like razor-blades and electric eggbeaters; it is made for use It is utilitarianand so at least partially rational and so unfortunately is

any

po (iloveyou) em. poems have writers which is what eecummings is but they also have readers which is what you and i who are not unpeople

are what you and i and eecummings being not unwhich have in common is, we, use language, which is also what communication is really except smoke-signals even which are also language.

what you and i and cummings have in common even more than roses is also not only language but also the Same Language ie english; a frenchman would have a hell of a time reading cummings' poetry unless he happened to speak english which unfortunately most frenchmen do not [and that would not help more than little-much even if he did for many of cummings' poems] (and the really go

go

good ones like somewhere I have never travelled or my love thy head or the great advantage of being alive are not really very unsame from any other uninpoems)

because most of them are not very anything but tricks and games saying unthings nearly or things that leave you with a vague feeling of feeling (my red red rose) goodness which is often not nearly poetry but unorganized sound or emotion like if i wrote I love you i Love you i lOve you i loVe you i lovE you i love You six times.)

What eecummings is doing withah-POETRY!? in his own syntactical way is really allthetime the same thing which I shall describe to wit . . . he is recreating his emotional experiences of looking at treesmoonsrainsnowlovemotherskythighetc or maybe even his dreams and he wants you to too and see how undead and thingish they are . . . what gets in his way is paper and Language which is why: once feeling is described it is not feeling any more but it is anaboutfeeling which is a farfar differentthing and you do not feel it but the telling about it in words which have logical relation ships topreposition eachadjective othersubstantive and that must therefore be intelligent in some way or one might say (or might not) rational (lyordered) and which are as i said not pure feeling which is immediate and emotional and unconventionally ordered.

eecummings is trying to get away from unliveness which destroys his feelings so he if i may quote someone else frEEEs language, that is he destroys ITS order until he thinks it looks (and this is where the problem) the same as HIS feeling, and/or (comes in) he uses words which are things with both denotations and connotations purely for their connotative which is usually emotional effect. ! Thus he combines images which are so unrelated to each other as to be almost unimages merely because of their associational quality which gives you the feeling he wants as in Cambridge ladies living in furnished souls or not even the rain has such small hands, and in which the feeling is even en Hanced because of the shock of such un nopersoned juxtaposition. He does this very well and it is why many of his poems are extremely unbad and rather o I'm going to go out and kiss the lips of the treesish at least if you are a romantic and an o how I love things which ought to be loved and an I shall lie with the warm body of the earthish person which i am and you are and all disinunnonhumans are. How!

and similarly is what else he does to us with his syntactics, in two ways: first with normal-wordorder and pun, ctu! ation? which is most ordinary when he merely reverses it or leaves it out; he does often much more fiendish, things? Second with the parts of speech which he mixes up like the muchness of summer rain until all, being being, are one with each other, this is not nocuous when he simply forgets capitaL letters and periods and other unbeautiful whatnots that aren't the snow soaking into the belly of the Earth or what have you;? after the first shock which was in the 1920's anyway you don't notice because these things are not either logical or illogical in themselfish's being only conveniences like a woman in a bar

And he is often (SUCCESS)

full, mixing up which's and whom's and all the King's words. As an example take (as the evening takes the sun) for instance a line like down shall go which and up come who—which conveys although i must admit only after a little thought the idea that people which are really am are better than things which are really not which is one of the things this poem—what if a much of a which of a wind, which is another line that very admirably does what he wants it to, is emphasizes—is about

However, in most of his poetry if you use the criterion of merely counting noses like any anaesthetizedimpersonalunbeing mathematician which don't get down and sssss

UCK the good earth, or mud when it rains, it fails. Of course there are some people though I will not admit for this occasion that

they are not unpeople who think or perhaps i should say feel differentl-y. lionel trilling for instance who is a critic of some renoun says and in the fullness of my heart i quote "The parts of speech that we all thought were merely 'modifiers' or 'relatives' or 'dependents' have learned from him their full, free existence."

this, I am afraid I must sub (which is a prefix meaning under and appears to make no sense placed before) mit, is so much bal! der dAS

h.

in a life which consists mostly of ironclad conventions, language is about the most ironcladandconventional and the last stand at the barricades will do you no good thing there is. And even though mr cummings and by implication mr trilling are in their anarchic goodness trying to free Language they cannot because Language is like Poland perpetually enslaved. The fact of the matter is that language (L) is a strict form logically constructed being indeed as mr carnap or mr hemple would be the first to tell you constructed on the same principles as any mathematical order Of course it is, not; necessary that we perceive it as such all the time, particularly in poetry because words and syntax develop their own conventions within a (convention) that form a short of sort-hand for quicker and more perhaps poetic understanding, as when eec writes that time is a tree this life one leaf which as stated is not strictly true but which convinces the casual reader because the image is self-consistent and is a concept which has been made unstartling (enough b)y previous usage.

but i must repeat the emphasis is still on the word convention " ", which is inevitable though reasonably limitable by any good poet for two reasons. The first of these is that any word or groupofwords comes or come to us with a history and tradition much like the German folk or the english parliament, which has been soaKE

d up through the ages and inculcated in all readers of poetry and poets except apparently mr cummings and mr trilling. What eec is doing is to take words ordinarily denotative and make them connotative like fragile which he uses to qualify almost everything under the sun not to mention the sun, or also to invent new connotations for words ordinarily used in a connotative sense. What happens too often is that the burden of meaning he puts on a denotative or conventionally connotative and therefore w$^{eak}_{ord}$ is too heavy; the word snapS and we are left with no meaning at all or an incoherent meaning as if he were stroking your back, it feels so nice but can you tell me about it? The weight referred to is that of mr cummings' private experience and perceptions which of necessity mustin their original state be unshared by the reader who has had his own experience and has found the triangular why of a dream is not to quote mr cummings blue and is furthermore not triangular and is indeed not why. Of course i am not saying that eec must only use words which a particular reader understands in context—the, line, we draw for permissibly avoiding unlivemassman convention is a pragmatic one at best but unfortunately eec is prone to overstep it, even at its most tolerant, as in the foregoing quotation which may sound very pleasant but poetry is unhappily not music it is impossible to elucidate the meaning or even the feeling of the phrase. The poet must grant the reader some rapport even if he doesn't like us because we're not undead or else his poetry becomes purely subjectivistic which is fine for writing on your tablecloth but not necessarily so good for printing in a public place unless you happen to be an anarchist, which I am not and you are probably not.

Second, we must refer to the similar but much more destructive problem of cummings' punc (tuation)? and typography which is to say that he $_{all}$ow$_{s}$ some

his poem$_{s}$ of

to sprawl all o ^{v} e (r)

the printed to use the word loosely page, with little marks that used to be commas and similar unthings stuck in unGodly places,

Mr cummings is in this regard working on the theory of direct communication i assume that i referred to earlier, which is that he is desir-ous of avoiding the stultification of prescribed form which will hinder the direct expression of his experiences. So that if he wants let us say to emphasize some metaphor about water dribbling on to the sidewalk for instance why he simply lets the words

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or to describe a k$^{i}_{t}$e he makes some kind of arrangement which is supposed to suggest a kite but is not a kite and cannot even really suggest a kite because a kite is a thing is unwords and exists in space not in time which is what words exist in; and because words are not things but are things ABOUT things or symbols and are experienced not directly but at one remove from experience. They are descriptions and a poem too in a description and since comprehension of descriptions occurs through the use of the intelligence the description itself must be intelligent even if this is unwhich and notmost. The trouble with cummings' poems which are really unpoems may be stated also psychologically; cummings breaks up w/o(r)-ds and chops them into pieces and mis: punctuate, s and extraCAPITALIZES and half-parenthesizes and (all to emphasize what he thinks are the feelings inherent in ordinary boring words like anonymous which has an US in it which is i suppose you and i making love. But this unphotographic-minded reader reads one word at a time and must therefore rearrange as he goes along because words will be words and demand that they be perceived in the same oldreary way that they have been for the last few hundred years, i. e. one at a time and oneafteranother and in one (1) piece and even spelled bourgeoiscorrectly. If i scrawl f,

l a ^{o*} tin,
g! ( )

in little pieces from here to eternity you are still going to read it as floating eventually if you die in the attempt and your effort to do this creates a battle between the reader and the poem which has nothing to do with the usual tension of unprose. It is just a damnuisance.

on the whole of course cummings has written a lot of doublemuchunugly poems which are very nice to read because he knows lots of not beautiful words which are unthings but words about beautiful things, and when i see the word spring whee with a few other such words surrounding it i want to go out and

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on the grass and sniff dandelions which is a very nice thing to do especially in springtime. But most of these poems are ones in which the images have at least something to do with anyone or anything and the words are written one after another. As a matter of fact which is a subtle way of saying that my next sentence will probably be incorrect, those unconventional oddities of eec's which are good, such as what if a much of a which of a wind, are good precisely because they combine the best features of innovation with convention being in the most respected ladyyourlipsaredivineandiloveyou tradition: they are in a given context logical (he'd never forgive me for saying this) changes, structured intelligently and (your pardon ee) rationally; in short they make (o world o death) sensE.

Source: Philip Green, "an unessay on ee cuMmingS," in *New Republic*, Vol. 138, No. 20, May 19, 1958, pp. 24–26.

R. P. Blackmur

In the following excerpt, Blackmur discusses the "typographical peculiarities" in cummings's poetry.

In his four books of verse, his play, and the autobiographical *Enormous Room*, Mr. Cummings has amassed a special vocabulary and has developed from it a special use of language which these notes are intended to analyse and make explicit. Critics have commonly said, when they understood Mr. Cummings' vocabulary at all, that he has enriched the language with a new idiom; had they been further interested in the uses of language, they would no doubt have said that he had added to the general sensibility of his time. Certainly his work has had many imitators. Young poets have found it easy to



HE BELIEVES HE KNOWS WHAT HE KNOWS, AND NO DOUBT HE DOES. BUT HE ALSO BELIEVES, APPARENTLY, THAT THE WORDS WHICH HE ENCOURAGES MOST VIVIDLY TO MIND ARE THOSE MOST PRECISELY FITTED TO PUT HIS POEM ON PAPER."

adopt the attitudes from which Mr. Cummings has written, just as they often adopt the superficial attitudes of Swinburne and Keats. The curious thing about Mr. Cummings' influence is that his imitators have been able to emulate as well as ape him; which is not so frequently the case with the influence of Swinburne and Keats. . . .

There is one attitude towards Mr. Cummings' language which has deceived those who hold it. The typographical peculiarities of his verse have caught and irritated public attention. Excessive hyphenation of single words, the use of lower case "i," the breaking of lines, the insertion of punctuation between the letters of a word, and so on, will have a possible critical importance to the textual scholarship of the future; but extensive consideration of these peculiarities to-day has very little importance, carries almost no reference to the *meaning* of the poems. Mr. Cummings' experiments in typography merely extend the theory of notation by adding to the number, *not* to the *kind*, of conventions the reader must bear in mind, and are dangerous only because since their uses cannot readily be defined, they often obscure rather than clarify the exact meaning. No doubt the continued practice of such notation would produce a set of well-ordered conventions susceptible of general use. At present the practice can only be "allowed for," recognized in the particular instance, felt, and forgotten: as the diacritical marks in the dictionary are forgotten once the sound of the word has been learned. The poem, after all, only takes wing on the page, it persists in the ear. . . .

Any poetry which does not consider itself as much of an art and having the same responsibilities to the consumer as the arts of silversmithing or cobbling shoes—any such poetry is likely to do little more than rehearse a waking dream. Dreams are everywhere ominous and full of meaning; and why should they not be? They hold the images of the secret self, and to the initiate dreamer betray the nerve of life at every turn, not through any effort to do so, or because of any inherited regimen, but simply because they cannot help it. Dreams are like that—to the dreamer the maximal limit of experience. As it happens, dreams employ words and pictorial images to fill out their flux with a veil of substance. Pictures are natural to everyone, and words, because they are prevalent, seem common and inherently sensible. Hence, both picture and word, and then with a little stretching of the fancy the substance of the dream itself, seem expressible just as they occur—as things created, as the very flux of life. Mr. Cummings' poems are often nothing more than the report of just such dreams. He believes he knows what he knows, and no doubt he does. But he also believes, apparently, that the words which he encourages most vividly to mind are those most precisely fitted to put his poem on paper. He transfers the indubitable magic of his private musings from the cell of his mind, where it is honest incantation, to the realm of poetry. Here he forgets that poetry, so far as it takes a permanent form, is written and is meant to be read, and that it cannot be a mere private musing. Merely because his private fancy furnishes his liveliest images, is the worst reason for assuming that this private fancy will be approximately experienced by the reader or even indicated on the printed page.

But it is unfair to limit this description to Mr. Cummings; indeed, so limited, it is not even a description of Mr. Cummings. Take the *Oxford Book of English Verse*, or any anthology of poems equally well known, and turn from the poems printed therein of such widely separated poets as Surrey, Crashaw, Marvell, Burns, Wordsworth, Shelley, and Swinburne, to the collected works of these poets respectively. Does not the description of Mr. Cummings' mind at work given above apply nearly as well to the bulk of this poetry as to that of Mr. Cummings, at least on the senses' first immersion? The anthology poems being well known are conceived to be understood, to be definitely intelligible, and to have, without inspection, a precise meaning. The descent upon the collected poems of all or of any one of these authors is by and large a descent into tenuity. Most of their work, most of any poet's work, with half a dozen

exceptions, is tenuous and vague, private exercises or public playthings of a soul in verse. So far as he is able, the reader struggles to reach the concrete, the solid, the definite; he must have these qualities, or their counterparts among the realm of the spirit, before he can understand what he reads. To translate such qualities from the realm of his private experience to the conventional forms of poetry is the problem of the poet; and the problem of the reader, likewise, is to come well equipped with the talent and the taste for discerning the meaning of those conventions as they particularly occur. Neither the poet's casual language nor the reader's casual interlocution is likely to be much help. There must be a ground common but exterior to each: that is the poem. The best poems take the best but not always the hardest reading; and no doubt it is so with the writing. Certainly, in neither case are dreams or simple reveries enough. Dreams are natural and are minatory or portentous; but except when by accident they fall into forms that fit the intelligence, they never negotiate the miracle of meaning between the poet and the poem, the poem and the reader.

Most poetry fails of this negotiation, and it is sometimes assumed that the negotiation was never meant, by the poet, to be made. For the poet, private expression is said to be enough; for the reader, the agitation of the senses, the perception of verbal beauty, the mere sense of stirring life in the words, are supposed sufficient. If this defence had a true premise—if the poet did express himself to his private satisfaction—it would be unanswerable; and to many it is so. But I think the case is different, and this is the real charge against Mr. Cummings, the poet does not ever express himself privately. The mind cannot understand, cannot properly know its own musings until those musings take some sort of conventional form. Properly speaking a poet, or any man, cannot be adequate to himself in terms of himself. True consciousness and true expression of consciousness must be external to the blind seat of consciousness—man as a sensorium. Even a simple image must be fitted among other images, and conned with them, before it is understood. That is, it must take a form in language which is highly traditional and conventional. The genius of the poet is to make the convention apparently disappear into the use to which he puts it.

Mr. Cummings and the group with which he is here roughly associated, the anti-culture or anti-intelligence group, persists to the contrary. Because experience is fragmentary as it strikes the consciousness it is thought to be essentially discontinuous and therefore essentially unintelligible except in the fragmentary form in which it occurred. They credit the words they use with immaculate conception and there hold them unquestionable. A poem, because it happens, must mean something and mean it without relation to anything but the private experience which inspired it. Certainly it means something, but not a poem; it means that something exciting happened to the writer and that a mystery is happening to the reader. The fallacy is double: they believe in the inexorable significance of the unique experience; and they have discarded the only method of making the unique experience into a poem—the conventions of the intelligence. As a matter of fact they do not write without conventions, but being ignorant of what they use, they resort most commonly to their own inefficient or superficial conventions—such as Mr. Cummings' flower and doll. The effect is convention without substance; the unique experience becomes a rhetorical assurance . . . .

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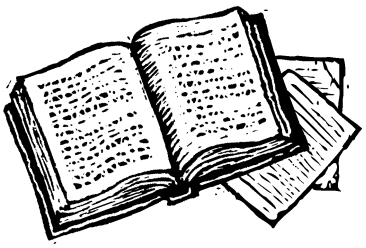
The Centaur

MAY SWENSON

1956

"The Centaur" is a widely anthologized poem by May Swenson that draws on her childhood experiences in Utah and explores the power of the imagination. First published in the *Western Review* in 1956, it was reprinted the following year in the collection *New Poems by American Poets 2* and then appeared in Swenson's second book of poetry, *A Cage of Spines*, in 1958. It subsequently appeared in several other collections of Swenson's poetry, including the posthumously published *Nature: Poems Old and New* in 1994. In 2007, it was published separately as an illustrated children's book.

On the surface, the poem is a simple narrative account of how Swenson's speaker (really Swenson herself, according to an interview she once gave) spent the summer when she was ten. It describes a child's fantasy of riding a horse that is really just a willow branch and pretending to be the horse herself. The poem has been widely praised for its depiction of mixed identities (child and horse, boy and girl), its exploration of gender roles, and its evocation of childhood's imaginative play.



Swenson is generally seen as a poet interested in nature and in the mysteries of the universe. She is also known as the creator of riddle poems illustrative of her interest in looking at things from new perspectives, making the familiar strange, and taking note of the wonder of the world. Though not technically one of her riddle



May Swenson (Oscar White / Corbis)

poems, "The Centaur" raises various questions about identity and creativity in a way characteristic of the poet, and its focus on a horse, albeit an imaginary horse, is consistent with her interest in animals.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Anna Thilda May Swenson was the oldest of ten children of Margaret and Dan Swenson, Swedish Lutherans who converted to Mormonism and emigrated from Sweden to Logan, Utah, where May Swenson was born on May 28, 1913. Swenson drifted away from her parents' Mormon beliefs (poetry became her religion, according to Gudrun Grabher, writing in *Body My House: May Swenson's Work and Life*), but she maintained a strong attachment to Utah, which she visited often even after moving to New York City in 1936. When she died, she was buried in Logan, at her request, on the grounds of her alma mater, Utah State Agricultural College (now Utah State University).

When she was nine, Swenson's family moved to a new house in Logan, near the area that is said to be the setting of "The Centaur." According to R. R. Knudson, in her biography *The Wonderful Pen of May Swenson*, Swenson's first language was Swedish and she did not learn English until she began school. But she did well in school and began writing at an early age. In high school she won a prize for a short story, and at Utah State University, where she obtained a bachelor's degree in English and art, she wrote poetry for the college literary magazine, *The Scribble*, and also wrote a column for the student newspaper.

After graduation, Swenson worked as a reporter in Logan, then moved to Salt Lake City, where she did clerical work. When she later moved to New York City she also worked as a clerk. In the 1930s and through most of the 1940s she could not get her poems published, but she did get work as an interviewer for the Federal Writers' Project from 1938 to 1939. Her breakthrough came in 1949, when the *Saturday Review of Literature* published her poem "Haymaking." Four years later the *New Yorker* published one of her riddle poems, "By Morning," but gave away the answer to the riddle by changing the title to "Snow by Morning."

Swenson's first book of poetry, *Another Animal*, appeared in 1954, the same year she began working on "The Centaur." After its publication in *Western Review* magazine in 1956 and in the anthology *New Poems by American Poets 2* in 1957, "The Centaur" appeared in Swenson's second book of poetry, *A Cage of Spines*, in 1958. Also in 1958, Swenson won the William Rose Benet Prize of the Poetry Society of America. She later won a Guggenheim grant, an Amy Lowell Traveling Scholarship, and several other awards, including an honorary doctorate from her alma mater. In 1980, she became chancellor of the Academy of American Poets, a post she held until her death nine years later. She was also a writer-in-residence for a year at Purdue University and taught poetry at other universities as well as working as an editor for a New York publisher, New Directions Press.

Altogether Swenson published nine books of poetry during her lifetime, including the book of "shaped" poems called *Iconographs*, which won much attention when it appeared in 1970. She also published two books of riddle poems: *Poems to Solve* in 1966 and *More Poems to Solve* in 1971. Four posthumous collections were published in

the decade after her death, along with *Made with Words*, a book of interviews, letters, essays, fiction, and a play script. In 2004, a three-day symposium on Swenson was held at Utah State University and led to the publication of a collection of essays on her life and work, *Body My House*, in 2006.

After two previous long-term relationships, the first with the Czechoslovak poet Anca Vrbovska and the second with the writer Pearl Schwartz, Swenson spent the last twenty-three years of her life with R. R. Knudson in Sea Cliff, New York. She died on December 4, 1989, in Ocean View, Delaware.

POEM TEXT

The summer that I was ten—
Can it be there was only one
summer that I was ten? It must

have been a long one then—
each day I'd go out to choose
a fresh horse from my stable

which was a willow grove
down by the old canal.
I'd go on my two bare feet.

But when, with my brother's jack-knife,
I had cut me a long limber horse
with a good thick knob for a head,

and peeled him slick and clean
except a few leaves for the tail,
and cinched my brother's belt

around his head for a rein,
I'd straddle and canter him fast
up the grass bank to the path,

trot along in the lovely dust
that talcumed over his hoofs,
hiding my toes, and turning

his feet to swift half-moons.
The willow knob with the strap
jouncing between my thighs

was the pommel and yet the poll
of my nickering pony's head.
My head and my neck were mine,

yet they were shaped like a horse.
My hair flopped to the side
like the mane of a horse in the wind.

My forelock swung in my eyes,
my neck arched and I snorted.
I shied and skittered and reared,

stopped and raised my knees,
pawed at the ground and quivered.
My teeth bared as we wheeled

and swished through the dust again.
I was the horse and the rider,
and the leather I slapped to his rump

spanked my own behind.
Doubled, my two hoofs beat
a gallop along the bank,

the wind twanged in my mane,
my mouth squared to the bit.
And yet I sat on my steed

quiet, negligent riding,
my toes standing the stirrups,
my thighs hugging his ribs.

At a walk we drew up to the porch.
I tethered him to a paling.
Dismounting, I smoothed my skirt

and entered the dusky hall.
My feet on the clean linoleum
left ghostly toes in the hall.

Where have you been? said my mother.
Been riding, I said from the sink,
and filled me a glass of water.

What's that in your pocket? she said.
Just my knife. It weighted my pocket
and stretched my dress awry.

Go tie back your hair, said my mother,
and *Why is your mouth all green?*
Rob Roy, he pulled some clover
as we crossed the field, I told her.

POEM SUMMARY

Title

The title "The Centaur" refers to a creature from Greek mythology that was half human and half horse. Interestingly, other than in the title, the term is not used anywhere in the poem. Rather than write about centaurs, Swenson's aim is to depict a metaphorical centaur, a girl who thinks she is part horse.

Stanza 1

The poem begins with an adult speaker reminiscing about her childhood, about the summer when she was ten. Right away there is wonder in her voice because she can hardly believe there was only one such summer. This attitude of wonder is typical of Swenson's poetry; so is her questioning, inquiring approach to life, indicated grammatically by casting the main part of the first stanza as a question. Another grammatical feature of the opening stanza is that it is largely a parenthetical aside; it is as if the speaker, or the poet, is so full of information and so alive to connections



MEDIA ADAPTATIONS

- "The Centaur," recorded on the long-playing vinyl record *Some Haystacks Don't Even Have Any Needle* and read by Anne Anglin, was released by Scott Foresman (1970).

that she can hardly start in one direction without wanting to go in another, perhaps a bit like a wayward horse.

Stanza 2

Stanza 2 completes the parenthetical aside about there being only one summer when the speaker was ten. Of course, a literal-minded person would say, how could there be more than one summer for any year? However, Swenson and her speaker are poets; they say apparently impossible things to get at deeper truths, in this case the fact that the summer in question seemed very long. It must have been a long one, she says, which again literally makes no sense; summers are always the same length. This is a poem about feelings, though, and that summer felt long to the speaker, or perhaps she means that there were more summers like it. What should be noted is that the tone is not grumbling; this is not a complaint that the summer dragged on and on; it is a memory of a delightful time. There is an aspect of pastoral idyll here—a depiction of a simpler, ideal time. The tone of the opening establishes a positive attitude towards the events of that summer before the speaker even says what they were.

The second and third lines of the second stanza begin to recount what happened the summer the speaker was ten. She says that she would go each day to choose a different horse from her stable. A reader who stopped at the end of this stanza—and the stanza break does encourage such a stop—might think the speaker was wealthy, with a stable full of real horses to choose from. However, the lack of punctuation at the end of the stanza, the running on of the sentence from this stanza to the next, means that the reader will no doubt carry on without stopping.

Stanza 3

In stanza 3, the speaker reveals that there were no real horses; she was not the child of wealthy horse owners; her stable was actually a grove of willow trees down near an old canal. Paul Crumbley, writing in *Body My House*, notes that this was the actual canal near where Swenson lived as a child. This brings out the autobiographical aspect of the poem, but in the poem, the oldness of the canal coupled with the fact that the young girl had to go out to it suggests a movement away from the everyday to someplace that may turn out to be magical in some way.

The stanza ends with the speaker saying she would go barefoot to the grove. The fact that she was going barefoot suggests a movement, in this case away from society with its clothes and shoes and into nature with its lack of artificial coverings. That is probably the main sense that this sentence conveys on first reading, but in retrospect the reader might note that the speaker emphasizes that she walked on her own two feet; the statement is somewhat odd, for who else's feet might the girl have gone on? The reader soon learns who else's feet might have been involved.

Stanza 4

The first word in stanza 4 indicates some contrast with the immediately preceding statement that the girl went down to the canal on her own feet. However, it will be a few more stanzas before the point of the contrast is made clear; in the meantime the reader is left wondering why a contrast has been set up while the speaker plunges into a parenthetic clause about using her brother's knife to cut herself a horse. Here the reader learns, if it was not already clear, that the horses are just branches from the willow trees. At least, that is the reader's natural assumption, though the speaker does not actually say they are branches; she simply says that she cut herself a horse, making a sort of metaphor, except that this is less a metaphorical way of describing a branch as a horse than an account of a little girl who thought, or pretended to think, that her branch was a horse.

Stanza 5

Stanza 5 goes into more detail about how the girl would transform her willow branch into a horse. Swenson was often praised for her attention to detail, and here she describes the peeling of the branch and the leaves arranged for a tail. The speaker also notes that she used her brother's

belt (again something of her brother's) to gird around the branch, tightening, maintaining control. There are elements of both wildness and control. Traditionally, reason and the passions have been depicted metaphorically as a rider and his horse, with the rider needing to keep his horse under control, just as reason in a human being was expected to keep the passions under control.

Stanza 6

Stanza 6 continues the notion of control by explaining that the belt, when tightened around the branch, was meant to function as a rein, but the speaker no sooner finishes saying that than she talks of making her horse take up a moderate gallop, as if control had been forgotten and the main point is to give in to adventure.

Stanza 7

In this stanza the speaker says she would trot in the dust, which she describes by use of the word *lovely*. Why dust should be lovely is not clear, but perhaps it is because it is part of nature, and the idea here is to escape into nature.

In this stanza the reader also begins to understand why the sentence that began in stanza 4, and which is still going on, emphasizes the feet of the speaker. In this stanza the speaker describes how the dust hid her toes and covered her horse's hoofs. Though she arrived on two feet, she is now riding on four hoofs; a transformation is underway.

Stanza 8

Stanza 8 finishes the thought about the horse's hoofs, which are referred to as feet here. Perhaps this indicates that the transformation from human to horse is not complete. There is also another possibility. Swenson is often seen as a poet who describes blending, and the poem seems to display some blending between human and animal.

Stanza 9

In this stanza, the transformation from human to horse, or the blending of human and horse, continues. The willow knob, the speaker says, was part of the saddle and part of the horse's head. At the same time, she says her head and her neck were her own, and there the stanza ends; like most of the stanzas it ends in mid-sentence.

Stanza 10

In stanza 10, the sentence continues with another contrast. Although the speaker said in the previous stanza that her head and neck were her own, now she says that at the same time they were like a horse, and her hair was like a horse's mane, blowing in the wind. This could be considered a simile, but it is more a statement of transformation. The speaker remembers that as a girl when she went out on her willow branch she began to feel like a horse.

Stanza 11

Horse imagery continues in this stanza, with the speaker using the word *forelock*, a term for hair usually used only in connection with horses. Also, she describes herself as snorting and performing other actions that a horse might do.

Stanza 12

Stanza 12 continues the detailed description of the girl as a horse, but then there is a pronoun shift. She suddenly switches to the first-person plural *we*. It appears that now she is both girl and horse, understood as two separate identities that are nonetheless one.

Stanza 13

Here the speaker explicitly declares the merging of identities between horse and rider that was implied in the previous stanza. It is less that she becomes transformed from human to horse than that she conjures up an imaginary horse and partly becomes him while yet remaining herself. She is both the magical imaginary creature and the ordinary person riding the creature, so when she smacks his rear, she is also hitting her own behind, as she says at the start of the next stanza.

Stanza 14

The speaker finishes the thought about how slapping the horse's rear means hitting herself and begins the next sentence with a word that is a highly appropriate term to describe what is happening; she has become double—she is both herself and another.

Stanza 15

Stanza 15 explores the doubleness of the situation. The speaker says that she was both the one with the bit in her mouth, in other words, the horse being controlled by a rider, and yet at the same time the rider herself, sitting on her steed.

Stanza 16

Stanza 16 provides more detail about how she was the rider, pressing her legs around the horse's ribs, standing in the stirrups. The end of the

sentence marks the end of the stanza. Instead of ending the stanza in mid-sentence and so carrying the reader on to the next stanza, as she has done in most of the previous stanzas, Swenson here orders a stop, marking the end of a section of the poem.

Stanza 17

Stanza 17 marks a change in tone. A calmness descends after the wild galloping, the snorting, the riding in the wind. Now the pace slows, literally, to a walk, as the speaker describes how she would return to her house, riding slowly up to the porch and tying her horse to the fence: an odd image, because she would have been tying one piece of wood to another. The wild ride is over; in a way, the reader only realizes its wildness retrospectively because of the contrasting calm introduced by this stanza. Now it is time to go back inside. The speaker describes how she would dismount, rearranging her skirt, a symbolic way of saying she was adjusting herself for domestic life again, if the skirt is interpreted to stand for all of domestic life.

Stanza 18

In this stanza the speaker describes how she would go inside, into a gloomy, dark hall, implying a contrast with the way things were outside in what presumably was bright sunshine, though she never mentioned that. It is an implied retrospective description through contrast.

The contrast continues in the last two lines of the stanza; she would walk on clean linoleum, leaving footprints, suggesting that indoors it is not only gloomy but sterile, as if the outdoors was much more alive. The ghostliness of her footprints seems to suggest a fading away, into a ghost, of her barefoot adventuring self, now to be replaced by a more conventional indoor self. Using the word *ghostly* to describe the footprints also suggests that her barefoot self had some magical or supernatural aspects.

Stanza 19

Stanza 18 having ended with a period, marking another break, stanza 19 introduces a new character, the speaker's mother, who promptly asks the girl where she has been, a typical maternal question. This is not like the musing, wondering question of the opening stanza, posed by the nostalgic speaker remembering a magical time with fondness. This is the voice of authority, of the established order, trying to bring a wayward child back into line.

The child answers with what might be considered the truth, saying she was riding, though of course it was just a fantasy ride. That the ride and the fantasy are over, and that life must now return to normality, is indicated by her getting a glass of water from the sink (not the place a horse would go for water).

Stanza 20

In stanza 20 the mother asks the second of three questions she will put to her daughter, asking what the girl has in her pocket. Again, this sounds like the voice of authority noting something wrong, posing a question that is full of interrogation rather than wonder. Interestingly, the girl answers that it is her knife, not her brother's knife, which it actually is. It is as if she has appropriated something, as if perhaps she has not completely returned to the normality of her role as a proper little girl. As if to reinforce this point, she says that the weight of the knife in her pocket has stretched her dress; here again a piece of clothing is used symbolically. By using her brother's knife and going out on a wild ride the girl has become something other than a normal little girl.

Stanza 21

The final stanza begins with the mother giving an order to the girl to tie her hair back. The reader may remember that the girl's hair has been flying in the wind like a horse's mane at the climax of her ride; now she is to tie it down, restore order, come back home. Then in one of the oddest moments in the poem, the mother asks her final question, wanting to know why the girl's mouth is green. The girl's answer is that Rob Roy, presumably the name she has given to her imaginary horse, has been eating clover in the field. This would mean that since she was the horse and since her mouth is green now, she was chewing on the grass herself. It is a final statement of how she blended with her imaginary horse, becoming a horse briefly, even bringing home the evidence.

Jean Gould, writing in *Modern American Women Poets*, notes that the final stanza is the only four-line stanza in the whole poem. Paul Crumbley, in *Body My House*, sees a rhyming couplet at the end, which emphasizes the last point of the poem, when the girl tells her mother

this strange story about Rob Roy eating clover and thus causing her own mouth to turn green. Crumbley argues that this indicates acceptance by the mother, and perhaps it does, though her reply is not given and Swenson herself, discussing this poem in an interview reprinted in *Made with Words*, says that in the closing stanzas the mother is scolding the girl. However, the exchange does perhaps indicate that the girl felt confident enough to tell her fantasy, as if trying to bring the magic home and communicate what she had been able to imagine.

Finally, it is worth noting that the name the girl gives to the horse is Rob Roy, a common name for a horse, but also the name of an eighteenth-century Scottish hero and outlaw. This suggests that her adventure was of the outlaw kind, or at least one that pushed the limits of propriety.

THEMES

Nostalgia

The poem is in part a nostalgic evocation of childhood and the sort of thing a child might get up to. This at least is how the poem opens, with the adult speaker remembering the summer when she was ten, but though the poem develops several contrasts, this contrast between present and past fades away, and at the end there is no return to the adult's world and little sense of the adult looking back. In the opening stanzas the very tenses the speaker uses emphasize that she is looking back; she talks of what she would do each day in that distant summer: she would go down to the willow grove, she would ride her horse, and so on. But by the middle of the poem the speaker shifts to the simple past; her hair blew around like a mane; she shied and skittered, reared and galloped; and then she slowed to a walk and entered her house, at which point the conversation with her mother that ends the poem is presented as a specific scene that happened and then ended. There is no closing reminiscence, seeking to bring out a contrast between the adult of today and the child of the past; the nostalgia theme simply disappears.

Gender Roles

A persistent theme in the poem is the exploration of gender roles. The girl takes up her brother's knife to do what might conventionally be seen as a boy's task: cutting a branch from a tree to serve as her horse. She also takes her brother's belt to use as the reins on her "horse." Moreover, in the 1950s, some might have seen the riding adventure as too wild for a girl, bringing out her tomboyish side. At the end the girl calls the knife her own, as if she has appropriated this symbol of boyhood, which has stretched her dress, disordering the symbol of girlhood.

The end of the poem brings out some antagonism between the girl and her mother, with the mother intent on making sure her daughter is ladylike while the daughter wants to talk about her fantasy adventure. In a way, it is a depiction of childhood rebellion against parental authority, or perhaps more an attempt by parental authority to rein in an overly exuberant child who is impatient with conventional rules and roles.

Imagination

The poem is a celebration of the imagination, of the girl's ability to conjure up a fantasy about riding a horse that engulfs her so much that she becomes the horse while at the same time remaining the rider. There are moments when she seems all horse, as when she says that she snorted and pawed at the ground, but at other times there is a doubled consciousness, with the girl being both the horse with the bit in her mouth and the rider on top of the horse. This double existence is eerily magical. It seems in some ways a metaphor for the act of poetic creation. Swenson herself made the comparison when talking of this poem in the interview reprinted in *Made with Words*, saying what the girl does in the poem is what an artist does in her art, becoming what she creates. The theme is thus the power of the imagination and the mystical nature of creation, in which a girl can half become the horse she creates just as a poet can half become her own poem. It seems in a way an illustration of the famous line from the poem "Among School Children" by W. B. Yeats, in which he asks how one can differentiate between the dancer and the dance that he or she dances. This doubleness or uncertainty seems central to Swenson's poem, illustrating the process by which one enters almost completely into one's creation and yet remains still apart, a conscious mind guiding the unconscious spirit.

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY



- Research the history and beliefs of Mormonism. How did the Mormons come to be in Utah? How are Mormon beliefs different from and similar to the beliefs of various Christian denominations? Write a report detailing your findings, including the role of Mormonism today.
- Explore the writings of Emily Dickinson and compare them to those of May Swenson. What topics did they have in common? How were their techniques and form similar or different? Write an essay outlining their similarities and differences.
- Think of a time in your life when you enjoyed playing games based on fantasies of being something or someone else. Write a short account (a story or poem) about what that was like.
- Look at the new children's picture book version of "The Centaur," illustrated by Sherry Meidell. Are the illustrations what you would have expected? Also, do you think this poem is too difficult and complex for young children? Can young children enjoy the poem on one level while teenagers and adults enjoy it on another, in the same way that both children and adults can understand and enjoy books like Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*? Create a poster showing images of the centaur from children's books, Greek mythology, and art. Give a presentation to the class about the various representations of the mythical figure, and lead a discussion about whether or not the poem is appropriate for young children.
- Organize a debate in your class about whether parents try to control their children too much. Should parents allow their children to spend more time on their own doing what they want, or is it better that they learn in a more formal and structured manner? Conduct some research into different theories of child rearing, then divide into debate teams and present the different arguments.

STYLE

Line Endings

The poem is written in free verse (a form of poetry in which no formal meter is used) without any rhyme scheme, though perhaps with a rhymed couplet at the end and some internal rhyme at the beginning, but it is not as free as in some of Swenson's other poems. There is enjambment, meaning that sentences carry over from one stanza to another, creating a feeling of movement in the poem, but most lines end with the end of syntactic units; phrases generally are not broken over two lines, but come to an end when the lines end, so there is regularity as well as movement, order as well as wildness, reflecting the content of the poem.

Metaphors, Symbolism, and Synecdoche

"The Centaur" might be said to contain metaphors, in which one thing is described in terms of another: the willow branch is a horse; the girl's hair is a horse's mane; and the girl snorts and paws the ground in a horse-like manner. However, these are not true metaphors used to describe the girl or the branch but signs of a transformation going on in which the branch becomes a horse, and the girl becomes a centaur. However, the whole poem can be seen as a metaphor for poetic creation.

The poem uses real objects such as the knife and the dress to symbolize larger things, in this case boyishness and girlishness. This could also be called synecdoche, in which a part of something, for instance the dress, stands for the whole of something, in this case female identity.

Pacing

In the middle of the poem, Swenson carries the reader along for the ride, moving from the nearly



A centaur *(© Christie's Images | SuperStock)*

stationary (the girl cutting the willow branch) to the beginnings of serious motion as the horse canters and trots. Her choice of words increases the sense of acceleration as she describes the horse's feet as swift and has the girl's hair blow in the wind. Then the rider and horse wheel and gallop. The words create a sense of speed, which suddenly stops as the rider and horse slow to a walk. Swenson's control of the language enables her to make the reader feel part of the ride as it begins, gathers speed, then slows.

Heroic Quest

The poem might be seen as enacting the heroic quest, a story structure that is common in literature. In the poem, the hero, in this case the ten-year-old girl, leaves civilization, that is, her house, to venture into a magical realm, in this case the willow grove by the canal, where willow branches can change into horses. She takes part in a magical transformation, becoming a centaur, at least figuratively, getting so caught up in the fantasy that she even gets her mouth green, presumably by eating grass or at least miming the action of eating grass. Then she returns from her heroic adventure and brings news of it to the representative of everyday life, in this case her mother. It is true that she slays no dragons, since this is not a violent quest; however, it still contains elements of heroism, the courage to enter a zone of personal transformation

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Mormons and Utah

Swenson's parents converted to Mormonism, more properly known as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, a religion founded by Joseph Smith in 1830 and established itself under Brigham Young in Utah later in that century. The Mormons dominated Utah in Swenson's

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **1920s:** Children are left free to amuse themselves with games such as marbles or skipping rope, without parental supervision, during their playtime.

  1950s: With the appearance of books such as Benjamin Spock's *Baby and Child Care*, after World War II, parents begin to become more involved in their children's daily activities.

  Today: There is increasing concern in some quarters that parents are over-managing their children, over-structuring their lives, and preparing them too early for the adult world.

- **1920s:** First-wave feminism, through the women's suffrage movement, challenges the male monopoly on political power. However, it pays less attention to domestic and labor roles, and in these realms, clearly demarcated spheres for men (the workplace) and women (the home) persist.

  1950s: Although the necessities of World War II sent women out of the home to do work formerly seen as male, in the 1950s, gender roles revert to the traditional division of family labor, at least in middle-class families. However, the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and beyond would later overturn many assumptions about women's capabilities and break down the notions of male and female spheres.

  Today: Because of the impact of nearly fifty years of feminist activism, women now lead countries, hold executive positions, and do many other things once seen as the province of men alone.

- **1920s:** Children entertain themselves with simple games and toys. They often make their own toys from natural objects. Children also spend most of their recreational time outdoors unless bad weather prevents them from doing so.

  1950s: With the advent of television and the appearance of more elaborate board games such as Monopoly and Clue, many children begin to spend more time indoors and less time on simpler pastimes.

  Today: Many children spend so much time at their computers and watching television that a national advertising campaign is launched to encourage them to spend more of their time in active, outdoor play.

childhood, and the rest of her family was strongly devoted to Mormonism, but even as a child Swenson did not feel strongly connected to it. Part of what the girl in "The Centaur" may be escaping is Mormon rules of propriety. According to R. R. Knudson, in her biography *The Wonderful Pen of May Swenson*, Swenson as a child liked to play cards and later took up smoking, even though both activities were frowned on by Mormons. The Mormons also had strict notions of gender roles, again something that the girl in Swenson's poem seems to be escaping, or subverting. It is not that Swenson, in this poem or others, attacked the Mormon religion; it is more that she simply looked elsewhere for spiritual and moral guidance.

Feminism

The first wave of the women's movement, bringing voting rights and other basic civil rights to women, was in full force in Swenson's early years, and a second wave of feminism, focused on gender roles, gathered force in the 1960s, not long after Swenson wrote "The Centaur." However, Swenson shied away from movements such as this; she was not one to join protests or issue polemics. What her writing does illustrate, though, is a willingness to explore topics traditionally considered masculine, for instance astronauts and the space program and technology generally. Her writings, including "The Centaur," also explore gender roles. Alicia Ostriker,

in *Writing Like a Woman*, states that Swenson did not write typical women's poetry, and Swenson herself disdained labels and did not like to be considered a feminist poet or a lesbian poet. She said that good poetry could combine male and female qualities, a principle embodied by the protagonist in "The Centaur."

The Beat Movement

Anticipating the counterculture of the 1960s, the Beat movement in poetry and other writing arose in the 1950s in opposition to the conformity and materialism of mainstream culture. Its leading members included Allen Ginsberg, best known for his poem *Howl* (1956), the publication of which led to an obscenity trial. Other notable Beats included Jack Kerouac, known for his novel *On the Road* (1957), and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, a poet who founded City Lights Books in San Francisco. Swenson was aware of the Beats, but just as she would not associate herself with political movements, she kept her distance from this literary movement. According to her biographer, R. R. Knudson, in *The Wonderful Pen of May Swenson*, Swenson felt somewhat old-fashioned in comparison to the Beats, with their talk about nuclear war, poverty, racism, and other social issues. She did not feel she could be a protester the way they were, even though her writing tended to express the freedom from conformity that the Beats were advocating.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

When *A Cage of Spines*, the collection that included "The Centaur," was published in 1958, it was widely praised by critics and by poets, including Elizabeth Bishop, Richard Wilbur, and Robert Lowell. The success of the book led to poetry readings, and at one of these readings, Swenson was introduced as the poet who wrote about being a horse, obviously a reference to "The Centaur." The poem later became widely anthologized.

In general, Swenson has been praised for her verve, her detailed observations, and her use of rhythm. Ann Stanford, in an article in *Southern Review*, focuses on Swenson's powers of observation and her ability to describe the merging and transformation of objects that she sees. Stanford refers to "The Centaur" as an example of such merging involving a magical sleight of hand that allows the objects to combine and yet remain separate.

Idris McElveen, writing in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, follows Stanford in seeing perception as central to Swenson, and like Stanford she sees merging as the key to "The Centaur," in which she also detects erotic imagery. McElveen also reports that Swenson has been compared to Emily Dickinson, the revered nineteenth-century poet who is sometimes seen as standing outside the literary tradition. Swenson is nontraditional in the sense that she is highly original (as noted by Alicia Ostriker, for one, in *Writing Like a Woman*) and, in the view of John Hollander, writing in *The Work of Poetry*, hard to categorize. Hollander writes that Swenson's poems are "systematically ad hoc," adding that there is "no classifying term for [the] organizing principle" of her poetry; she puts her poems together, he states, according to personal principles.

McElveen also compares Swenson to the English romantic poet William Blake, in the sense that both of them composed poetry that works on several levels. Blake's "deceptively simple poems," McElveen writes, resemble Swenson's in the sense that Swenson's poems "are easy enough for children to read and enjoy," but both poets are also "often symbolic and visionary." She adds that even in the simplest of Swenson's poems "there are always many things going on, many interconnected levels and poems-within-poems beneath simple surfaces."

Cynthia Hogue, writing in *Body My House*, praises "The Centaur" for its portrayal of hybrid identity. She writes that the lines about the girl using her brother's jackknife "suggest a sly performance of the charade of masculinity," adding that "the girl in Swenson's poem crosses and confuses discrete categories of sexual identity." Michael Spooner, also writing in *Body My House*, sees "The Centaur" as being in the tradition of the French eighteenth-century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who wrote of man's goodness when in the state of nature, before the creation of society: "One hears Rousseau . . . when she considers the green freedom of the natural world, as she does in 'The Centaur' and other poems."

In general, Swenson is seen as a poet of wonder and speculation, whose poetic explorations of the mysteries of the universe can make familiar objects unfamiliar and cause readers to think about things they have taken for granted.

CRITICISM

Sheldon Goldfarb

Goldfarb is a specialist in Victorian literature who has published nonfiction books as well as a novel for young adults. In this essay, he describes May Swenson's exploration of imagination in "The Centaur," suggesting that it reflects her beliefs about poetic creativity.

"The Centaur" begins with an air of nostalgia. An adult speaker looks back with some pleasure at her ten-year-old self and the joys of summer adventures. One might expect a sigh over remembrance of things past, but that is not the direction the poem actually takes. Instead, as the poem unfolds, the adult speaker almost disappears and is certainly not there to pine over lost pleasures. Instead, the poem focuses on a specific, though perhaps characteristic, incident that occurred when the ten-year-old girl went down to the willow grove to cut herself a "horse."

This is a quite magical incident that Swenson describes in characteristically full detail, making it come alive for the reader. The speaker's younger self, the ten-year-old girl, goes down to a willow grove near an old canal, turns a stick into a horse, and then follows up that trick by turning herself into a horse, or at least partly into a horse, creating a hybrid being, part human and part horse, the centaur of the title.

Instead of a sad evocation of vanished youth from the standpoint of middle age, the poem erupts into a celebration of youth that seems not to have vanished at all. The reader rides with the young girl as she canters and trots and finally gallops along the path, hair waving in the wind, arching, snorting, rearing even, and if we are to believe the poem's ending, stopping to eat some grass.

It is interesting that the reader does not get to see the "centaur" chomping on the grass; perhaps some things are too implausible (or magical?) to portray. In any case, the ten-year-old girl so loses herself in her fantasy that she seems a long way from the house she eventually returns to, with its linoleum and its sink, a perfectly normal house where a mother stands ready to call her daughter back from the magical land she has gone to.

The poem works on several levels and makes many points, one of which is that the magical land is never very far from the normal house. It does not require any grand journey or expensive apparatus to get there; all that is needed is a brother's knife and belt and a short trip to the willow grove.

"INSTEAD OF A SAD EVOCATION OF VANISHED YOUTH FROM THE STANDPOINT OF MIDDLE AGE, THE POEM ERUPTS INTO A CELEBRATION OF YOUTH THAT SEEMS NOT TO HAVE VANISHED AT ALL."

In this magical land girls can act like boys, or like horses, or like a combination of a child and a horse. The poem on one level is an exploration of doubleness, of doubled identity, or interaction with another, with the "other." There is much play with rein and bit here; it is not all wildness and exuberance; there is an attempt at order and control, reflected in the relatively controlled nature of the verse form, with very little enjambment for a free verse poem.

Still, there is that wild riding, the bared teeth, the swiftly traveling hoofs traversing the dust. There is control and wildness, a delicate balance of what could metaphorically be the traditional pairing of reason and passion, reason being the rider and passion being the horse.

As critics have noted, however, it is misleading to speak of rider and horse in this poem as two separate entities; they are blended into one. There really is only one being here, a ten-year-old girl with her willow branch, and yet they are two as well; Swenson here is exploring the nature of unity and duality. To do so she has transported her heroine, and her reader, to a magical land where human beings can merge with animals, where wild animal natures can emerge and yet be controlled by human reason.

What this may represent metaphorically is the act of artistic creation. Here is a ten-year-old girl letting her imagination run free and conjuring up a centaur, an animal-human merger that she can even report to her mother, just as a poet can go into a trancelike state, call up a metaphorical canal in a metaphorical willow grove, and create a set of verses. A successful set of verses will plumb emotional depths and conjure up something out of the deepest wildness while

WHAT DO I READ NEXT?



- *Poems to Solve*, published in 1966, was Swenson's first collection of riddle poems. She included "The Centaur" in it, presumably because she considered it a sort of riddle poem.
- *Iconographs*, published in 1970, is a collection of Swenson's noted shaped poems, in which the way the words of each poem are arranged on the page is part of the effect.
- For a novel about an adventurous child, readers might enjoy *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by Mark Twain, published in 1876. In this novel, Twain portrays a clever child who delights in being outdoors, but unlike the girl in Swenson's poem, Tom interacts with other children, often in a mischievous way.
- For another poem about creativity and duality, see "Among School Children" by W. B. Yeats, first published in 1928. It is available in any collection of Yeats's works.
- For another account written in the 1950s about growing up in the 1920s, see *Where Did You Go? Out. What Did You Do? Nothing* by Robert Paul Smith, published in 1957. In this book Smith warns against over-managing children and advocates letting them be free to do more of what they want.

being shaped, controlled, and structured by the poet's rational consciousness.

Swenson herself saw poetic creation this way and compared the act of imagination in her poem to the act of imagination that creates such poems. In an interview in 1977, reprinted in *Made with Words*, she talked about "The Centaur," first explaining its autobiographical roots. She herself was the ten-year-old in the poem; she would go down to an actual willow grove and cut a switch that became a hobby horse; and when she rode the hobby horse she felt she was riding a real horse and then felt herself to be the horse itself.

This is the act of imagination that she describes in the poem, and as she says, this act of imagination, this ability to become something else, an animal, a horse, or whatever, is the same sort of activity that a poet carries out in imagining a poem. The artist, according to Swenson, becomes her artistic creation; to write a poem you become the poem, trance-like transported to another world, just as the ten-year-old girl is transported into a world where she can become part of a horse.

What of the disappearing adult speaker in all this? Perhaps the reason this is not a poem about a sad middle-aged adult whose magic has disappeared is that, once she begins to describe the magic, it comes back to her. She has not lost it at all.

Probably neither the adult speaker in the poem nor the middle-aged Swenson would go to a willow grove to create horses, but they may still conjure up magic. Swenson could still write poems. "The Centaur" is therefore not an elegy mourning the loss of magic, but a celebration of magic that still exists. In a century full of gloomy modernism and gloomy, linoleum-covered hallways, Swenson could still create a joyful poem celebrating the power of the imagination, a power this poem suggests need not fade with age. This is why the summer at the beginning of the poem seems so long: for Swenson and her speaker that summer of imagination never really ended.

When the Beat poet movement began in the 1950's, Swenson felt a bit old-fashioned, thinking at first she should be more like the poets in this new angry movement. But she found that she could not. She was not an angry protester; she was rather a celebrant of life's mysteries, exploring and stimulating. Of course, she wrote some sad poems too, exploring the anguish of life, but in "The Centaur" she tapped into the exuberant power that animated her own imagination and presented an explanation of the poetic process itself, with the poem being its own illustration.

Here in this poem is the poet plunging into the magical realm where poems are made, showing the reader how it is done. Just as the girl in the poem comes back home from her adventure with a tale to tell, so does the poet come forward with her poem, shaped from the magical materials she collected while giving full rein to her imagination. Thus "The Centaur," while being a poem about gender roles and hybrid identities, nature and the



MAY SWENSON WAS A VISIONARY POET, A PRODIGIOUS OBSERVER OF THE FRAGILE AND MIRACULOUS NATURAL WORLD, A POET WHO BROUGHT OUR DEEPEST QUESTIONS TO THE CENTER OF HER WORK."

outdoors, and the relationship between mothers and daughters, is above all a poem about the power of imagination and the ways of poetic creation.

Source: Sheldon Goldfarb, Critical Essay on "The Centaur," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2009.

Priscilla Long

In the following excerpt, Long praises the poems of Nature: Poems Old and New*, including "The Centaur," for their musicality and insight.*

May Swenson was a visionary poet, a prodigious observer of the fragile and miraculous natural world, a poet who brought our deepest questions to the center of her work. By the time she died in 1989 at 76 she had published some 450 poems in ten books, including a few poems that rank among the finest composed in the late twentieth century. *Nature: Poems Old and New* contains 183 poems selected and ordered to emphasize her affinity with the out-of-doors. The poems are lush, delicious, witty, luminous and at times deeply philosophical.

Swenson was an unrelentingly lyrical poet, a master of the poetic line in which similar sounds accumulate and resonate so that the poem exists, beyond its meanings, as a rattle or a music box or, in moments of greatness, a symphony. Consider "The Beauty of the Head," a poem on the under-explored subject of defecation:

> . . . . Lake is our bathtub, dish-sink,
> drinking jug, and (since the boat's head doesn't work,
> —the ice box, either—the bilge pump barely)
> lake is water closet, too. Little I knew
> a gale this night would wash, and then
> wind-wipe my rump hung over the rail.

Listen to the jingle of short "i's" in *dish-sink* and *drinking*. Note the chugging of short "u's" in *tub, jug, pump, rump, hung*. Mind the alliterative whooshing of *water, wash* and *wind-wipe*.

Musicality informs nearly every line of every poem. It is grounded in Swenson's formidable powers of observation that in certain poems reach breathtaking virtuosity. In "Look Closer" description mounts to revelation as the chant "look closer" prompts another look at one particular plant. . . .

I once heard a very good poet remark that a poet's strongest attribute may also be her weakest. Swenson's musicality and her observational genius give us her slight poems as well as her great ones. The least memorable are skillfully designed trinkets that don't reach beyond the observed to attain the metaphorical transformations of her greatest work. The literal, surface level of meaning is the only one. "October Textures" are October textures and nothing more: "The brushy and hairy, / tassely and slippery. . . . " I did not want "I want the fluffy stuff to keep coming down" ("The Fluffy Stuff").

Perhaps a great poem requires a great subject, a quintessential conflict. "The Snowy" addresses an owl in a zoo hunched on its "cement crag, black talons just showing. . . . " Building on the longer, more expansive line of Swenson's most metaphorically resonant work, the poem gains in descriptive power until the owl seems to represent wild nature itself, enraged, trapped in the small cement cell humankind has designed for it:

> . . . . Elemental form simplified as an egg,
> you held perfectly still on your artificial perch. You, too,
> might be a crafty fake, stuffed or carved. Except your eyes. Alive,
> enormous, yellow circles containing black circles, clear, slick,
> heartstopping double barrels of concentrated rage pointed at me.

Perhaps a fourth of Swenson's published poems contain imagery unrelated to the natural world and, happily, her compilers have included a few here. "Feel Me," perhaps her greatest poem, certainly one of our greatest poems, explores a father's enigmatic dying words, "Feel me to do right." The poem simultaneously sinks and expands through layers of possible meanings.

> . . . . Did it mean that, though he died, he would be felt

through some aperture . . . .
Or was it merely his apology
for dying? "Feel that I do right in not trying,
as you insist, to stay on your side. There is
the wide
gateway and the splendid tower, and you
implore me
to wait here, with the worms!"

The speculations on "our dad's" last loaded words continue until we arrive at the spectacular epiphany.

In the process of shaping a book, poets typically order and reorder their poems until the book becomes a macro-artform as the poems elaborate, contradict and mirror one another much as stanzas interact in a single poem. I would have appreciated some insight into the procedures and problems of doing this in the absence of the poet, and I also felt the need of a critical overview of Swenson's career. In the midst of writing this review I learned from another source that Swenson had composed some nine hundred poems but that despite her many honors, only something like half her work has so far been published. As Houghton Mifflin continues the vital mission of keeping Swenson in print, I hope the editors will consider sharing important information like this with her readers.

R. R. Knudson and Peter Davison (who are not identified) selected and ordered the poems topically in sections titled "Frontispieces," "Selves," "Days" and so on. I found some of their choices pedestrian. Should a poet's twenty bird poems written over a fifty-year period be gathered into a section titled "Feathers"? Doing so forced them to surround the strong poems such as "The Snowy" with incidental poems that also contain bird imagery. Grouping poems by image type—comets and moons under "Heavens"; waves and whales under "Waters"—highlights the obvious and produces an unnecessary glut of similar images. At some point deep in these poems, the method of presentation produced an overdose of petals and clouds. More intelligently designed groupings might have focused attention on Swenson's larger philosophical concerns—perception itself, the nature of identity, the relationship between subject and object.

In fact, the compilers shaped the most numinous section, "Selves," to do exactly this. The section calls attention to Swenson's metaphorical reach by grouping diverse poems that explore the boundaries of identity. In "The Centaur," Swenson's famous, superb poem about girlhood, the malleable boundaries of the self allow girl and horse to fuse: "My forelock swung in my eyes, / my neck arched and I snorted." Identity (gender?) is also the subject of the long and psychologically acute "Bleeding." The poem portrays an interaction between a sadistic knife-type and a submissive wound-type:

Stop bleeding said the knife.
I would if I could said the cut.
Stop bleeding you make me messy with this
blood.
I'm sorry said the cut.
Stop or I will sink in farther said the knife.
Don't said the cut . . . .

This concrete poem—the caesura in each line makes a visual image of a jagged cut—is one of several that illustrate Swenson's lifelong interest in typographical experiments . . . .

This master of observation has put observation itself under her microscope. "Sleeping Overnight on the Shore" explores perception and its distortions: "Intermittent moon/ that we say climbs/ or sets, circles only." The poet's eye can see from the eye of an insect—"Am I sitting on your wrist, someone immense?" ("Alternate Hosts")—or from the moon where "there shines earth light/ as moonlight shines upon the earth . . . " ("Landing on the Moon").

As Swenson knew, we are in the process of destroying the world of plants on which we depend for food and air. The annual destruction of dozens of species amounts to a continuous, low- grade, full-scale catastrophe. In the world of Swenson's poetry, we look at these plants, these animals, with an eye that sees them on their own terms. We see what we stand to lose from " . . . steam shovel, bulldozer, cement mixer/ rumbl[ing] over sand . . . ":

There'll be a hotdog stand, flush toilets,
trash—
plastic and glass, greasy cartons, crushed
beercans,
barrels of garbage for water rats to pick
through.
So, goodbye, goldeneye, and grebe and
scaup and loon.
Goodbye, morning walks beside the tide
tinkling
among clean pebbles, blue mussel shells and
snail



ACTUALLY, THE POET'S PRIMARY EFFECTS ARE HER CADENCES. THE IMPACT OF HER POEMS LIES IN THEIR URGENT SPEECH AND INCANTATORY RHYTHMS, THEIR MUSIC OF CHARMS, SPELLS, CURSES, RITUAL DANCES."

shells that look like staring eyeballs. Goodbye,
kingfisher, little green, black-crowned heron,
snowy egret. And, goodbye, oh faithful pair of
swans that used to glide—god and goddess
shapes of purity—over the wide water.

Forget my quibbles about selection and arrangement. The poems themselves are every reason to own this book, and to treasure it.

Source: Priscilla Long, "Poet's-eye View," in *Women's Review of Books*, Vol. 12, No. 4, January 1995, pp. 8–9.

Grace Schulman

In the following excerpt, Schulman discusses the themes of life and death in Swenson's poems, including "The Centaur."

The voice of May Swenson combines the directness of intimate speech and the urgency of prayer:

Body my house
my horse my hound
what will I do
when you are fallen

Where will I sleep
How will I ride
What will I hunt

Where can I go
without my mount . . .

The magic of that lament, "Question," from *Another Animal* (1954), is in its contrasts: while the details are specific, the central situation is a mystery that terrifies with each new speculation. Here as elsewhere in her poems, Swenson dwells on the living body with an immediacy that heightens the dread of its loss. Other gestures that recur in Swenson's poetry are the insistent, unanswerable questions, "what will I do." "How will I ride," "What will I hunt," "Where can I go," all of them precise, all ironic, because futile. Here they are enhanced by obsessive rhyme ("house," "horse," "hound," "hunt," "mount"). Their futility is emphasized by the absence of punctuation, and again by its sudden presence, in the final line. They are meditations. Admirable too, is the voice that is neither androgynous nor gendered, but one that encompasses both sexes in its fluid boundaries and essentially human dimension: "What will I hunt," the male speaker's question, modulates here, with no abrupt tonal change, to a woman's query, "With cloud for shift / how will I hide?"

Questions are the wellsprings of May Swenson's art. She inquires about simple things, such as "What is the worm doing / making its hole," and about principles such as "What / is it about, / the universe, / the universe about us stretching out?" or, considering the moon landing, "Dare we land upon a dream?" In her speculations and her close observations, she fulfills Marianne Moore's formula for the working artist: "Curiosity, observation, and a great deal of joy in the thing." In subject matter a poet who, like Donne, takes all of knowledge as her province, she is as comfortable with animals and flowers as she is with anti-matter, electronic sound, and DNA. Some of her chosen forms incorporate questions, such as her ballad, "The Centaur": "*Where have you been?*" "*Been riding*." Another is the ancient riddle, a form that enables her to concentrate on the object without naming it. "The Surface," for example, has affinities to Dickinson's riddles, and to her wit: "First I saw the surface, / then I saw it flow, / then I saw the underneath," the poet begins, and gradually unravels the answer, the image of an eye. Swenson riddles in a quest to find a higher reality obscured by conventional names, and to fathom what is deepest within the self. By rejecting ready-made definition—those designations that enlighten—Swenson sees in the dark. She derides the ordinary labeling of things with its consequent reduction of greatness:

They said there was a Thing
that could not Change
They could not Find
it so they Named
it God . . .

("God")

The poet's unnaming allows her to rename, in an effort to see things outside the context of common parlance. Continually the search is for a deeper meaning, the essence of the thing

observed. In "Evolution," the first poem of her first book, she exclaims:

> beautiful each Shape
> to see
> wonderful each Thing
> to name
> here a stone
> there a tree
> here a river
> there a Flame . . .

May Swenson was born in 1913 in Logan, Utah, of a Mormon family, and educated at Utah State University. She was a New Yorker from 1936, and lived in Sea Cliff, New York, for twenty-three years before her death in Ocean View, Delaware, in 1989. In her lifetime, she published eleven books over three decades, nine of them poetry collections, from *Another Animal* (1954) to *In Other Words* (1987). Honored as she was during her lifetime, her books included only four hundred and fifty of the nine hundred poems she composed. Since her death, as new poems and new books continue to appear, it becomes apparent not only that her output is larger than readers have supposed, but that her stature is major.

Nature (1994), the newest of the posthumous books, contains some early poems, hitherto unpublished, whose dominant tone is awe: "Remain aghast at life," the poet resolves in "Earth Your Dancing Place," composed as early as 1936:

> Enter each day
> as upon a stage
> lighted and waiting
> for your step . . .

Wonder prevails in "Manyone Flying" (1975), another of the poems that appear posthumously in *Nature*. Here, the poet, in the guise of a high flying bird, considers the divisions between the individual and humanity:

> Out on the edge,
> my maneuverings, my wings, think
> they are free. Flock, where do we
> fly? Are we Ones? Or One, only?
> if only One, not lonely . . . being
> Manyone . . .
> but Who are We? And Why?

. . . The title of her 1967 volume, *Half Sun Half Sleep*, announces that division of what May Swenson once called, "the primitive bipolar suspension in which my poems often begin to form." Her theme of division is conveyed by many of her shaped poems, or those which contain visual as well as textual metaphors.

Actually, the poet's primary effects are her cadences. The impact of her poems lies in their urgent speech and incantatory rhythms, their music of charms, spells, curses, ritual dances. Never does the typography, however intricate, supersede the cadence. As in primitive poetry, word and appearance are fused for a total effect.

As if to demonstrate subtly that the shaped poems have an auditory life of their own, May Swenson chose to read aloud many of her typographical poems in 1976 on a Caedmon recording, which could not, of course, exhibit the visual pattern to her listeners. One of the poems she read was "The Lightning," which she referred to as a pivotal poem in *Half Sun Half Sleep*. Of its typographical device, the visual metaphor, she commented: "As seen on the page, there is a streak of white space that runs diagonally through the body of the poem and this even splits some of the words." The poem celebrates speech, and the white streak creates meditative pauses in lines, indicating the gap between word and event, between experience and its realization in the poem:

> "The Lightning"
>
> The lightning waked me. It slid unde r
> my eyelid. A black book flipped ope n
> to an illuminated page. Then insta ntly
> shut. Words of destiny were being ut-
> tered in the distance. If only I could
> make them out! . . . Next day, as I lay
> in the sun, a symbol for concei ving the
> universe was scratched on my e yeball.
> But quickly its point eclipse d, and
> softened, in the scabbard of my brain.
>
> My cat speaks one word: Fo ur vowels
> and a consonant. He rece ives with the
> hairs of his body the wh ispers of the
> stars. The kinglet spe aks by flashing
> into view a ruby feath er on his head.
> He is held by a threa d to the eye of
> the sun and cannot fall into error.
> Any flower is a per fect ear, or else it
> is a thousand lips . . . When will I grope
> clear of the entr ails of intellect?

Swenson spoke, too, of a poem whose title is, antithetically, "Untitled," commenting on an earlier version she read on the recording. She described the visual metaphor created by the typographical appearance on the page, noting

that "two black crooked lines pass through the text as if to x it out. The bipolar words 'you,' 'me,' are in the center as if entangled where the two black lines cross." Here, the spaces are between words, and they designate a meditative, almost painful effort at speech. "I will be earth you be the flower . . . ," the poem begins, and the voice rises in passionate intensity as the lovers flail, boat and sea, earth and flood, desert and salt.

Utterance is the theme, too, of "Fountains of Aix," a poem from the 1963 collection, *To Mix With Time*. In it, the word "water" is split fifteen times from its lines, and poured, in effect, down the side of one stanza:

> A goddess is driving a chariot through water.
> Her reins and whips are tight white water.
> Bronze hoofs of horses wrangle with water.

The streak of space separates the fountain's sculptures from the water spouting from their mouths. Here are dolphins and lions and bulls, and "faces with mossy lips unlocked," all uttering water, "their eyes mad / or patient or blind or astonished." She builds a metaphor of the fluidity of utterance, and thence of poetry. Swenson's pauses emphasize her wonder: In "Fire Island," from *Iconographs* (1970), the poet contemplates the miracle of beholding light and dark—milky foam, black sky—of solitude and the group—walkers on the beach and "other watchers"—while the two ends of the narrow island are splayed out in type above and below, creating pauses between the letters of the words "Fire" and "sight."

Typographical pauses appear throughout Swenson's writing career. Some are part of an intricate pattern, as in "The Fountains of Aix" and "The Lighting." Many occur in poems of two columns, and of those, some are read down the page, some across the page and still others across *and* down. Early and late, those patterned spaces between the words indicate opposites, ironies, reversals, paradoxes, ambiguities. For example, in a poem whose title conveys a moment in time, "While Sitting in the Tuileries and Facing the Slanting Sun," the poet ironically associates, and then divides by space a swaddled infant in Giotto's fresco, "Birth of the Virgin," and a mummy in the Vatican Museum . . . .

In "Bleeding," from *Iconographs*, a space through the center is a jagged, running wound, effecting caesuras of hesitation in a dialogue between the knife and the cut. The force grows along with the grim realization that bleeding is precisely feeling, in this devastating relationship:

> I feel I have to bleed to feel I think said the cut.
> I don't I don't have to feel said the knife drying now becoming shiny.

Like the polarized images found throughout Swenson's work, the contrasts created by her typographical separations have their roots in the love poems. There are the two columns of "Evolution" and "Facing" (both to be read down the page, rather than across), each indicating another animal, the lover who is an aspect of the self. Like all the love poems, these two praise opposite beings—flame and ice, sun and moon—who move forward to their destiny.

The love poems, with their high energy and "desert freedom," contain, as do the poems of Shakespeare and Sir Philip Sidney, the irony that vitality can emphasize its very opposite, the certainty of life's decline. From early on, May Swenson sings of life in death's shadow, as in "Question," quoted above, and in poems that have the word "Death" in their titles: "Deaths," "Death Invited," "The Shape of Death."

Did Swenson suffer great personal loss? Her biographer, R.R. Knudson, writes that the death of a beloved grandfather prompted May, as a child, to question the finality of loss. Then, as a teenager, May questioned Mormonism, and, in fact, normative religions with their conventional notions of God. It seems that later she was deeply saddened by the atrocities of World War II. Young May's lover, the Czech poet, Anca Vrboska, lost her family to the Nazi death camps. While Vrboska wrote of Auschwitz directly, Swenson internalized, objectified, searched, as always, for the essence of death:

> I will lie down in Autumn
> let birds be flying
>
> swept into a hollow
> by the wind
> I'll wait for dying
>
> I will lie inert unseen
> my hair same-colored
> with grass and leaves . . .

("I Will Lie Down")

Later still, in those poems whose titles say "death," Swenson plays on the Elizabethan paradox that tragic implications are perceived in the midst of life's personal, intimate experience.

All are poems that embody contrasts, either in their divided shape on the page, or in their imagery, or both. A fascinating early example is "Death, Great Smoothener":

Death,
great smoothener,
maker of order,
arrester, unraveler, sifter and changer
death, great hoarder;
student, stranger, drifter, traveler,
flyer and nester all caught at your border;

death,
great halter;
blackener and frightener,
reducer, dissolver,
seizer and welder of younger with elder,
waker with sleeper

death, great keeper
of all that must alter;
death,
great heightener,
leaper, evolver,
greater smoothener,

great whitener!

The poem's sheer energy cries of life even as it speaks to death. It has the sound of a pagan incantation, with its frightening direct address presented in clusters of heavy stresses. Swenson achieves her falling rhythm here, as in "Question," with reversed iambs, and depicts death in lists of epithets, enforced by rhyme: "order," "hoarder," "border." In contrast to the chant rhythm, the typographical shape on the page is that of an ornate Christian cross. The resonant epithets echo, for me, Caedmon's hymn, the legendary first song of our first English poet, a song of thanksgiving:

Nu sculon herigean heofonrices weard
metodes meahte and his modgethanc
weorc wuldorodur swa he wundra gehwos

now shall we praise heaven's keeper
the maker's might and his mind thought
father of the world as of all wonder . . .

Poetically, their techniques are alike: to sing of God. Caedmon takes epithets for the Anglo-Saxon warlords, such as ruler and father, and qualifies them with Christian adjectives such as . . . "eternal." Swenson chants death in life, and engraves a pagan rhythm in a Christian cross.

The poetry of May Swenson celebrates life's miracles even with death in view: the wonder of speech ("Fountains of Aix"); the grandeur of God. ("God"); the radiance of sight ("Fire Island"). In each of these three poems, typographical division—white streaks down the middle of text, make for breath-catching pauses that enhance the excited tone. The ambiguities and paradoxes of Swenson's poetry result from basic contradiction between our illusion of permanence and an underlying certainty of fatality. This contradiction is articulated explicitly in one of the love poems, "The Shape of Death," as it was printed, in *Iconographs*, with a white streak down the middle of the text:

What does love look like? We know the
shape of death.
Death is a cloud, immense and awesome. At
first a
lid is lifted from the eye of light. There is a
clap of sound. A white blossom belches from
the
jaw of fright.

Then, in sharp contrast to those positive assertions about death, love is presented in a series of questions: "What is its / color and its alchemy?" "Can it be sown and harvested?" The resounding theme of Swenson's poems is there, in her concluding statement. Like life, love, though fatally transient, is "not alien—it is near—our very skin, a sheath to keep us pure of fear."

Source: Grace Schulman, "Life's Miracles: The Poetry of May Swenson," in *American Poetry Review*, Vol. 23, No. 5, September–October 1994, pp. 9–13.

Sue Russell

In the following excerpt, Russell identifies autobiographical elements of Swenson's works, including "The Centaur."

May Swenson, who died in 1989 at the age of seventy-six, was a lover of riddles. She liked to write them as well as to solve them—the harder the better. Like the riddle poems she assembled in two books for young readers, all her poems have the capacity to tease and delight. "A poem is a thing," Swenson tells us in her introduction to one of these collections, *More Poems to Solve* (1972). Often based on intricate mechanisms that are not easily replicated, Swenson's poems seem more to have been constructed than composed. Excerpting them is an extreme disservice, as it limits the reader's perspective of the overall design. The poems often take up space in every direction on the page, asserting their identity quite literally at every turn. Individual poems have the kinetic ability to spill over diagonally



HAVING GROWN UP IN A FAMILY OF PRACTICING MORMONS, IT IS CERTAINLY NOT SURPRISING THAT SWENSON WOULD SHOW AN OVERACTIVE ATTENTION TO 'DELICIOUS SIN.' THE THEME OF THE RECALCITRANT CHILD IS A STRONG PRESENCE THROUGHOUT HER WORK IN POEMS LIKE 'THE CENTAUR.'"

into stanzaic receptacles, embody the shape and spirit of paintings by De Chirico, and spin like a top around a still center. Although Swenson was clearly engaged in the experimental enterprise to a degree that would charm any scientist, her poetic experimentation was more a means than an end. A language poet before the phrase was coined, she surely would have disdained the label, for her poems are clearly "about" more than the words themselves. . . .

While Swenson did not go out of her way to disclose her lesbianism, neither did she go out of her way to hide it. Relatively late in her life, she expressed her pleasure at the possibility of having certain poems understood in their proper context, but she was apparently less happy about the implication of being a "lesbian poet," with "lesbian" as the modifier or defining term. Swenson's poem, "To Confirm a Thing," dated 1957, appeared in Joan Larkin and Elly Bulkin's anthology, *Amazon Poetry*, the first major collection of its kind, which came out in 1975. Swenson accepted the editors' invitation to include a sample of her work and suggested this particular poem, which after its appearance in *To Mix with Time* (1963), according to Swenson, "has never been paid any particular attention that I know of." She notes as well in her reply to Larkin: "To me the statement it makes doesn't seem at all obscure, but perhaps the metaphors constitute a thicker veil than I expected" (letter 2 Sept. 1975) . . . .

The oldest child of ten born to Swedish immigrant parents who settled in Utah, she was raised with a rigid set of expectations of how boys and girls should behave. Having grown up in a family of practicing Mormons, it is certainly not surprising that Swenson would show an overactive attention to "delicious sin." The theme of the recalcitrant child is a strong presence throughout her work in poems like "The Centaur." Indeed, the word "tomboy" seems to have been created with Swenson in mind. Her boyish, close-cropped hair is a constant on the dust jacket of each new book. This healthy resistance to authority, however, did not stand in the way of her filial loyalty. From the stringencies of her family of origin to the self-made family of women implied in such poems as "The Beauty of the Head," Swenson seems to have negotiated the boundaries of her various worlds with remarkable grace.

Swenson's eight surviving siblings attended her memorial tribute, given in March 1991 by the Academy of American Poets, for whom Swenson had served as chancellor from 1980 until her death in 1989, replacing Elizabeth Bishop in that post. Swenson's sister, Margaret Swenson Woodbury, one of her younger siblings, was among the presenters who offered reminiscences and read selected poems from the body of Swenson's work. Woodbury read the poem "I Look at My Hand" (*Iconographs*, 1970), in which the physical inheritance from parents is literally traced down to the fingertips. In another poem, "Night Visits with the Family" (*Things Taking Place*, 1978), variant dreams are attributed to a multitude of family members all identified by first name, including May and Margaret.

The collective presence of the family group takes on added significance in the poem "Feel Me" (*Iconographs*, 1970), in which, through a combination of apparent autobiography and linguistic analysis, Swenson/the speaker recalls "our father's" last words and puzzles through several possible interpretations:

> "Feel me to do right," our father said on his deathbed.
> We did not quite know—in fact, not at all—what he meant.
> His last whisper was spent as through a slot on a wall.
> He left us a key, but how did it fit? . . .

The microscopic attention to a small syntactic unit here stands in for the larger emotional work of grief, as if to say, in the absence of any clear message, we fix on the little we have. One possible interpretation to which the speaker does not allude is that, instead of (or in addition to) addressing the family members in his presence,

the father might be offering a prayer for God's grace. The implicit "you," in this case, would be God. "Feel me to [have done] right" (with my life) would then be the sense of his words. This seemingly intentional misreading reflects a narrowing perspective which sidesteps the extremity of the situation. If the father is talking to someone other than "us," "we" lose the exercise which gives meaning to "our" grief. Given Swenson's background, it seems likely that she assumes an implicit dialogue between "our father" on his deathbed and "Our Father," the heavenly maker, to whom the earthbound family members are denied access. In another family poem, "That the Soul May Wax Plump," Swenson writes: "Mother's work before she died was self-purification / a regimen of near starvation, to be worthy to go / to Our Father, Whom she confused (or, more aptly, fused) / with our father, in Heaven long since . . . " (*Things Taking Place*, 1978).

The internal dialogue was a useful strategy for Swenson in grappling with the important questions of her own life. In the previously unpublished poem, "Manyone Flying," she returns to a favorite visual format—the symmetrical arrangement of lines built around a narrow column of white space. In this instance, the structure suggests both the visual formation of birds in flight and the verbal precipice over which the speaker is poised. Swenson's notation on this poem tells us that she started it on a plane flight to Utah for a family visit. It is not surprising that this situation would evoke a soliloquy which traces the speaker's role as both loner and member of the flock, perpetually flying from one life to another and wondering at the need for such flight:

> Out on the ragged edge flying lonely
> Not all alone not that brave
> or foolish or self-sufficient
> or self-believing In the middle

In other poems, Swenson tackles metaphysical questions with an ironic spin that is gently irreverent. Just as "Feel Me" begins with a key that does not seem to fit in any known door, an earlier poem, "The Key to Everything" (*Another Animal*, 1954), looks at the hopeless task of the eternal seeker for answers. Here, Swenson uses breathless, unpunctuated verse paragraphs to characterize such an individual, "waiting for / the right person the doctor or / the mother or / the person with the name you keep / mumbling in your sleep . . . ." This is the kind of poem one would love to thrust in the face of New Age friends, particularly for the impact of its final lines: "...no once you'd / get there you'd / remember and love me / of course I'd / be gone by then I'd / be far away" (*New and Selected*).

The first two poems in *To Mix with Time* (1963) are entitled "The Universe" and "God." As Alicia Ostriker has pointed out, there may be no other poet with the audacity to use such titles, and it may be the quality Anthony Hecht refers to as "calculated naiveté" which allows Swenson to pull off the gesture. But Swenson is a child here in Blake's sense of wonderment before the infinite. And, like Whitman, her first poetic impulse is to celebrate. Her early short story, "Appearances" (one of two she published in her lifetime), sets up a dialogue between a physician and a visual artist that embodies Swenson's continuing stance. "'After all,'" the story opens in the tired, paternalistic voice of the doctor, "'we are no longer children.'" The artist, that callow youth, responds, "'On the contrary, I believe that we are all still children.'" The artist then refines his position, exalting the role of the senses in coming to terms with "'a mysterious and lavish power veining everything in nature, spilling free and raw from every stone and leaf'" (*New Directions*, 1951).

Peter Pan, both ageless and androgynous, remains the essential archetype, with nature a positive force that cannot be denied. It is that persistent spirit which leads me to resist a reading of Swenson's work and life that belabors the idea of internalized homophobia or self-hatred. Her absolute willingness to confound gender expectations for subject matter, genre, and style far outweighs her apparent ambivalence about being politically "out."

The first Swenson book I purchased was *To Mix with Time*, and this was long before I called myself a lesbian or saw her work collected in *Amazon Poetry*. I remember standing in the bookstore, transfixed by these lines from "Out of My Head":

> If I could get
> out of my
> head and
> into the
> world.
> What am I saying?
> Out of my
> head? Isn't my
> head
> in the
> world?

That immediate move to stand the question itself "on its head," the refusal to separate "head" from "world," the enactment of this separation by means of a continental divide of white space—these are qualities that disarmed me then and now. As a teenager with a hyperactive intelligence and a bent toward poetry, I sensed in Swenson's work the possibilities of a future I did not yet have the words to imagine—one in which I could be "in my head" and "in the world" at the same time and in equal measure. This lesson, of course, is the opposite of what parents and teachers had to say to smart girls—that experience was something we had to go out there and "get" if we wanted to fulfill ourselves as women. Swenson's work and life palpably contradict the voice of authority. Somehow, finding out that she was a lesbian simply confirmed what I already knew. Swenson had an innate distrust for the separation of thinking and feeling states. What she recognized, instead, was the seductive energy of words and ideas, the sensual allure of exploration and discovery, the sexiness of a machine's (or a poem's) working parts. It is the word made flesh and the flesh made word—that moment of union protracted in a body of work. For these reasons, Swenson's readers tend to offer an unqualified admiration that is closer to love. We love the poet who brings us closest to our own true nature—who shows us, through her example, what it means to be truly alive.

Source: Sue Russell, "A Mysterious and Lavish Power: How Things Continue to Take Place in the Work of May Swenson," in *Kenyon Review*, Vol. 16, No. 3, Summer 1994, pp. 128–39.

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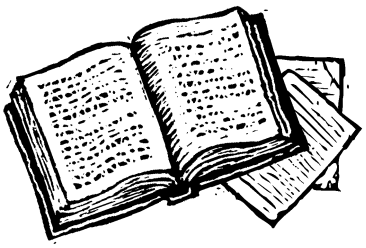
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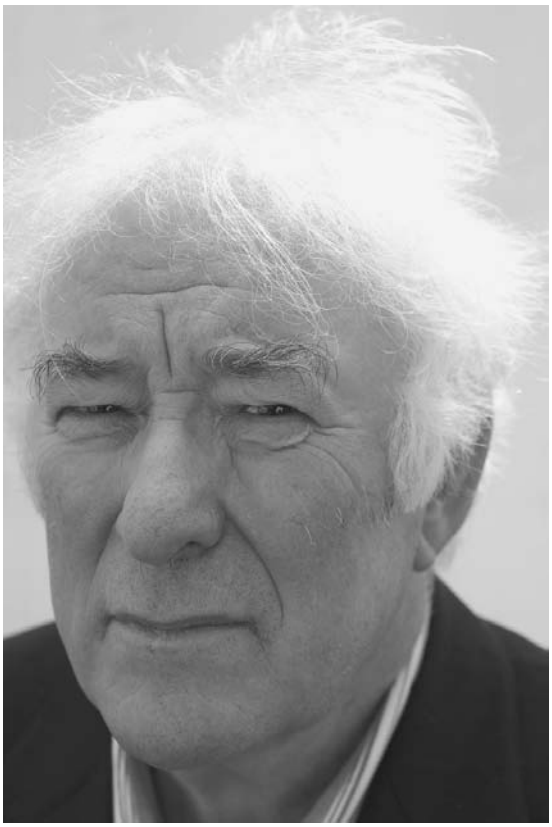
SEAMUS HEANEY

1966

"Follower" was first published in Seamus Heaney's 1966 anthology *Death of a Naturalist*. This first book of Heaney's career established his reputation as a poet almost overnight, and "Follower" is usually singled out as among the finest poems in that volume and among the most important of Heaney's poems from throughout his career. It establishes the main themes of Heaney's work, a poetry that is rooted in a sense of place in the rural Ireland of his boyhood and that laments the loss of old traditions that inevitably disappear among modern ways of life. Heaney considers that his family's traditional connection to the land and work as peasant farmers has come to an end in the modern world and must be continued by transformation into poetry. He uses the scholarly metaphor of pygmies standing on the shoulders of giants to suggest his indebtedness as a writer to his forebears' tradition of labor. He has since shaped a career based on navigation between tradition and the modern world, and on the transformation and translation of works of mythic tradition into modern English.

"Follower" has been widely republished in literary anthologies and in collections of Heaney's works, for instance in Heaney's *Opened Ground: Poems 1966–1996*.





Seamus Heaney *(David Levenson | Getty Images Entertainment | Getty Images)*

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Seamus Heaney was born on April 13, 1939, on the family farm of Mossbawn in County Derry, Northern Ireland. His family was Catholic, part of the minority population in Northern Ireland. He initially attended the local parish school, but soon won a scholarship to St. Columb's College, a prestigious Catholic boarding school in the city of Derry. He went on to take a First in English (the equivalent of an American bachelor's degree with honors) from the Queen's University of Belfast in 1961. He worked for two years on a teaching degree at St. Joseph's Teacher Training College, which included a year teaching English at a high School in Belfast. During this time he began to publish poems in local magazines. In 1963 he began lecturing in English at St. Joseph's. He also entered a circle of young poets patronized by Philip Hobsbaum, an established poet and a lecturer at Queen's University of Belfast. Under his patronage Heaney quickly came to the attention of prominent critics and published his first professional volume of poetry, *Death of a Naturalist*, including "Follower," in 1966. After this he would publish a new anthology of poetry every few years and constantly move on to more and more prestigious teaching posts. Between 1972 and 1980 he taught at Carysfort College in Dublin, which enabled him to move with his family (he married the teacher and writer Marie Devlin in 1965 and had sons Michael and Christopher in 1966 and 1968) to the Catholic Republic of Ireland. Acclaimed by critics as among the greatest living poets, in 1982 he began teaching at Harvard University and in 1989 at Oxford, maintaining his permanent residence in Dublin. Since 1994 he has made his living as a public speaker, no longer needing to teach to support himself.

In 1995 Heaney was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. The following anthology, *Spirit Level*, was awarded the prestigious Whitbread Prize, an honor of nearly the same rank in British letters as the Booker Prize, which, being awarded exclusively to novels, Heaney is ineligible for. His translation of *Beowulf* won another Whitbread in 1999. He has won innumerable lesser prizes and been awarded honorary doctoral degrees by Fordham University, Harvard University, and other schools.

Of Heaney's later poetry anthologies, perhaps the most important is *Station Island* (1984). Organized around his reenactment of the medieval practice of pilgrimage, Heaney considers in this volume the place and character of the poet in the modern world. One section of the book is devoted to poems inspired by the medieval Irish myth, *The Madness of Sweeney*, of which Heaney had published an interpretation, *Sweeney Astray*, the previous year. Heaney's adaptations of Greek drama, *The Cure at Troy* (1990), based on Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, and *The Burial at Thebes* (2004), based on Sophocles' *Antigone*, have also been well received. Since winning the Nobel Prize, Heaney has done an increasing number of translations out of Old and Middle English. Of these the most important is undoubtedly his rendering of *Beowulf* (1999), which is recognized as one of his most significant and influential works in any genre.

POEM SUMMARY

"Follower" consists of six four-line stanzas, or quatrains. Each stanza follows an *abab* rhyme scheme, meaning the first and third line of each

stanza rhyme, as do the second and fourth. No particular metrical scheme is followed, and the length of the lines is determined by the ideas they contain and by grammatical breaks.

Stanza 1

Heaney takes as his subject a description of his father plowing a field. He does not use a tractor. No modern device intrudes on the scene. His father cuts through the field with an old-fashioned hand plow drawn by a horse. The use of horses (most likely a team) indicates some level of prosperity since a less successful farmer would be forced to use a cheaper draft animal such as an ox. The plough horses are well trained and respond to the plowman's voice command. The metaphor of the second and third lines is somewhat odd. The speaker views his father in profile and describes the curve of his body bent over in the act of plowing as the curve of a sail billowing out from attachment points at the handles of the plough and at the trench being cut into the sod by the plough blade. But, of course, the billowing shape in this instance is coming off the back of the plow and would suggest motion contrary to the forward progress of the plough. But, no doubt, the image is not used for its literal applicability but for its suggestion of the smooth motion of sailing, propelled by nature rather than a man-made device such as a tractor engine. The transformation of the plowman into a sail suggests that the plough as a whole is sailing over the field like a ship, and one cannot help but think that it is a vessel for the preservation of tradition, modeled, perhaps on the metaphor of the ship of the Church as the vessel preserving the faithful and Catholic tradition on the storm-tossed sea of the world. The fact that the father is stretched between the plow and the cut he is making in the ground also suggests the special connection of the farmer to the earth.

Stanza 2

The second stanza develops the theme of the father's expertise as a farmer. The process being described is a plough running over the earth to create a fold in which seed can be sown to germinate and hence produce a crop. The specialized blade that cuts into the soil and turns it over is called a moldboard. This is supported by a wooden framework with handles that allow the farmer to guide the plowing and a rigging at the head to enable the horses to pull the plough. The blade and framework together make up the plough. The pointed blade attached to the front of the moldboard that does the cutting is called a ploughshare, although Heaney makes a point of referring to it by an Irish dialectical word that is only a homonym to the English word 'sock'; that is, it has the same sound but a completely different meaning and origin. The trailing part of the moldboard that actually turns the earth is likened by a conventional metaphor that is really a technical term to the similarly shaped anatomy of a bird. As his father plows, he leaves a solid swath of turned over soil, as opposed to a trail of broken clods of earth. This emphasizes again his father's special skill at his work, as does his control over the horses.

There is a striking enjambment between the second and third stanzas. Enjambment is the continuation of sense and grammatical units across the boundaries of metrical or formal units in poetry. In this case not only a sentence but a clause extends across the stanza break. This is a poetic representation of the continuous action of plowing: just as the plowman leaves a continuous path of sliced up earth, the poet keeps going smoothly across the stanzas. Given Heaney's love of the archaic, probably the effect he had in mind was the boustrophedon style of writing. When alphabetic writing was first introduced into Archaic Greece from the Near East, there was considerable uncertainty among scribes about the direction of the writing itself. Some chose to start at the left and write toward the right in the way that is standard in European languages (probably because of the prevalence of right-handedness). Others, however, preserved the Semitic practice of writing from right to left. A few examples survive in boustrophedon, in which the first line of a text reads from left to right, but the second from right to left, the third from left to right again, and so on, the scribe always writing the first letter of the next line directly underneath the last letter of the previous line. This type of writing is called boustrophedon from Greek words denoting the motion of plowing oxen back and forth across a field.

Stanza 3

The third stanza reiterates the early themes of the poem: the father's skill and perhaps the nautical metaphor of the first stanza, if there are references to the age of exploration under sail in the sense of navigating through the field requiring the making of a new map. The sense

of repetition itself is important since once the plowman has crossed the field he must turned around and exactly repeat his procedure over and over, back and forth, until the entire field is plowed.

Stanza 4

So far the speaker has viewed his father's plowing through the eyes of memory. In the fourth stanza he suddenly sees and shows the reader his younger self, perhaps four or five years old, before he would have entered his parish school, playing in the field where his father is working. In the traditional society that Heaney was destined to leave as soon as he attended a prestigious boarding school in Derry, this is how children would have learned the routines and skills of labor on the farm, by playing and then working with their parents as they performed their age-old tasks. The likening of the long cuts made into the ground by his father's plowing through the waves left by the passage of a ship may be taken as a reemphasis of the earlier nautical metaphor. Heaney describes his young self as awkward and uncertain, unable to follow in his father's footsteps. But his father picks him up and lets him ride on his shoulders. These are powerful metaphors establishing the relationship between father and son. Heaney is unable to go forward in the tradition of his family and his father, but he is nevertheless supported and uplifted by that tradition.

Stanza 5

The fifth stanza deals with the speaker's incapacity to imitate his father's way of life. This is his desire, but his imitation is childish and exaggerated. He cannot become a plowman but can only follow behind the plowman. His father casts a shadow larger than his young body, a reference to the idea of being overshadowed by one's predecessors.

Stanza 6

In the first sentence of the last stanza Heaney characterizes his young self as a positive distraction, getting in the way of his father, and never able to keep up with him owing to his unstable awkwardness. Then, changing his perspective and tone, the speaker says that now the situation is reversed; his father is the awkward follower. Heaney's father was a peasant farmer, a man of tradition, who cannot make his way in the modern world as Heaney—a professor, writer, and poet—can do. His father's tradition is dead and his father with it, but yet it stands behind Heaney in his encounter with modernity. The fit between the two worlds is as awkward from the viewpoint of the modern as it was from the viewpoint of tradition: Heaney's childhood gracelessness was a foreshadowing of this. Young Heaney would not leave his father's footsteps, but playfully and haltingly dogged him. His father will now, however, stay behind Heaney, supporting him as a bridge to an imperishable tradition, however haltingly.

THEMES

Tradition

Much of Heaney's work is devoted to what, for want of a better word, may be called tradition. Tradition is the set of customs that are inherited by a culture and give it its identity. In "Follower," Heaney makes the particular craft of farming—his father's excellence at its tasks, as well as the close association between father and a son made possible by the traditional way of life in which a son was essentially apprenticed to his father for education—stand for tradition as a whole. A great deal of Heaney's later work has involved the adaptation or translation into modern English of works vital to the Western tradition including stories from Irish mythology, Greek tragedy, and the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf*. In his own poetry Heaney often laments the loss of tradition. "Follower" is one of the most important examples of Heaney's treatment of tradition. It describes in loving, idealized terms the agricultural way of life that represents tradition for Heaney, in particular his father's way of life as he knew it in his own childhood. In the last stanza of the poem, there is a stark transition to Heaney's adult viewpoint, where his embrace of modernity and progress has jarringly pulled him out of the traditional way of life and left it a staggering wreck shambling behind him.

The Shoulders of Giants

In the fourth stanza of "Follower," Heaney describes his young self riding piggy-back on his father's shoulders while the elder is plowing. This is probably unlikely as a physical fact (though not impossible), but it is best taken as an allegorical reference to one of the most

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY



- Look through several art books with illustrations of genre paintings that provide images of peasant life in Northwestern Europe from the Middle Ages to the present. Then produce your own artistic interpretation of the characters in Heaney's "Follower."
- What traditions does your family have? What have you learned from your parents and relatives? Write a poem describing how the ideas and wisdom you have inherited from your family will support what you intend to accomplish in the future.
- Think of a period in history that you would like to visit. Write a short story detailing what it would be like if you went there and how you would influence the citizenry with your twenty-first century knowledge.
- Brian Desmond's 1962 film *Playboy of the Western World*, an adaptation of the 1907 play by Irish playwright J. M. Synge, presents a satirical view of rural Irish life. Watch this film and discuss in a review how this film either illustrates or contrasts with the world mourned by Heaney in "Follower."

important themes of Western literature and culture, the idea that if modern people see farther than the ancients, it is because they are pygmies standing on the shoulders of giants. This slogan was first developed during the little Renaissance of the twelfth century when Western Europe received a great mass of Greek literature in Arabic translation, immensely enriching medieval culture. The phrase was coined by Bernard of Chartres, as quoted by Jacques Le Goff in *The Birth of Europe*, in the form "we are dwarves standing on the shoulders of giants," and has been repeated countless times since then. In the Middle Ages and Renaissance it meant that contemporary achievements were small and weak compared to those of Classical antiquity and that anything that seemed an advance over the ancients was only a tiny addition to the Greco-Roman foundation. The phrase continued to be popular during the Scientific Revolution, but in the less radical sense of indicating that each generation of researchers owes an enormous debt to their predecessors. In this sense the phrase has been adopted as the slogan of the Google Scholar service, which is dedicated to searching scholarly periodical literature on the Internet: "Stand on the shoulders of giants."

In more recent times, the Renaissance slogan has been used to criticize modernity. The cynical short story writer and essayist Ambrose Bierce (1842-1914) in his "Prattle" column in the *San Francisco Examiner*, used it to highlight the supposed insignificance of modern culture compared to that of the ancients:

> My friends, we are pigmies and barbarians. We have hardly the rudiments of a true civilization; compared with the splendor of which we catch dim glimpses in the fading past, ours are as an illumination of tallow candles. We know no more than the ancients; we only know other things; but nothing in which is an assurance of perpetuity, and nothing which is truly wisdom. Our vaunted *elixir vitae* is the art of printing with movable types. What good will those do when posterity, struck by the inevitable intellectual blight, shall have ceased to read what is printed? Our libraries will become their stables, our books their fuel.

In *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883–85), the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche composes a parable in which a dwarf standing upon the soldiers of the ancient lawgiver Zarathustra is nevertheless unable to see the same profound insight that Zarathustra does because he is not only small in stature but also in imagination and vision, suggesting that the relatively small advances in philosophy and culture made since antiquity are insignificant compared to the original base.

Heaney's use of the pygmies on the shoulders of giants motif seems somewhat different again. On the one hand he makes the pairing not of mythological or stereotypical figures, but of a father and son, suggesting a much stronger connection between the two halves of the metaphor than is usual, contradicting the function of the idea of size difference to emphasize the gulf between the ancients and moderns. On the other hand, the entire metaphor of learning falls apart because Heaney's academic education is in no usual sense dwarfed by his father's lack of conventional learning. Rather, what Heaney is



Man ploughing with horses (© Ed Young | Corbis)

suggesting by these transformations is that the modern learned culture represented by himself, which is a link to the larger Western traditions of antiquity and the Renaissance, must be in some sense inferior and secondary to the traditional culture represented by his father. It is removed from the direct connection to the earth, which is the source of tradition.

Agriculture

The literal theme of "Follower" is plowing. This essential agricultural work has been used as a metaphor for the union of man and woman throughout the history of Western literature and going back to Mesopotamian and Egyptian literature. In this usage, the field is conceived of as feminine and the plough the masculine force. Karen Moloney, in *Seamus Heaney and the Emblems of Hope* has pointed out that the mythological theme of the pre-Christian Irish kings marrying the goddess earth and pledging to protect her as his wife would increasingly concern Heaney in his his later work. If we view the act of plowing in "Follower" as a symbolic marriage, it offers an explanation for the sudden appearance of young Heaney, as a sort of earth-born offspring of Ireland. The poem then takes on a dreamlike quality in which Heaney's birth and maturity, alongside the maturity and decline of his father, the succession of the generations, is compressed into a single moment. It emphasizes Heaney's rootedness in the tradition of rural Ireland.

STYLE

Metrical Effects

Traditionally, poetry in English is marked by a special cadence or rhythm of the language used known as meter. For this purpose every syllable is said to be either stressed or unstressed. The meter consists of the repetition of metrical units known as feet: an iamb, for instance, is a foot consisting of an unstressed followed by a stressed syllable. The most common line of poetry in English is the iambic pentameter, that is, a line consisting of five iambs. It is almost

possible to resolve the lines of Heaney's "Follower" into lines of iambic quadrameter (lines with four iambs), though with a few oddly placed pentameter lines. Given the overwhelmingly iambic character of ordinary spoken English, however, it seems more likely that Heaney is using more contemporary techniques of composition and abandoning meter as an element of the poem. He does use some metrical effects; for example, the last stanza of the poem describes awkward lurching motions and is heavy with trochees, or feet consisting of a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable, to suggest the unnatural movements.

Abab *Rhyme Scheme*

Rhyme was a native characteristic of Arabic poetry that was introduced during the Middle Ages into French and thence other Western European languages by troubadour poets who moved across the language border between Arabic and the Romance languages in northern Spain. Rhyme consists of having the sound at the end of one line, from the last accented syllable until its end, repeated in another line. Heaney follows this convention quite faithfully, with an *abab* rhyme scheme in each four-line stanza, meaning the first line rhymes with the third, and the second with the fourth. However, he frequently only rhymes the last syllable, not going back to the last accented syllable, and in many cases only matches long or short vowels rather than using syllables with the same vowels.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Heaney's "Follower" concerns the transition from a traditional way of life to a new way of life embedded in modernity. For Western civilization as a whole, this process began during the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution in the late eighteenth century. For Heaney's family and for the poet himself, this change occurred in the course of Heaney's own life and education.

In a traditional culture such as the one in which Heaney grew up in rural Ulster in the early 1940s, most people accepted the culture they were part of as given, not something to be questioned or examined. Life was based on closely held human relationships, not only within families but between individuals of differing classes, such as landowners and peasants, whose interactions created the economic fabric of culture. An individual's place in society was largely determined by his ancestry, with some exceptions, including peasant boys who became priests or sailors. Almost everyone lived as peasants, whose lives and livelihood were inextricably bound up with the natural world through their work as farmers. The perception then of an ideal life was a satisfying mixture of physical labor and wisdom that allowed one to successfully navigate society as it existed. Larger issues such as religion were also determined by family tradition. By and large culture was fixed and unchanging. This was seen to be good because it reflected a moral hierarchy and tradition that supported and transcended human existence; the individual led a good life by fulfilling his place in the societal order.

Heaney describes his boyhood life in this kind of environment in *Crediting Poetry*, the lecture he gave in acceptance of his Nobel Prize in 1995. He cherishes the satisfied isolation of his peasant family:

> In the nineteen-forties, when I was the eldest child of an ever growing family in rural County Derry, we crowded together in the three rooms of a traditional thatched farmstead and lived a kind of den life which was more or less emotionally and intellectually proofed against the outside world.

To his boyhood self, the world seemed a place full of magic, which we may understand to mean animated with belief and meaning. The only way in which the outside world intruded was the single modern device in the family's life, the shortwave radio. Even this seemed to the young Heaney a source of divination and miracle, as magical voices talked about far-off events in a war that might as well be happening in the land of "Once upon a time." "But it was not only the earth that shook for us: the air around and above us was alive and signaling us as well," he recalled in his lecture. He did not at that time view the radio and the modern world it was a connection to as agents of change. Before he was sent to a modern school, where his parents hoped he would find the means of a life better than their own, or at least a place in the world outside their retreating livelihood, he accepted the order of the world as it was, as it had always been. "The wartime, in other words, was pre-reflective time for me. Pre-literate too. Pre-historical in its way."

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **1940s:** After the period 1920–25, when Ireland was partitioned into Northern Ireland, which continued as part of Great Britain, and the newly independent Irish Free State, political violence in Ireland sinks to a very low level.

  1960s: Northern Ireland is entering a period termed "The Troubles," a time characterized by violence between Catholic and Protestant paramilitary factions, violence that also involved and the British authorities.

  Today: Political tensions and violence have eased considerably following a number of negotiated settlements.
- **1940s:** Ulster, or Northern Ireland, has a more prosperous economy than the largely rural south because of its concentration of heavy industry, especially shipbuilding in Belfast.

  1960s: Despite the presence of industrial centers in the north, farming still accounts for a large segment of the economy in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

  Today: The economy of the Republic of Ireland has undergone a high-tech boom since the 1990s and has become one the wealthiest (per capita) countries in the world. Northern Ireland has benefited from the prosperity of its neighbor, and from relative peace, but it lags behind economically.
- **1940s:** Education beyond the equivalent of grade school is rare in rural Ireland.

  1960s: Education beyond the equivalent of grade school is still rare in rural Ireland and common only in the industrialized cities of Northern Ireland.

  Today: Education through the equivalent of high school is compulsory and college and graduate education are offered to all Irish citizens free of charge. The same is true in Northern Ireland.

Modernity brought dramatic change to every area of life, undermining and replacing almost every element of traditional ways of life, first in Western Europe and then increasingly throughout the whole world as Western culture became dominant in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment set about to examine all of the certainties that underpinned life in traditional culture—the very things that seemed to make civilized life safe and meaningful—and to expose these traditions as false or meaningless. The very nature of the universe was changed by the heliocentric revolution. The social order was overturned and shown to be built on injustice rather than justice by the French Revolution and such Enlightenment treatises as Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* (1791), Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *The Social Contract* (1761), and eventually Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels's *Communist Manifesto* (1848). Social support for traditional religions also eroded as educated classes embraced deism and even atheism, while simple irreligion has become increasingly widespread, with, for instance, a dramatic decrease in church attendance in Western Europe throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Work once followed the natural rhythms of agricultural life and families worked together on farms with parents acting as teachers to their children, instructing them in the skills necessary for their lives. But the vast majority of workers were sooner or later forced to leave the land for employment in factories. This meant laboring at unfulfilling and often dangerous, repetitive work tending machines; it also meant separation of the family with fathers isolated for long hours in the factories. The twentieth century brought about two world wars, which turned the power of industrial production to the destruction of human life.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

From the very beginning of Heaney's efforts to write poetry, established poets such as Philip Hobsbaum and critics like Edward Lucie-Smith acted as his patrons, so his work was quickly published and immediately gained widespread critical acceptance in the mid-1960s. Since the 1980s, he has regularly been called the greatest Irish poet since William Butler Yeats and the greatest living poet writing in English.

James Simmons was an early associate of Heaney, who studied with him under Hobsbaum. His article "The Trouble with Seamus," published in *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays*, breaks with the easy acceptance Heaney quickly gained in critical circles. He feels that Heaney, though capable of writing a few nice individual poems, was ruined by his early advancement, never having been forced to do the groundwork necessary to become a great poet. He is dismissive especially of Heaney's first volume of verse: "Most of the poems in that first book, *Death of a Naturalist* (1966), have the air of diligently done school exercises lacking any vision, passion or intellect." He excepts from this, however, "Follower," for its vivid, flowing language and what he terms its outspokenness.

Elmer Andrews's essay, "The Gift and the Craft," in *Twentieth Century Literature*, interprets "Follower" as a demarcation between two worlds: the unexamined, illiterate life of traditional Irishmen into which Heaney was born, and the self-consciously reflective world of English literature into which Heaney was educated, where direct experience is impossible and sensation must be mediated by thought. In "The Spirit' Protest," from *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Andrews also singles out "Follower" as unusual among Heaney's poetry. In his view the poem "highlights the way family relationships can be a burden as well as sustaining. Here, old ways and old allegiances prevent free movement and personal development." Alan Peacock, in an essay titled "Meditations: Poet as Translator, Poet as Seer," also in *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays*, takes up the same theme, seeing the poem as defining limits the poet imposes on himself because he is unwilling to betray the tradition represented by his father. Peacock's interpretation of the poem's last stanza is standard, seeing the father's halting gait as an admission that Heaney is moving away from his beloved tradition. John Boly, a widely published professor of English at Marquette University, has offered in an article in *Twentieth Century Literature* a different interpretation of this final passage of the poem: "The lurching father suggests a voodoo zombie dug up by some malevolent Pedro loa and set to work in the plantations of Haiti. With no will of his own, the heroic ploughman loses control of his own limbs." This view has not been echoed by other critics.

CRITICISM

Bradley A. Skeen

Skeen is a classics professor. In this essay, he considers "Follower" in relation to romantic and post-romantic concepts of tradition.

Heaney's "Follower" laments the loss of contact with a tradition of family, of place, and of long ages past that nevertheless sits beneath and sustains his poetical work. The boundary between the traditional way of life that has shaped human culture and modernity was drawn for the educated classes of Europe toward the end of the eighteenth century. The change from tradition to modernity has come to the rest of the world as each place has contacted and absorbed modern Western culture. For Heaney it came when he won a scholarship to St. Columb's Catholic boarding school in Derry and he was thrust from the family farm into a new world of learning. "Follower" is about the loss of tradition. In fact, the main theme of Heaney's poetic career is the sense of loss that accompanies moving away from tradition. His poems often focus on the details of his family life in his childhood before his personal break with tradition. He has tried to create an English in his poems accessible to modern audiences, but nevertheless drawn equally from the language heard in his childhood from family and neighbors, and from the heroic and archaic Anglo-Saxon he studied at university. He sees the unity between those two roots of his language not in their shared tradition, which is slight, but in their shared possession of a tradition in contrast to the more artificial language of polite English society, often called BBC English because it is recognized as the creation of a specific and very modern consensus. For this reason the magnum opus of the latter part of Heaney's

WHAT DO I READ NEXT?



- Heaney's 1999 translation of *Beowulf* is acknowledged as the masterpiece of his later career. His style of translation points out similarities he sees between the epic diction of the Old English verse and the conversational speech of the peasant farmers he grew up among.
- Kathleen Raine's *Collected Poems, 1935–1980*, published in 1981, presents the primary works by a leading self-avowed traditionalist poet who is interested in many of the same themes as Heaney.
- *Some Experiences of an Irish RM*, published in 1899 by Edith Somerville and Violet Martin, is a series of comic short stories concerning an English Resident Magistrate attempting to bring the benefits of modern British civilization to the Irish countryside. It was followed by two more collections, *Further Experiences of an Irish RM* (1908) and *In Mr. Knox's Country* (1915). Most of the stories in these volumes were adapted into a long-running British television series, *The Irish RM* by Ulster Television in the 1980s.
- Conor McCarthy's *Seamus Heaney and Medieval Poetry* (2008) treats Heaney's use of medieval myth and poetry in his translations and adaptations.
- William Butler Yeats is the most famous Irish poet to precede Heaney. Like Heaney, he is an Irish poet and a Nobel Laureate who dealt extensively with Irish myth and tradition. His poems have been frequently collected and republished, for instance in the edition edited by Richard J. Finneran, *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (1989).

career is the translation of the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf*, which he rendered into the remembered language of his youth. Through that work, adaptations of Irish myth (*Sweeney Astray*, 1983), and Greek dramas (*The Cure at Troy*, 1990; *The Burial at Thebes*, 2004), Heaney attempts to speak in the lost idiom of tradition.



A MAN LIKE HEANEY, WHO DESPERATELY LONGS FOR TRADITION, CAN NEVER PARTICIPATE IN IT AGAIN ONCE THE MODERN WORLD HAS CAST HIM OUT OF HIS EDEN; HE MUST FOREVER BE A STRANGER IN HIS OWN LAND."

But what is this tradition whose loss so concerns Heaney? Tradition is the story that a culture tells about itself, that defines itself and expresses the hopes and aspirations of a people. Tradition tells this story not only in the words of poets but in every moment of life, as Heaney insists, even in the farmer plowing and digging. Tradition is true in the sense of giving an expression of cultural identity. However, it may well contain historical, mythological, or folkloric information that is not factually true from the viewpoint of logic or from a scientific examination of evidence. The apparent falsification of tradition by academic investigation does not make it any less vital. Balancing the idea of a tradition as true with the fact that it is not true makes it impossible for modern people to participate in tradition unself-consciously, as premodern people did, and leads to alienation from tradition. The alienation of modernity arises from the perception that life in a modern industrializing society fragmented tradition, that capitalism replaced class structure with class warfare, and that science and the Enlightenment held up traditional social institutions and their associated belief systems to ridicule. The bonds between man and God become ignorant superstition, the corruption of Church officials, and intolerance for freedom of thought; the bonds of man to man become the oppressive tyranny of medieval social hierarchy; the bonds of man to the world become a hindrance to scientific exploration and commercial exploitation. A man like Heaney, who desperately longs for tradition, can never participate in it again once the modern world has cast him out of his Eden; he must forever be a stranger in his own land. Modern people are doomed to stand apart from tradition

and examine it from the outside, seeing through it and around it, but never again within it.

Poetry itself was one of the traditions most dramatically and directly effected by the rise of the modern world. In the traditional world, the poet of the sort who composed *Beowulf* is a bard. He does not tell the story of himself or of any particular individual but composes epics, or tales of a mythic hero who encounters gods and monsters. He tells the myths and legends that define the very nature of his own culture. He cannot read or write but rather composes his songs through repetition and other literary devices of the oral tradition. Though his artistry is free to shape the brilliance of each performance, he does not speak in his own voice, but in a metalanguage of lines and half-lines of verse composed by generations of bards before him, all of which he holds in his memory, selecting and recombining them into new songs the way ordinary speakers make sentences out of words. The bard holds an honored place within the social hierarchy that governs traditional society, patronized by nobles and kings, but is gratefully heard by the people as a whole at festivals and singing competitions. In the twenty-first century, however, the modern sort of poet must speak in his own unique voice and must speak only his own story: only that isolated truth is given value. The contemporary poet's relationship to his own culture is one of alienation and conflict. He is cut off from tradition. In this sense, he could not compose a true epic even if he desired to; he could, however, write about the impossibility of composing an epic. Contemporary poetry is, for the most part, read only by other poets and academics (Heaney is the great exception to this, and accounts for about two-thirds of all poetry books sold in the United Kingdom.) Forced by circumstance to be one sort of poet, Heaney perhaps longs to be the other.

Reaction against the alienation of traditional European culture effected by the advent of modernity was not long in coming in the form of the romantic movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In the twenty-first century, romanticism is considered a literary movement, but the intellectual force behind it, especially in such philosophical figures as Goethe, Schiller, and Wordsworth, recognized the transformation of culture that was happening. Many positive developments, especially for the individual, came with modernity: increased personal freedom, the intellectual certainties of science, modern sanitation, improvements in medicine, the phenomenal growth of knowledge in general, and many other advances. But the romantics nevertheless felt that something was being lost with the passing of tradition. What they aimed at was a logical syllogism, or deductive reasoning, where the thesis of tradition and the antithesis of modernity (both good things by themselves, though in radically different and mutually contradictory ways) could be reconciled because the elementary basis of tradition was still harbored within the soul of humankind. This reconciliation would then produce a wholly new synthesis that would supersede and at the same time combine the best parts of both. However, the synthesis eluded the romantics and modern culture has become increasingly distant from tradition.

More recent mainstream reactions to modernity, which may be roughly equated with postmodernism, hold that meaning is more and more invested with the individual and his perception of the world, rather than any objective reality. Even in the case of texts, authorial intent matters little compared to the critic's perception. Each individual is left alone to create his own world, finally and utterly cut free of the anchor of tradition. A different reaction to modernity is traditionalism. This is a marginal political movement that began at the start of the twentieth century in southern Europe, particularly with the writings of the French intellectual René Guénon (1886–1951) and the German-Swiss philosopher Frithjof Schuon (1907–98). The principles of traditionalism hold that human life derives its meaning from being enmeshed in a tradition that goes back to the earliest civilizations and beyond, ultimately to a source of supernatural revelation such as the Judeo-Christian Bible, the Koran, or the Chinese I-Ching; traditionalism considers all religions to be equally valid expressions of tradition. Traditionalism is less willing than romanticism to compromise with modernity or to see the good in it, but, at the same time, traditionalism lacks any definite answer to the problem of modernity and advocates waiting and preserving tradition, especially links to traditional institutions, insofar as possible until conditions change, making a revival of tradition possible.

Though today it is difficult to see how it could be brought about, traditionalism seeks nothing less than a *different* modernity, one

that develops in support of, rather than in opposition to, tradition. This view has gained more support in the Islamic world as a political adjunct of the Sufi school than in Western Europe or the United States. The great voice of traditionalism has been the English poet Kathleen Raine (1908–2003), who used ancient Greek and Christian traditions to express the particularities of her experience, producing a body of work that is in many ways comparable to Heaney's.

Heaney has never associated himself with the traditionalist movement, and given its marginal place in European politics and intellectual life, he may well not even know of its existence. In fact, Heaney has eschewed all involvement with politics since the beginning of the Troubles in Northern Ireland in the 1970s. As he says in his Nobel address, later published as *Crediting Poetry*, "We have terrible proof that pride in the ethnic and religious heritage can quickly degrade into the fascistic." In this way he distances himself from traditionalism as political activism, avoiding the trap some traditionalists fell into. Nevertheless, Heaney's ideas share many features in common with premises of traditionalism. His poetry is rooted in a specific place, and in the history of that place. In his Nobel lecture, he expressed this in describing a vivid accident that occurred on the morning the announcement of his Nobel Prize was made. He happened to be in Sparta and saw in the museum there a plaque dedicated to the mythical poet Orpheus:

> The image moved me because of its antiquity and durability, but the description on the card moved me also because it gave a name and credence to that which I see myself as having been engaged upon for the past three decades: "Votive panel," the identification card said, "possibly set up to Orpheus by local poet. Local work of the Hellenistic period."

He does not limit inspiration to the single place of Derry or Ireland that is his. The voice of each place is equally valid:

> But it strikes me that it could equally well come out of India or Africa or the Arctic or the Americas. By which I do not mean merely to consign it to the typology of folktales, or to dispute its value by questioning its culture-bound status within a multicultural context. On the contrary, its trustworthiness and its travelworthiness have to do with its local setting.

For Heaney, as for the traditionalist, the tradition of any place is as fit a subject of poetry as any other. Heaney's concept of crediting poetry is not an appreciation of poetry, or merely belief in its beauty and importance, but rather a way to use poetry to reattach to the anchor of tradition and stand against the shifting currents of the postmodern world. "What I was longing for was not quite stability but an active escape from the quicksand of relativism, a way of crediting poetry without anxiety or apology," Heaney explained in his Nobel address. He wishes to embrace poetry without distancing thought from consideration, just as the ancient bards had done, though he knows that as a modern person he cannot do so. Heaney sees himself as another kind of traditional writer, the medieval monk, preserving a tradition he cannot advance. He described it thus to the Nobel audience:

> . . . For years I was bowed to the desk like some monk bowed over his prie-dieu, some dutiful contemplative pivoting his understanding in an attempt to bear his portion of the weight of the world, knowing himself incapable of heroic virtue or redemptive effect, but constrained by his obedience to his rule to repeat the effort and the posture.

Heaney is a pygmy standing on the shoulders of giants; using a different metaphor, he cannot build a fire himself (that is, write an epic poem), but must content himself with "blowing up sparks for a meagre heat," as he put it in his Nobel address, in other words, with writing the poetry that he does. At the same time, he is aware that many elements of modernity have grown into monstrous giants themselves and make poetry seem feeble. He wants a poetry that can equal the modern world, a poetry that would have to be myth, the literary form of tradition, and could support and create a different reality than the modern.

In the first poem in *Death of a Naturalist*, "Digging," Heaney establishes the profession of his father as digging, whether the small scale farming that was his main profession, or in the vegetable garden, or in his outside work cutting peat from a bog. He notes the excellence of his father in this work, a quality that is ancestral in the family going back generations. Heaney himself, however, is detached from this tradition. He does not work with a spade but with a pen. Nevertheless, he feels the imperative to continue in the same ancient tradition: he must dig with his pen. He can no longer participate in the tradition of his family, of his place, but must—not can, but must—instead keep the tradition alive through writing it. It is in this sense that

Heaney is the follower of his father, even as he goes on where his father cannot follow. In "Follower" Heaney proclaims himself the follower of tradition, but is nevertheless forced to move away from a tradition that cannot follow him into the modern world.

Source: Bradley A. Skeen, Critical Essay on "Follower," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2009.

John Boly

In the following excerpt, Boly discusses the speaker, eulogy, and poetic melancholy in Heaney's "Follower."

Readers of Seamus Heaney's poetry may remember the scene in "Follower" when the father, hard at work with spring ploughing, interrupts his task to reach down, pick up his little boy, and set him on his shoulders. It is an intimate detail made poignant by the speaker's point of view; now an adult, he recollects a moment in childhood shared with a father who has passed away. Composed altogether of nine such scenes, the poem serves as a funerary monument. The father and horse plough appear first, much as would the central figure of a classical frieze, and then supporting scenes encircle them: the father adjusting the coulter, pivoting the team, striding about the farm with his son following. As would be expected from the shallow depths of a bas-relief, there is no background. Though set in the bloom of an Irish spring, the poem makes no mention of wildflowers, birdsongs, the rich odors of wet steel, freshly turned earth, and weathered tack. Instead, a sculptural austerity prevails. A few clicks of the ploughman's tongue and the massive draft surge against the traces. The thick clay, doubtlessly sodden from winter rains, curls with an effortless grace. As if to defy the mystery of death, a raking light captures each detail so it is possible to feel the ploughman's eye squint as he lines up his next pass, or his son's slender arm stiffen as he dreams of one day driving the team himself.

The scene provides an ideal opportunity for poetic melancholy. The child, grown up, discovers like the creator of another cold pastoral that he may never enter the world of his beholding. Yet the tone of "Follower"'s initial persona suggests something different from longing or regret: relief, maybe even accomplishment. Homages to the dead can also serve the interests of the living, and it is not unusual for such reminiscences to become a means of containment. As Rene Girard notes in *Violence and the Sacred*,



THE SPEAKER IN 'FOLLOWER' CLEARLY PROVIDES THE CONSTATIVES OF THE POEM'S FICTIONAL 'INFORMATION.' AT THE SAME TIME, HE ALSO ENACTS A SERIES OF PERFORMATIVES, EACH OF WHICH PLAYS OUT A DRAMA IN BRIEF."

"With death a contagious sort of violence is let loose on the community, and the living must take steps to protect themselves against it. So they quarantine death . . . " (255).

The cliche about speaking no ill of the dead may present itself as an act of reverence for the deceased, but it also protects the living. The well-groomed anecdotes and recollections found in funereal genres help to edit painful memories and displace ugly secrets. It might even be possible to construct a correlative index. The more intense an effort to enshrine the dead (to seal, fix, finish them), the greater their threat. If so, the danger in "Follower" would be considerable because the initial persona resorts to one of the most powerful of mythemes to contain his father. The illud tempus, or "those times," commemorates the timeless moment when creation moved in perfect harmony with the gods. After the war between heaven and earth, historical beings were forever barred from revisiting this condition, except in the symbolism of sacred ritual (Eliade 80). It is to this forbidden place that the son transports his father, to become one of the ancient giants who towers over the mortals of subsequent ages. This mythical parent acquires the might of a Titan whom creatures, wind, and the earth itself obey. The events of his life unfold with the solemn inevitability of a sacred rite. There is no mention of his thoughts, for all is arranged in accordance with the eternal rhythms of nature. Such mastery cannot exist within human experience, and that is the point. The father, securely entombed in a timeless self-sufficiency, will never climb down from his stone monument.

Or at least that would be the case were it not for the poem's last lines. As with many of the poems in *Death of a Naturalist*, "Follower" does

not end; it interrupts itself with the beginning of a completely different poem.

> But today
> It is my father who keeps stumbling
> Behind me, and will not go away.

A new world emerges. Sudden shadows overtake the scene and a hitherto idealized being turns demonic. The lurching father suggests a voodoo zombi dug up by some malevolent Pedro Ioa and set to work in the plantations of Haiti. With no will of his own, the heroic ploughman loses control of his own limbs. There is no hint of what conjures this apparition from the father's sculptural repose, nor any indication of its subsequent actions. Unless, that is, this bare plot fragment is itself an act of conjuring in that it opens the way to so many counterplots. Does the father wish to accuse, judge, punish, forgive, or thank the son. The silent, grim, and reeling shadow offers no answers. For whatever reason, "Follower" ends with the dead awakened from the spell of illud tempus and returning to a "now" forever poised at the threshold of human time.

What unspoken summons leads to this unconcluding interruption? Although the poem probably has but one speaker, this dramatic character in turn comprises at least two different personas. Poetic speakers readily play distinct roles within the same work, even when the poem is a monologue. In "Follower," however, the text withholds the information needed to understand the inner conflict that generates the speaker's separate roles. The last persona might be heard as assigning blame with an insistent "It is my father who keeps stumbling / Behind me, and will not go away." But an imaginative reader could also hear the lines in a way that indicates surprise, resignation, terror, guilt, or even satisfaction. A reader is put in the situation of an outsider unexpectedly caught up in a family feud, perhaps recruited by the warring parties but given no explanation of their conflict. One interpretive move would be to rely on social convention. Suppose the second persona begrudges the harmless compliments paid by the first? What would be so wrong with glossing over memories from childhood? Did the horses lag at field's end, or the ploughshare veer to one side, or the father sometimes need to rest? Assuming that the first persona's remarks were sanitized, would that be so terrible in a reminiscence of the dead, particularly of one's father? If called upon, social convention delivers its usual swift judgment, in this instance by pronouncing the second persona to be irrational, horrid, distracted, or deeply troubled, with the choice depending on a preference for normalization, projection, displacement, or denial. But few responses are more suspect than the reflexes of social convention, however gratifying it may be to join in communal outrage.

If there are no direct connections between the speaker's beautiful memories and his puzzling self-interruption, and if a moralizing judgment is not the answer, then readers must turn to other resources. Some concepts from speech act theory may be useful here in that they distinguish otherwise simultaneous aspects of a locution. In *How to Do Things with Words*, John Austin quickly moves beyond an initial distinction between constatives (which assert something to be true or false about a state of affairs) and performatives (which accomplish social actions such as reassuring, misleading, belittling, inspiring, etc.) Yet his earlier formation still has considerable value for critical practice. The speaker in "Follower" clearly provides the constatives of the poem's fictional "information." At the same time, he also enacts a series of performatives, each of which plays out a drama in brief. While his constatives are restricted, his performatives are not. There is only so much information available in the poem. But how many different performatives are there? In the last lines of "Follower" for example, does the persona lament that he did not become a farmer, unearth a repressed experience, interject a screen memory that actually conceals something else, wreck a belated revenge on a tyrannical parent, shrewdly enlist one of numerous possible tactics for eliciting his listeners' sympathy, etc.? With face-to-face communications, human beings commonly identify performatives on the basis of contextual cues. "I will see you" might be a promise to someone in love with the speaker, a deliverance to someone caught in a tedious conversation, or a threat to someone who owes the speaker money. Notwithstanding the confidence many people have in their judgment, the process of identifying performatives is notoriously perilous. In the case of imaginative literature, matters are even worse. Literary works oblige readers to identify performatives mainly on the basis of internal cues, yet they deliberately omit, ambiguate, and overload such markers. To tell if an acquaintance were evening scores with a less-than-perfect parent, a listener might refer to

factors such as the speaker's intonation, the nature of the occasion, their prior encounters, the genre (letter, casual remark, retort), etc. But if the only access to a speaker's performatives is through a compressed and richly metaphorical text, then the performatives' potential meanings quickly outpace calculation. Necessarily, to interpret the purely textual and thus unrestricted performatives of a literary text requires a departure from the conventions of understanding ordinary speech acts. A literary text asks its readers to consider whether its performatives include some that are unintended by a speaker, or even at odds with one another. Nor is this a strictly modern preoccupation. Shakespeare's plays offer a great many scenes in which characters sincerely believe in their benign constatives, yet enact bloodthirsty and cynical betrayals. And they virtually consist of utterances whose leading metaphors portray the cast and setting of a coherent action, yet at the same time bear within themselves a medley of divergent and even contradictory dramas.

Literary criticism has much to learn about the various elements that cue a performative, or the complex interactions that may occur among multiple performatives. One matter, though, is clear. Some performative cues are relatively apparent in that they consist of familiar generic and stylistic elements. Other cues, however, may consist of more subtle markers: a gap in narrative continuity, a shift in physical perspective, a slight discrepancy within a metaphor's source domain. As with Austin's other distinctions, the various performatives of a literary text cannot be neatly divided into so many discrete textual segments, for they are simultaneous. A passage within a work of fiction, or lines within a poem, may contain an array of performative cues. And each of these may bring into being the cast and conflict of a different social world. As a heuristic, however, the performatives of any given passage may be roughly divided between a primary set signaled by familiar and apparent markers, and a secondary set signaled by less commonly noted and thus less conspicuous markers. Adapting a term from Foucault, the performatives of these secondary markers can be considered as heterotopias. In his essay "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias," Foucault describes a heterotopia as a space that potentially connects to any other space, yet whose internal relationships "halt, suspend, or invert" conventional relationships (350). As well as its main drama, then, a literary work's performatives may further enact a series of heterotopias or spaces of decoding. By patiently tracing these spaces of the other, it becomes possible to delve into the tacit history of a locution, even should that history be entombed within a protective funerary art.

The framing drama of "Follower" suggests an amiable scene, perhaps a pub or other informal gathering. The conversation has perhaps turned to a harmless rivalry. Whose family and kin were closest to the land? The audience is probably a small group rather than an individual, for grandiloquence such as "His shoulders globed like a full sail strung . . . " would be too great a risk with just one person. Its members do not know the speaker well, otherwise they would not need to be told he is talking about his own father. Most likely the audience consists of outsiders unfamiliar with the husbandry skills that were common prior to the use of farm tractors. Were they locals they would be unimpressed by the initial flourish of rural argot: "shafts," "wing," "sock," "headrig." Interestingly, the speaker draws on this lexicon for only the first two quatrains. Each term occurs once, after which he returns to a more standard diction. His brief and well-placed display of verbal expertise leaves the impression of someone, perhaps an outsider himself, who mimics a ploughman's language just long enough to assume the role. Whatever his intentions, the initial persona plays several tramps in this conversational game. His ancestors belong to a tradition of survival that reaches back to fifth-century BC tillers of millet, and his diction confers an expert's knowledge and authority. Put simply, he pulls rank.

In different circumstances, even casual companions would grow suspicious and maybe resentful. But "Follower" also conducts a ceremony for honoring the dead, a eulogy, which tightly restricts an audience's responses. Anyone within earshot of a eulogy is supposed to listen respectfully. Doing so is a social obligation because the dead, if not put to rest, may wreak havoc anywhere. Those in attendance must furthermore take the speaker at his word, lest irony or innuendo begin to unravel the pall of reverence. Eulogies are usually announced well in advance so that participants can arrive well prepared to play their attentive and supportive roles. Yet "Follower"'s band of mourners find themselves inducted without benefit of either

prior notice or situational cues, so they could not possibly anticipate the consequences of the subtle net in which they are caught. Only a gradual accumulation of past tenses hints that the father has passed away, and even this remains an inference, not a fact. The eulogy's restrictions of the audience insinuate rather than announce themselves. Perhaps the father is still alive, but who would dare ask? By the time the listeners understand the drama in which they have been cast, it is too late. They have no choice but to play their assigned role.

But what about the restrictions on the speaker? Some generic codes are relevant here. A eulogy is not an encomium, which requires emotional warmth from the speaker; or a panegyric, which requires richly elaborated praise; or a tribute, which requires both profound grief and a substantial memorial, preferably one that involves heavy expense. Eulogies instead tend to be set pieces, delivered by commissioned rhetors, who do not know the deceased well, if at all. In a busy world, a eulogy offers a ready-made and convenient template, complete with fill-in blanks. All the initial persona of "Follower" need do is follow the numbers.

1. Put the deceased at center stage, but describe general features common to a role rather than specific details about an individual.

Anyone working a horse-drawn plough must adjust the share depth and angle of the moldboard according to the soil conditions, keep a solid grip on the lurching handles, turn the team at field's end, and match the furrows so as to waste neither time nor tillage. These are also the major events of the poem.

2. Keep it safe and shallow.

The two-dimensional ploughman appears entirely from the outside, just like his draft horses. The audience learns nothing of the father's thoughts, dreams, or disappointments, not even those that would be risk-free truisms such as his great love of the land or deep concern for his family.

3. To heighten the reality effect, and keep disharmonious memories at bay, weave several different occasions into a single memorable episode.

The eulogy forsakes the splays and tangles of historical time for the fight inevitability of a plot. It creates an unbroken thread, but at a high cost of exclusion.

4. End with a contrast between the ennobled past and the dismal future.

There can be no doubt concerning the difference between the father's manly prowess and the son's childish mimicry.

> I wanted to grow up and plough,
> To close one eye, stiffen my arm.
> All I ever did was follow
> In his broad shadow round the farm.
>
> I was a nuisance, tripping, falling,
> Yapping always.

While such dogged adherence to generic convention would make sense for a professional, especially one who is rushed or underpaid, for a son it raises questions about the purpose of his performative. Is its primary objective to conduct an act of homage to the dead? Or is this only a tactical means to another end, namely to exercise inescapable power over a conscript and submissive audience? It is a curious issue to raise, were it not for the even more curious absence of either emotion or understanding of son for father . . . .

Source: John Boly, "Following Seamus Heaney's 'Follower': Toward a Performative Criticism," in *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 46, No. 3, Fall 2000, p. 269.

Elmer Andrews

In the following excerpt, Andrews explores the opposition of masculine and feminine elements in Heaney's poems, including "Follower."

. . . Everywhere in his writings Heaney is acutely sensitive to the opposition between masculine will and intelligence on the one hand, and, on the other, feminine instinct and emotion; between architectonic masculinity and natural female feeling for mystery and divination. It is the opposition between the arena of public affairs and the intimate, secret stations of "the realms of whisper." He uses it to describe the tension between English influence and Irish experience ("The feminine element for me involves the matter of Ireland and the masculine strain is drawn from involvement with English literature "[*Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968–1978*, 132]). It underlies two different responses to landscape, one that is "lived, illiterate and unconscious," and one that is "learned, literate and conscious" (*P*, p. 131). Early poems like "Digging" and "Follower" establish his troubling self-consciousness about the relationship between "roots and reading," the lived and the learned.



EARLY POEMS LIKE 'DIGGING' AND 'FOLLOWER' ESTABLISH HIS TROUBLING SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN 'ROOTS AND READING,' THE LIVED AND THE LEARNED."

In attempting to resolve these contrarieties, the example of Patrick Kavanagh was invaluable. Kavanagh, the son of a country shoemaker in Inishkeen, County Monaghan, made the move from his native parish to London in 1937, and then in 1939 to Dublin, where he spent most of the rest of his life. Kavanagh's career seemed to Heaney to parallel much in his own, especially the conflict between "the illiterate self that was tied to the little hills and earthed in the stony grey soil and the literate self that pined for 'the City of Kings / Where art, music and letters were the real things'" (*P*, p. 137). The importance to Heaney of Kavanagh's "The Great Hunger" lay in the balance achieved between "intimacy with actual clay" (*P*, p. 122) and "the penalty of consciousness" (*P*, p. 118), through which Kavanagh proved the poet's imaginative self-sufficiency within his own parish. Kavanagh's assertion that "parochialism is universal, it deals with fundamentals" gave Heaney confidence in the poetic validity of his own preoccupation with his County Derry childhood. From Kavanagh's most successful work he could learn from a poet who had managed to develop ironic points of vantage on his material, which promoted the articulation of more subtle, complex feelings about the relationship between poet and place.

The pervasiveness of the masculine/feminine opposition in Heaney's writings about himself and other poets originates in a deepseated sense of his own divided feelings and experience. His poetry reflects the attempt to reconcile the tension. The poem, Heaney says, should be a "completely successful love act between the craft and the gift." But it is the gift, the initial incubatory action, he keeps reminding us, which is for him the crucial stage in the creative process. A poem, he believes, can survive stylistic blemishes that are due to inadequate crafting, but "it cannot survive a still-birth" (*P*, p. 49). Poetry is essentially a mystery, a corpse from the bog, a whispering from the dark, a gift from the goddess. The poet is passive receiver before he is an active maker.

There are times, however, when Heaney felt guilty or exasperated with this essentially passive role and wanted poetry to do something; when he wished to be a man of action making direct political statements rather than an equivocator, a parablist, a supplicant, or a withdrawn aesthete. From the beginning, from that opening image in the first poem in his first volume, "Digging," the shadow of a gunman is present, as if to convince us that the pen can be as mighty as the gun. He compensates for his failure to follow men of action by making promises: he'll dig with his pen he says. The theme does not become prominent until *North*, where art and the role of the artist come under his tormented scrutiny. By then Ulster was in a state of war.

Despite the lapse of confidence in art which *North* evinces—and the intensity of the anguish it occasioned should not be underestimated, as the last poem in *North*, "Exposure," would testify—the great bulk of Heaney's prose statements, comments to interviewers, and reviews of other writers are made from the point of view of a poet. When he turns to fellow poets, he tends to focus on their use of language, their verbal music, before theme or meaning. He never comments from the point of view of a politically committed spokesman, rarely even from a strictly academic viewpoint. He registers his appreciation of poetry as "self-delighting buds on the old bough of tradition" (*P*, p. 174). He takes the politically committed artist to task, in this case the Marxist, for attempting "to sweep the poetic enterprise clean of those somewhat hedonistic impulses towards the satisfactions of aural and formal play out of which poems arise, whether they aspire to delineate or to obfuscate 'things as they are'" (*P*, p. 174). Typically, Paul Muldoon qualifies as "one of the very best" for "the opulence of the music, the overspill of creative joy," for his exploitation of "the language's potential for generating new meanings out of itself . . . this sense of buoyancy, this delight in the trickery and lechery that words are capable of" (*P*, p. 213).

"During the last few years," Heaney stated in 1975, "there has been considerable expectation that poets from Northern Ireland should

'say' something about 'the situation.'" Heaney's comment on this demand was that "in the end they [poets] will only be worth listening to if they are saying something about and to themselves." Poetry for Heaney is its own special action, has its own mode of reality. In his review of the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam, who had found it impossible to make an accommodation with Soviet realities under Stalin, Heaney writes:

> We live here in critical times ourselves, when the idea of poetry as an art is in danger of being overshadowed by a quest for poetry as a diagram of political attitudes. Some commentators have all the fussy literalism of an official from the ministry of truth. (*P*, p. 219).

What Heaney's review asserts is the urgent need to fight for the very life of poetry in a world which seems increasingly to discount it. He elevates the artist's work above the moralist's. The principle of the autonomy of art frees the artist from tendentiousness, vulgar moralizing, and political propagandizing. A cut below the surface, however, are the whole world's concerns which, by virtue of the poet's "aesthetic distance," can be treated with a kind of passionate detachment, a concerned disinterestedness. Heaney speaks as an apologist of the "religion of art." The Mandelstam review begins with this impassioned pronouncement:

> "Art for Art's Sake" has become a gibe because of an inadequate notion of what art can encompass, and is usually bandied by people who are philistines anyhow. Art has a religious, a binding force, for the artist. Language is the poet's faith and the faith of his fathers and in order to go his own way and do his proper work in an agnostic time, he has to bring that faith to the point of arrogance and triumphalism. (*P*, p. 217).

Inevitably, however, politics come into communication with the poetical function, but legitimately only when the political situation has first been emotionally experienced and reduced to subordinate status in an aesthetically created universe of symbols. If Heaney's poetry automatically encompasses politics, he is careful that it should not serve them. In this respect the Yeatsian aesthetic is exemplary. There is a passage from Yeats's essay, "Samhain: 1905," part of which Heaney quotes at the beginning of *Preoccupations:*

> One cannot be less than certain that the poet, though it may well be for him to have right opinions, above all if his country be at death's door, must keep all opinion that he holds to merely because he thinks it right, out of poetry, if it is to be poetry at all. At the enquiry which preceded the granting of a patent to the Abbey Theatre I was asked if *Cathleen ni Houlihan* was not written to affect opinion. Certainly it was not. I had a dream one night which gave me a story, and I had certain emotions about this country, and I gave those emotions expression for my own pleasure. If I had written to convince others I would have asked myself, not "Is that exactly what I think and feel?" but "How would that strike so-and-so? How will they think and feel when they have read it?" And all would be oratorical and insincere. If we understand our own minds, and the things that are striving to utter themselves through our minds, we move others, not because we have understood or thought about those others, but because all life has the same root. Coventry Patmore has said, "The end of art is peace," and the following of art is little different from the following of religion in the intense preoccupation it demands.

Like Yeats, Heaney writes political poetry; but, also like Yeats, he is not political in any doctrinaire sense. As a man like any other man, politics are part of his life: being a poet does not separate him from the concerns of common humanity. What being a poet means is that his concern cannot simply be with abstract ideas, but with ideas suffused and shaped by emotion, and absorbed at the deepest levels of consciousness. The Yeatsian declaration that poetry is "expression for my own pleasure" is echoed by Joyce's shade in "Station Island," when he advises the poet, "The main thing is to write / for the joy of it." Art and politics may come from different imaginative "levels" of the personality if the art is good, original, deep, authentic enough: if the latter is the case (that is, in the case of good writers) the artistic insight is prophetic, "true," at a deeper level, and for a longer time, than any political idea can be.

In an interview with Seamus Deane, Heaney sought to explain the political nature of his poetry:

> Poetry is born out of the watermarks and colourings of the self. But that self in some ways takes its spiritual pulse from the inward spiritual structuring of the community to which it belongs; and the community to which I belong is Catholic and Nationalist. I believe that the poet's force now, and hopefully in the future, is to maintain the efficacy of his own "mythos," his own cultural and political colourings, rather than to serve any particular momentary strategy that his political leaders, his para-military

> organization or his own liberal self might want him to serve. I think that poetry and politics are, in different ways, an articulation, an ordering, a giving form to inchoate pieties, prejudices, world-views, or whatever. And I think that my own poetry is a kind of slow, obstinate, papish burn, emanating from the ground I was brought up on.

Heaney will not renounce tribal prejudice as the rational humanist would urge, but write out of it in such a way as to clarify his own feelings, not to encourage—or discourage—prejudice in others. That would be propaganda—the didactic achieved at the expense of the poetic. "We make out of the quarrel with others rhetoric," Yeats has said, "but out of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry." Clearly, Yeats, like Heaney, was preoccupied with the opposition between the divided selves of the poet, between the poet as poet and the poet as a human being like other human beings. "In most poets," writes C. Day Lewis, "there is an intermittent conflict between the poetic self and the rest of the man; and it is by reconciling the two, not by eliminating the one, that they can reach their full stature." Heaney strives for such a reconciliation—a reconciliation between primitive piety and rational humanism, between illiterate fidelity to origins and a sense of objective reality, between the feminine and the masculine impulses.

For Heaney, the ultimate example of this kind of synthesis is Dante. Discussing how the modern poet has used Dante, Heaney shows how Eliot discovered the political Dante, the poet with a "universal language," the artist as seer and repository of tradition, one who was prepared to submit his intelligence and sensibility to the disciplines of "philosophia" and religious orthodoxy: "Eliot's ultimate attraction is to the way Dante could turn values and judgements into poetry, the way the figure of the poet as thinker and teacher merged into the figure of the poet as expresser of a universal myth that could unify the abundance of the inner world and the confusion of the outer." All poets turn to great masters of the past to recreate them in their own image. This was the "stern and didactic" image of Dante that Eliot discovered in the struggle to embrace a religious faith. Mandelstam, on the other hand, in the effort to free himself from the pressures of Stalinist orthodoxy, discovers a different Dante: "Dante is not perceived as the mouthpiece of an orthodoxy but rather as the apotheosis of free, natural, biological process, as a hive of bees, a process of crystallization, a hurry of pigeon flights, a focus for all the impulsive, instinctive, nonutilitarian elements in the creative life."

For his own part, Heaney responds to the Dante who "could place himself in a historical world yet submit that world to scrutiny from a perspective beyond history," who "could accommodate the political and the transcendent." Dante, says Heaney, is the great model for the poet who "would explore the typical strains which the consciousness labours under in this country. The main tension is between two often contradictory commands: to be faithful to the collective historical experience and to be true to the recognitions of the emerging self." Heaney's goal is the achievement of that momentary peace in which all oppositions are reconciled in the self-contained, transcendent poetic symbol.

Source: Elmer Andrews, "The Gift and the Craft: An Approach to the Poetry of Seamus Heaney," in *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 31, No. 4, Winter 1985, pp. 368–79.

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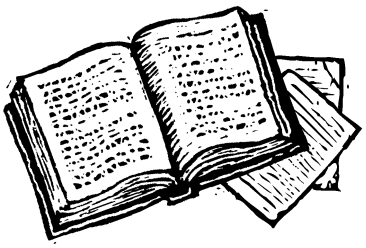
Freeway 280

LORNA DEE CERVANTES

1981

Lorna Dee Cervantes's poem "Freeway 280" offers images of survival in an inhospitable environment. Life, in the form of wild plants and all but indestructible fruit trees, refuses to succumb to the concrete and automobile exhaust that looms all around. However, this poem's inner meaning is what has marked Cervantes as one of the most important Chicana (female Mexican American) poets writing in the United States. Cervantes's images in this poem reflect the spirit of a young woman who has returned to a special place along a San Jose highway. She grew up in a neighborhood that was destroyed to build this freeway. The neighborhood was a hostile environment for the speaker of this poem, but like the weeds that she finds under the highway, she has refused to succumb to the difficulties that life has thrown her way. As the young woman explores this area that was once her home, the speaker of "Freeway 280" reflects on the changes she has made in her life.

"Freeway 280" is autobiographical, offering readers a glimpse into the poet's inner life. The poem was published in Cervantes's award-winning first collection *Emplumada* in 1981. Reviewers of this collection hailed Cervantes as a young poet on the rise. The poems of *Emplumada* have often been referred to as powerful representations of the Hispanic American experience.



AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Born in the Mission District of San Francisco, California, on August 6, 1954, and raised in San Jose, Lorna Dee Cervantes is a central figure in Hispanic poetry circles. Not only is she praised for her poetry, she is considered a pivotal force in the Chicano (Mexican American) literary movement. She has also been active in the feminist and the civil rights movements.

Of both Mexican and Native American ancestry, Cervantes is a member of a fifth-generation California family. Her parents, concerned about prejudices against Spanish-speaking citizens in the United States, strictly forbade the use of any language but English in the home as Cervantes was growing up. Cervantes's poetry often reflects this clash between her ethnic background and the American culture around her. As a way of reflecting her multicultural upbringing, the poet often makes use of both English and Spanish vocabulary in her poems.

Cervantes's parents were separated when she was five. She, along with her brother and mother, then moved to east San Jose to live with her maternal grandmother, who was of Chumash (a central and southern California Native American tribe) ancestry. Here, Cervantes struggled amongst the poverty and crime in her neighborhood. Her mother, Rose, worked as a maid and was often absent from the home. When not at work, her mother gave in to her weakness for alcohol. Because of this, Cervantes turned to her grandmother for love and support. Later, in 1982, Cervantes's mother was brutally murdered.

In the 1970s, as academic as well as popular interest in Hispanic American literature was growing, Cervantes founded a literary journal called *Mango*. The journal promoted rising Chicano and Chicana writers such as Sandra Cisneros, Gary Soto, and Alberto Rios. A decade later, in 1984, Cervantes received her bachelor's degree from Califonrnia State University at San Jose. She would go on to study philosophy at the California State University at Santa Cruz.

Though she has written poetry since she was a teenager, Cervantes has published only three small collections: the 1981 publication *Emplumada* (in which "Freeway 280" appears), which was honored with the 1982 American Book Award; *From the Cables of Genocide: Poems on Love and Hunger* (1991); and *Drive: The First Quartet: New Poems, 1980–2005* (2006) for which she was nominated for the 2007 Pulitzer Prize for poetry. Adding to her status as a poet, in 1995, Cervantes was awarded the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Foundation Writers Award for outstanding Chicana literature.

As of 2008, Cervantes teaches creative writing and is the director of the creative writing program at the University of Colorado at Boulder. She was once married and later raised a daughter as a single mother after her divorce.

POEM TEXT

Las casitas near the gray cannery,
nestled amid wild abrazos of climbing roses
and man-high red geraniums
are gone now. The freeway conceals it
all beneath a raised scar.

But under the fake windsounds of the open
lanes,
in the abandoned lots below, new grasses sprout,
wild mustard remembers, old gardens
come back stronger than they were,
trees have been left standing in their yards.
Albaricoqueros, cerezos, nogales . . .
Viejitas come here with paper bags to gather
greens.
Espinaca, verdolagas, yerbabuena . . .

I scramble over the wire fence
that would have kept me out.
Once, I wanted out, wanted the rigid lanes
to take me to a place without sun,
without the smell of tomatoes burning
on swing shift in the greasy summer air.

Maybe it's here
en los campos extraños de esta ciudad
where I'll find it, that part of me
mown under
like a corpse
or a loose seed.

POEM SUMMARY

Stanza 1

Cervantes's poem "Freeway 280," like the other poems in her collection *Emplumada*, focuses on the coming-of-age process. Knowing this, readers can imagine a young girl surveying a special section of her old neighborhood, describing what was there when the speaker of this poem was a child as well as what is there now. The speaker describes not only the landscape as she sees it but also the elements and forces of this

special place that have formed her. The poem is about place as well as the speaker's personal development.

The speaker begins by letting the reader know that the neighborhood is not a place where well-to-do families live. The houses that were once there were small, a fact that the poet conveys by the use of a Spanish word. There also used to be industry nearby, which implies two things. Houses built near industrial areas are usually occupied by people who have little wealth. This particular industry was a cannery, which the speaker describes only with the color gray, like a tin can. It is also possible that the small houses were inhabited by the workers at the cannery. The images that are presented in the first three lines are neither rich nor oppressive in tone. The effect that is created is neutral, similar to the color gray. The one touching element of these lines is the descriptions of the flowers that grew in the yards of these small homes. These flowers, unlike the weeds that have taken their place, required human care. The cultivated plants such as roses and geraniums did not grow in the wild. The presence of the flowers indicates that someone once took the time to feed, to trim, and to water them. This tender visual image might represent the pleasant memories that the speaker had of her childhood.

The tone changes, however, in the next two lines. Here the speaker informs readers that all that she has mentioned—the houses, the cannery, the cultivated flowers—are gone now. In their place is a freeway, a mass of concrete that hides the place that once was her neighborhood. What is left of the landscape is buried under the elevated ramps and roadways.

Stanza 2

In the second stanza, the poem's tone changes again. Despite the freeways and the cars that go whizzing by, creating a manmade sound of wind, life still exists. Though the land beneath the freeway has been deserted, plants have managed to grow. The speaker names the plants and suggests that they still remember when houses were there and people used to work in their gardens. The plants that rise out of the earth in search of the sun, the speaker says, are even stronger than before. Though they are not the roses and geraniums of the cultivated garden, they are the survivors; many of them are what people refer to as weeds. Also, there are still trees that continue to bear fruit. There are apricot, cherry, and walnut trees. There are also wild mustard plants, spinach, mint, and purslane (a wild, edible green). Though the fields look abandoned, there are still old women who go there. The women know the worth of this rich source of nutrition, and they collect the food in their bags.

Stanza 3

In the third stanza, the speaker uses the personal pronoun "I." Now she is no longer just describing the scene, she is entering the poem and taking action. She climbs the wire fence that runs around the field. As she does so, she reveals that she once lived in this place, and she remembers that there was a time in her life when all she wanted to do was leave it. So it seems ironic to her that she is now working her way back in. There was a time when all she wanted was to be on the freeway that now arches over her head. She wanted to go to someplace else. She liked the straight lines of the highway that would take her from one point to another. She longed for the discipline of the tight lanes in which she would be forced to stay. She was tired of the sun and heat, the smells of the cannery, and the depressingly stale air of her neighborhood (or of her life as a teenager). In contrast now, she wonders why she is enjoying her return.

Stanza 4

The speaker answers this question in the fourth and final stanza. She realizes that she is looking for something in what she refers to, in Spanish, as the strange fields of the city. What she is looking for is a missing part of herself. She does not define this missing portion, but she believes it is in that field under the freeway, in that old neighborhood where she once lived. This missing part of her was cut down, maybe just like the houses were knocked down or maybe just as the old cultivated flowers were neglected. That portion of her, the speaker suggests, could be dead and buried. But in the last line of the poem, the speaker confesses that she holds out hope. Maybe that part is not dead. Maybe it is contained inside a seed, a seed that might be planted and renewed.

THEMES

Renewal

Throughout Cervantes's poem "Freeway 280" is the theme of renewal. The first incident is presented in the images of the fruit trees and the wild plants that grow in the abandoned plots of land under the freeway. Though the houses have been knocked down to make way for the construction of the highway, the land remains. There are thousands of cars passing overhead, yet under the mass of concrete there exists a natural garden. The more fragile plants, like the roses, as well as the people who once lived on this land, are long gone, but the more hardy plants have risen out of the soil on their own. Rather than becoming a barren piece of land, a plot consisting only of dirt and trash, the earth has renewed itself, sending up healthy plants. These plants are even stronger than before, the speaker states. The plants are not just weeds. They are edible plants that will nourish the people who eat them. But the plants and the people who gather them are not the only form of renewal in this poem. The speaker of the poem is also renewed. She mentions the fact that at one time all she wanted to do was to run away from this piece of land. Now she has a change of mind. She wants to visit it, and she even climbs a fence to get to it. Once all she wanted to do was to be on the highway, heading in some other direction. Now she has come back to find a part of her that has been missing. She, too, wants to be renewed, like a seed that has waited a long time to sprout.

Coming of Age

Cervantes's collection *Emplumada*, in which the focus poem was published, is often described as a collection of coming-of-age poems. The term *coming of age* suggests an attainment of maturity. When this term is applied to literature, the poem or story narrates an aspect of a young person's life when he or she reaches a point of understanding in their transition from childhood to adulthood. Often the piece of literature focuses on a turning point. In Cervantes's poem, this turning point is the speaker's recognition that at one time all she wanted to do was to run away from her childhood. She disliked so much of it, even the way the neighborhood smelled. She wanted to be taken to some place that was totally unlike what her childhood represented to her. However, when she returns to the same place, even though most of her childhood neighborhood has been destroyed, she finds the beauty that remains. Even though her childhood is buried under the concrete pilings and wide expanses of highway, she finds nourishment. Now that she is beyond her childhood years, she finds that she is stronger and more capable of embracing her memories. She is able to mount the obstacles that have been placed between herself and her memories. Those memories, she finally understands, contain the unsprouted seeds of her beginnings. If she abandons those memories, as the neighborhood has been abandoned, she will have lost a part of herself. Thus,

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY



- Go to a vacant lot in your town and draw sketches of the weeds you find. Then either compare your sketches to a book about wild plants or take your drawing to your biology teacher to identify them. Are any of them edible? Are any of them similar to the plants mentioned in this poem? Write short descriptions for each plant and share your findings with your class.
- If it is possible, visit a place where you lived when you were a child. Take photographs of the area. Then write a poem about your memories of living there. Show your classmates the pictures and read your poem to them.
- After reading Cervantes's poem, what images come to mind? Using any art medium, create four or more visuals that relate to the poem. Take lines or phrases from the poem to use as titles for the images. Present your work to your class.
- Choose a section of a major freeway in your town. Mark it on a map. Then take the map to your local library and ask the reference librarian to help you discover the history of that piece of land. How long has that freeway been there? What was on the land before the freeway was built? Write a report detailing the history of the land you have researched.



Freeway through a wire fence (Hitoshi Nishimura / Taxi Japan / Getty Images)

the speaker demonstrates that she has matured beyond the pain of those memories and is ready to reclaim them.

Loss and Discovery

One of the overall themes of this poem is that of loss and discovery. On the surface, the houses, the cannery, the people who have lived and worked in this neighborhood are all lost, at least from this particular scene. So, too, are the cultivated flowers. On another level, one might imagine that the relationships among the neighbors are also gone. The noises of children playing in the yards, of people walking to and from work, all the aspects of this deconstructed neighborhood remain only in memory. The speaker suggests that because the neighborhood has been destroyed, so also have some of the memories. The people who once lived there have turned their backs on the place because all that remains is a piece of land hidden under the freeway.

However, the speaker demonstrates that there is also the possibility of discovery. From a distance, all that appears to exist in this place is the freeway. Upon closer inspection, though, beyond the fences and traffic, is the land on which this neighborhood once thrived. After climbing the fence and walking upon the land, the speaker discovers that not only does the land still exist but that there is also life there. By taking the time to inspect this piece of land, the speaker stirs her memories and becomes intrigued with the possibility of discovering something new about herself.

Survival

One of the strongest themes in this poem is that of survival. There is the survival of nature, despite the neglect and a non-supportive environment. The irony in this aspect of survival is that the delicate plants, the roses and the geraniums that need constant human care, do not survive in the new, harsh conditions. These plants have been manipulated through human cultivation and have become dependent on artificial means of nourishment. Humans have to feed and protect them. The plants have been cultivated for their beauty and their aromatic scent and not for their strength. The trees, even though they too have been cultivated, are strong

enough to survive because they have stronger roots. But the most self-sufficient plants are the wild ones, the ones that most people call weeds. These plants have received no human cultivation. They are strong because they have evolved over the centuries to exist in the harshest conditions. These are the purslane, the mints, and the wild spinach.

The other aspect of survival is that of the speaker. There is irony in her story, too. First, as a younger person, she thought that the only way she could survive was to head out on her own, to leave the environment in which she was living. She wanted to use the highway to run away from home. She wanted nothing to do with her home. Then, some years after her neighborhood was demolished, she returns to what is left. She even fights to overcome the barriers (the fences) that have been placed around her own neighborhood. Now that she is older, she realizes that in order to survive, she has to find pieces of herself that she discarded in this neighborhood. These pieces of herself, she is hoping, may be found in the form of seeds. A seed is a symbol of survival in that it holds the potential of growing into a new plant, or in the speaker's case, nourishing a new or long-forgotten aspect of herself.

STYLE

Imagery

An image is a representation of something concrete that the mind has in some way experienced. The image creates a mental picture and may also evoke a sensory response in the reader. In "Freeway 280," for example, Cervantes mentions roses, which might conjure a visual image of a flower as well as the flower's scent. She also mentions the wind, which cannot literally be seen. When a poet mentions an apricot or a walnut, as Cervantes does in this poem, a reader might not only see the fruit but also might imagine what the fruit tastes like.

Some of the most prominent visual images in this poem are small houses, a cannery nearby, flowers, fruit trees, culinary plants, and of course, the highway. Cervantes uses contrasting images and colors— the red of the geraniums and the green of the grasses, plants, and trees against the gray of the cannery and the wire fence—to suggest the incongruous existence of living things with manmade, industrial constructions.

Free Verse

Free verse is a form of poetry that does not use a strict pattern of meter (rhythm) or rhyme. For the past fifty or so years in American poetry, free verse has become the predominant poetic form. In free verse, the poet establishes his or her own rhythm by ending the lines of each verse according to the emphasis he or she wants to create. The first stanza of Cervantes's poem, for instance, begins with images that are pleasant to imagine, for the most part. There are small houses that are decorated with roses that hug the outside walls. There are also geraniums that are almost six feet tall. These images make up the first three lines of the poem. Then, at the beginning of the fourth line, the poet changes direction. In three small words, she makes those pleasant opening images disappear. Everything she has previously mentioned is taken away. They no longer exist, she states. The poet has arranged the words in this stanza so that the three words she uses to tell readers that the houses and flowers no longer exist come as a shock, just as the image of the vacant lots where once she used to live might have shocked her the first time she saw them.

Another benefit of using a free verse form is that the poem can be read in a conversational tone. There are no rhymes or measured beats during a normal conversation. This is true also for the free verse form.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Late-Twentieth-Century Latino and African American Literature

Inspired by the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, the Chicano movement was developed to promote the civil rights of Mexican Americans. It flourished in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The increasing visibility of Mexican Americans in the fabric of American life, as well as the success of the women's movement of the 1960s and beyond, produced changes in the American literary landscape. Prior to the 1960s, the majority of the literature that was being published and taught in classrooms was written by Caucasian men. In the 1960s and into the 1970s, however, people began to recognize a

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **1970s:** Only a few Hispanic authors, such as poet Octavio Paz and novelist Gabriel García Márquez, are published in the United States, but they are gaining in popularity.

  Today: Hispanic authors, such as Cervantes, Julia Alvarez, and Sandra Cisneros, are well known, and their works are studied in college courses.
- **1970s:** Mexican American students stage walk-outs to protest prejudice and promote civil rights reform, such as protections and fair wages for farm workers.

  Today: Mexican American students stage protests demanding immigration reform.
- **1970s:** Protest campaigns, especially in California, oppose the construction and expansion of freeways through cities because these developments destroy neighborhoods.

  Today: Protests against building and expanding freeways through neighborhoods continue. Protesters are backed by environmental groups attempting to curb increasing pollution in cities.

need for literature written by a more diverse group of authors that would better reflect the general population of the United States. Publishing companies responded by accepting more poems and stories written by women and minorities. College courses began to spotlight these previously ignored groups.

During this period, Chicano literature also entered a new phase. Literature by Mexican Americans became more politicized, speaking to Mexican American readers, urging them to stand up and fight for their rights. The poetry of several female (Chicana) poets spoke directly to Mexican American women, giving them a new way of looking at themselves. An interest in Chicana and other multicultural literature in the 1970s, similar to the interest in feminist and African American works, inspired college-level studies. As a result, publishers began to accept poetry and stories from the viewpoint of men and women of various ethnicities. This in turn encouraged Mexican American poets such as Cervantes to submit their poetry to magazines and publishing houses.

Cervantes has stated in an interview with Sonia V. Gonzalez in *MELUS* that there were several writers who strongly influenced her writing. One of the most significant influences on her work while writing the poems contained in her first collection *Emplumada*, was the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda. Cervantes discovered Neruda's poems when she was fifteen. Her brother had brought home a copy of Neruda's "The Heights of Machu Picchu" and given it to her. She claims that it was the first poetry she read that spoke to her cultural experience. Most of the other poets she had read prior to Neruda were British and American poets from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Neruda (1904–1973) was an internationally acclaimed writer and the 1971 winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature. His writing covered a wide range of topics from very sensual love poems to political treatises. He is often referred to as one of the most influential poets of the twentieth century. Neruda's "The Heights of Machu Picchu" is part of the poet's tenth book of poems, *Canto General*, which was published in Mexico in 1950. This collection attempts to present the history of Spanish-speaking Central and South America in poetic form. "The Heights of Macchu Picchu" makes up the second section and contains twelve poems. Neruda was in political exile in Mexico when he wrote these poems

Other prominent Hispanic authors of the 1970s and 1980s include Pat Mora, a prolific

writer who has published poetry for adults and children. Mora's *Chants* (1984) and *Borders* (1986) both won Southwest Books Awards. Another very successful writer is Denise Chavez, whose popular 1986 novel *The Last of the Menu Girls* received the Puerto del Sol Fiction Award. The first Mexican American to hold the position of chancellor at the University of California at Riverside, Tomás Rivera was also a prominent poet and author. His most famous book was *And the Earth Did Not Part* (1971), which was awarded the First Quinto Sol Literary Award. Another first went to Oscar Hijuelos. He was the first Latino to win the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, given to him for his novel *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*, published in 1989.

Cervantes has also mentioned that she was inspired by the works of African American women who became popular during the early 1970s. She includes poet Maya Angelou, whose first work that Cervantes read was *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, published in 1970. Angelou's collection of poetry *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'Fore I Diiie* (1971), was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize, and Angelou recited her poem "On the Pulse of Morning" at U.S. President Bill Clinton's 1993 inauguration. Another poet Cervantes would include in that group is Sonia Sanchez. As a teacher, playwright, and poet, Sanchez helped to develop one of the first black studies courses at San Francisco State University. Her first collection of poems, *Homecoming* was published in 1969. Her most recent collection, *Homegirls and Handgrenades* (2007), won the National Book Award. One other black female author who influenced Cervantes was Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Gwendolyn Brooks (1917–2000). Her famous works include *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945), her first published collection of poems, which brought her immediate fame. Following this was *Annie Allen* (1950) and *We Real Cool* (1966), among other publications.

California Freeway 280

The 280 Interstate highway in California extends between San Jose and San Francisco and is often mentioned as one of the most scenic highways in the world. The roadway is fifty-seven miles long and begins at U.S. 101 in San Jose and ends near the baseball park of the San Francisco Giants. The freeway was built in the 1950s and was named the Junipero Serra Freeway.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

Cervantes's *Emplumada*, the book which contains "Freeway 280," was the poet's first published collection. Frances Whyatt reviewed the work for the *American Book Review*, describing the collection as "a highly picaresque, image-packed regional guide, specific to the experiences of a young Chicana/American poet whose work, though rooted in contemporary American poetry, reflects the unique voice of her heritage." Whyatt goes on to describe Cervantes by stating that "the poet is often childlike, funny and entertaining," in offering her poems, which "move rhythmically at a moderate pace." Whyatt adds that with the publication of this prize-winning collection, Cervantes became "a poet to watch."

In another review, written shortly after *Emplumada* was published, *MELUS* contributor Lynette Seator states that Cervantes's work is "poetry that defines a Mexican-American identity." The poems, Seator continued, "tell the story of Cervantes' life, her life as it was given to her and as she learned to live it, taking into herself what was good and turning the bad into a comprehension of social context." In the process of writing these poems, Cervantes has "learned precision, economy and control." Cervantes, Seator writes, "is aware of herself as a Mexican-American woman who possesses gifts and who knows how to use them."

Patricia Wallace, also writing in *MELUS*, states that in Cervantes' "powerful and accomplished first book," the poems "are often acts of assertion against restrictive social and linguistic structures." Wallace praises Cervantes's poetic language for its "energy and power." Wallace adds, "Her poems provide us with desire's transforming energy at the same time that they reveal her understanding of intractable circumstances."

Nine years after the publication of Cervantes's first collection, Ada Savin discussed it in an essay published in *An Other Tongue: Nation and Ethnicity in the Linguistic Borderlands*. In this essay, Savin states that *Emplumada* remains "an eloquent literary expression of the Chicanos' paradigmatic quest for self-definition." Savin continues, "Thus, it is through her writing in English, interspersed with some reappropriated Spanish—evidence of her painful attachment to two cultures—that she can attempt to convey her people's genuine experience."

Prefacing her 2007 *MELUS* interview with Cervantes, Sonia V. Gonzalez states that *Emplumada* remains "a fundamental text in Chicana/Latino studies" and describes Cervantes as "one of the best read and more anthologized Chicana writers."

CRITICISM

Joyce Hart

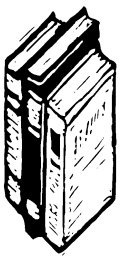
Hart is a published author and freelance writer. In this essay, she examines the images and symbolism in "Freeway 280."

Cervantes has created many images in her poem "Freeway 280." Reading her poem is almost like watching a slide show or thumbing through the pages of an old photograph album. In using the vivid images, the poet invites readers into her poem through their sense of sight. These images are, however, much more than snapshots. By examining the images and reflecting on the effects they produce, readers gain insights into the deeper meaning of the poem. This is how the images are transformed into symbols.

In the first stanza, Cervantes begins by offering a pleasant image of a potentially quiet and somewhat typical neighborhood—a cluster of small, probably older houses. The houses could be cottages that once belonged to a small town, and then as time went by a larger city grew up around the neighborhood. The first impression this image offers is that of a cozy, picturesque neighborhood. The small houses are graced with flowers, such as climbing roses that hug the outer walls of the homes. Also softening the edges of the houses are huge geraniums, which are tall and most likely covered in brightly colored blossoms. However, the poet does not linger long on this peaceful image. As soon as the speaker has painted this tranquil image in the reader's mind, she changes it in two ways.

The first portion of the image's transformation takes place when the speaker mentions a cannery that exists near this neighborhood. This creates a contrast between the brightly flowered homes and this other, industrial part of the town. The cannery is colored in a gray hue, which hints at the negative aspect of this business. Also, whereas the houses surrounded by cultivated flowers suggest family life and pleasant pastimes spent in the garden, the cannery suggests work. Work in a cannery is typically filled with drudgery. Workers often receive poor wages, stand all day in assembly line work stations, and are often bored with the monotony of their jobs. The nearness of the cannery to the neighborhood also indicates that the overall environment around the neighborhood is, more

WHAT DO I READ NEXT?



- Cervantes's third collection of poetry *Drive: The First Quartet: New Poems, 1980–2005* (2006) has received enthusiastic reviews. The poems are autobiographical, drawing on the author's early life on the streets as well as her adult activities as a political activist. The poems range from the political to the personal.
- Helena Maria Viramontes depicts life as a Latina youth in East Los Angeles in her novel *Their Dogs Came with Them* (2007). The novel is set in the 1960s and 1970s, about the same time that Cervantes was a youth. The female protagonist joins a gang of girls in order to find a safe path through the tough neighborhood that she lives in.
- Two books by Sandra Cisneros provide readers with an insider view of growing up Latina in the United States. One is a work of fiction, *Woman Hollering Creek: and Other Stories* (1991), in which the author offers brief glimpses into the life along the Texas/Mexico border. Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* (1983), one of the author's earlier works, uses poetry and prose to tell the story of a young Latina girl living in Chicago.
- *From Indians to Chicanos: The Dynamics of Mexican-American Culture* (1997), by James Diego Vigil, was considered a groundbreaking work at the time of its publication. The author, who is an anthropologist and historian, provides the background and the elements that shape contemporary Chicano life. Written in simple, understandable short accounts, the author describes the specific economic, cultural, and psychological forces that shaped the experiences of Mexican American people.



HOPE IS SYMBOLIZED BY THE IMAGE OF THE WILD PLANTS THAT NOT ONLY CONTINUE TO GROW BUT HAVE BECOME EVEN STRONGER THAN THEY WERE BEFORE."

than likely, not very healthy. If the houses are located near an industrial area, the air is probably more polluted than areas farther away. This signifies that the neighborhood that is described in this poem is probably located in a part of town that is undesirable.

Next, the author adds another element to the images of the neighborhood she is describing. The new elements also drastically transform this portion of town from tranquil settings full of family life to something much less inviting. The speaker abruptly informs the reader that the neighborhood she has described no longer exists. It has been wiped out. With this piece of information, the tension in the poem rises. There is no more need to question if the poet meant to create a tranquil neighborhood scene or one that only appears peaceful on the surface. It no longer makes a difference if the cannery is located nearby, polluting the air with its commercial exhaust and dulling the employees's minds with boredom and low pay. The focus now is on the fact that the neighborhood and the cannery are gone. Now the readers's attention turns to the question of what happened to them and what has taken their place.

Whereas the first stanza began with images that suggest a possibly vibrant life, the stanza ends with no life at all. The final impression of the first stanza is not of family life or of a thriving urban neighborhood but rather of a sense of destruction, abandonment, or even worse. The image in the last line of the first stanza completely negates the images in the beginning of the poem. Where there was life in the beginning, there is only a wound at the end. The quiet, flower-strewn neighborhood is not just gone, it is buried, covered over by concrete roads that remind the speaker of a scar, the puffy, dried skin that forms over a puncture or a scrape on a person's body after a battle. At the mention of a scar, readers might also envision that some kind of battle might have taken place. This symbol of a scar further undermines the sense of tranquility that was present in the beginning of the first stanza.

In the second stanza, the same pattern of images exists. In the first stanza, the images changed from tranquility to a kind of barren emptiness. In the second stanza, the images change in reverse order, from the dispiriting to the nourishing. The speaker's tone, when she creates the image of the freeway in the second stanza, is not positive. First, there are the sounds of the traffic whipping by. This is followed by the image of not just vacant or open lots but lots that have been discarded. There once was life or beauty on these lots, the speaker suggests, but that life no longer exists. The effects of these images might conjure up sadness; life has been taken away from the land that remains behind. The scene has changed but not for the better. Where once the land was picturesque, now it is polluted by huge man-made concrete structures that have all but buried the land that once supported a neighborhood.

However, in the remaining lines of the second stanza, the speaker suggests hope. Hope is symbolized by the image of the wild plants that not only continue to grow but have become even stronger than they were before. In contrast, the cultivated roses and geraniums have died off. The people who once pulled the wild plants out by their roots because they were considered weeds in a cultivated garden no longer remain. The field now belongs to the weeds, and they are thriving. The women who come to the abandoned lots are therefore also thriving. They come to pick the so-called weeds because the women know the nutritious qualities of the wild plants. So this stanza develops from the negative image of abandonment and death to the more lively sense of nourishment.

In the third stanza, the images the speaker offers are more like a short video than static snapshots. The speaker is climbing over a fence in the first lines of this stanza. She tells readers that she is struggling to get into a place that she has previously tried to escape. At another time in her life, the freeway represented freedom. The road would, she imagined, lead her to a better place. She was tired of the environment in which she lived. She wanted the opposite of the oppressive heat and the odors of her neighborhood.

Since the speaker was so accustomed to wanting to get away from this area, she is surprised to feel excitement as she sneaks back over the fence that is there to bar her access to the land that once held her. She is conquering an obstacle, but in the opposite direction than the one she remembers from her youth. Instead of running away, she now wants back in. In this stanza, the speaker accomplishes this feat. She is back on the land under the freeway.

The fourth and last stanza explains in mixed images why the speaker has fought her way to this point. There is a sense of hope both at the beginning and at the end of the stanza. However, this sense of hope is corrupted. First, the speaker hopes she will find something she has lost here, in this strange city of concrete columns and weeds that was once her home. The something she is looking for is a part of her, the speaker says. Then she provides a negative or dismal image. She fears that this lost part of her has been cut down, possibly destroyed, just as the roses and geraniums were mutilated and the houses were ruined. She also suggests that this part of her that she is looking for might even be dead. But before the poem ends, the speaker returns to her former sense of hope. There is a chance, she suggests, that she will find a seed, something that contains all the knowledge or all the basic elements needed to re-grow that missing part of her. She has hope that she will discover something about herself that has grown stronger and will help nourish her, just like the wild plants that have grown stronger and now nourish the old women who come back to this all-but-forgotten plot of land under the freeway. As the old women claim the purslane, the wild spinach, and the mint and then place them in their bags and carry them home, so too does the speaker want to take the missing part of her home.

Source: Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on "Freeway 280," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2009.

Patricia Wallace

In the following excerpt, Wallace discusses Cervantes's struggle to present the real, historical world while incorporating literary elements in the poems of Emplumada.

When Emerson, in the 1840s, imagined an ideal American poet, he confessed his difficulties even with the models of Milton and Homer; the one he found "too literary" and the other "too literal and historical" (Whicher 239). As with other of his pronouncements, Emerson leaves this one suggestively unexplained. I take him to mean that his ideal poet will be equally faithful both to what we call art and to what we call history, and that even in great poets, these fidelities are not easily reconciled. Czeslaw Milosz also drew attention to the poet's divided loyalties in his Charles Eliot Norton lectures, delivered at Harvard in 1981–82. Milosz defined poetry as a "passionate pursuit of the Real" (56), and then acknowledged, indeed insisted, that the poet's motives are necessarily mixed. In the act of writing, Milosz said, "every poet is making a choice between the dictates of poetic language and his fidelity to the real" (71). But, he quickly adds, "those two operations cannot be neatly separated, they are interlocked" (71).



IN MANY OF THE POEMS IN *EMPLUMADA*, CERVANTES'S DESIRE TO ALTER CIRCUMSTANCE THROUGH IMAGINATIVE POWER MEETS WITH WHAT RESISTS THAT DESIRE. HER POEMS PROVIDE US WITH DESIRE'S TRANSFORMING ENERGY AT THE SAME TIME THAT THEY REVEAL HER UNDERSTANDING OF INTRACTABLE CIRCUMSTANCE."

Adapting Emerson's terms, I want to explore the way both the literary and the literal make themselves felt in the work of three contemporary poets: Lorna Dee Cervantes, Cathy Song and Rita Dove. Each of these women is a member of a different American minority, and the work of each exhibits the pressures of particular, historical reality, and of the poet's need to witness what is. All three of these writers experience what Milosz calls the way "events burdening a whole community are perceived by the poet as touching him in a most personal manner" (94–95).

Yet the work of these poets is shaped not only by their cultures but also by a passion for language's possibilities, for the creative and experimental energy of poetry itself. At times this passion can seem to separate them from the very communities of which they are a part;

the sensuous appeal of poetry may seem irrelevant to those who live amidst more pressing and immediate concerns. The poet's formal, literary education and her fluency with written language may also separate her from her cultural community. And while beyond the scope of this essay, the important issue of a poet's fluency in English, when her experience is multicultural and bilingual, further complicates this matter.

What, then, would faithfulness both to the power of the literary (with its creative use of language, its love of design, its connectedness to other writing) and to the power of the literal (with its material reality, its resistance to design, its relation to history) mean for poets like Cervantes, Song and Dove? This question must be grappled with in the immediacy of particular poems, where the imaginative transformations of language meet the resistance to transformation that Emerson calls the literal, or history, and that Milosz calls "the real." . . .

> It was never in the planning,
> in the life we thought
> we'd live together, two fast
> women living cheek to cheek,
> still tasting the dog's
> breath of boys in our testy
> new awakening.
> We were never the way
> they had it planned.
> Their wordless tongues we stole
> and tasted the power
> that comes of that.
> We were never what they wanted
> but we were bold.

These lines are the opening of "For Virginia Chavez," from Lorna Dee Cervantes's powerful and accomplished first book, *Emplumada* (1981). In making this poem my starting point, I choose a work explicit about the poet's double loyalty. "For Virginia Chavez" negotiates the connection and the difference between the poet-speaker, whose access to literature and whose power with words separates her, to some degree, from the Chicana world she grew up in, and the girlhood friend to whom the poem is addressed. As she explores her relation to Virginia Chavez, Cervantes also thinks through the relations between poetic language and direct experience, between the activities of poetry and of ordinary life. She begins "For Virginia Chavez" with the pronoun "we," asserting the girls' mutual rebellion against their cultures' expectations for them. The edgy rhythms of the opening lines have an assertive energy that flouts predictable patterns. Rejecting the definitions of others ("we were never" the way someone else had it planned), Cervantes seizes the power of description for herself. But this is the act which also separates her from Virginia Chavez. A space widens between the poet's life, empowered by language, and the friend's life, embedded in a violent reality. "We" divides into "you" and "I."

There's an emblem for this division when, in adolescence, the poet reads aloud to her friend "the poems of Lord Byron, Donne, / the Brownings: all about love, / explaining the words," then recognizes Virginia's more immediate, and different, form of knowledge ("you knew / all that the kicks in your belly / had to teach you"). This gap between the literary and the literal appears to widen in one of the poem's final sections, where Cervantes confronts the brutal consequences of domestic violence in Virginia's adult life:

> Even
> that last morning
> I saw you with blood
> in your eyes, blood
> on your mouth, the blood
> pushing out of you
> in purple blossoms.

The image of "purple blossoms" calls attention to itself as literary, the kind of image Cervantes might have found in Donne or the Brownings. It could suggest that the poet's language turns toward art in order to turn away from the event. Doesn't the image distance and mediate the actuality of male violence against women? Don't Cervantes's instincts as a poet, her desire to turn a phrase, here separate her from the life of Virginia Chavez, and from Virginia's direct, spare language as it appears in a single moment of the poem ("He did this./When I woke, the kids/were gone. They told me/I'd never get them back")?

This question requires attention to the rhythm and shape of Cervantes's lines, for it is in these "literary" properties of Cervantes's poem that the pressure of the literal is both felt and resisted. In the lines quoted above, the image of "purple blossoms" takes its place in a pattern of repeated stress, where stress is a poetic, psychic and physical event. The repetition of the strong, monosyllabic "blood" (each time taking the accent at the end of the line) is a part of this

stress. The word keeps resurfacing, as if to block out an intact image of the friend's face; it pushes itself between "eyes" and "mouth" as part of a coercive force the poet both witnesses and experiences. When '"blood" becomes "purple blossoms," something alters. The image breaks a pattern (the trochaic unaccented second syllables alter the rhythm that dominates the previous lines) and answers the threat of fragmentation by turning the interruptive and obliterating '"blood" into discrete and intact "purple blossoms." The need (and capacity) to break coercive patterns, and to compose anew in a way which restores particularity and wholeness, are central both to the subject and the activity of this poem; this need joins the act of the poet to the life of her friend.

For if many of the poems in *Emplumada* (among them "Cannery Town in August," to which I will return) demonstrate that the lives of men and women cannot be separated from conditions of race, sex and class, the energy and power of Cervantes's language also challenge the claim that these conditions are wholly definitive. They are part of what is "given," part of the order of things, but not the whole story. "Life asserts itself in spite of the most imposing obstacles set against it from without," Cordelia Candelana has written of Cervantes's "Freeway 280" (159). Cervantes's poems are often acts of assertion against restrictive social and linguistic structures (a less precise and distinctive use of language weakens this challenge in her second book, *From the Cables of Genocide: Poems on Love and Hunger*, 1991). In this opening poem of *Emplumada*, the energy of Cervantes's language seeks to free, if only momentarily, the existence of Virginia Chavez, and the friendship between the two women, from either social or literary fixity.

But the subject of "For Virginia Chavez" is not strictly a creature of figuration; she is a co-presence with the poet, and her substantiality is grounded in a world outside the poet's power. Her life cannot simply be transformed by imagination into the freedom Cervantes desires for her. In the conclusion there's a tension between the poet's vision of Virginia (as a double for the poet herself) and the conditions which resist that vision. We feel this tension in the rhythms of the lines, which recall and revise the poem's beginning, its rebellious energy. Here the rhythm and syntax assert against a weight present in the lines, a weight most easily located in the way the verb "ignorin" cannot overcome what follows it; the poet thus admits into the poem what she wants to forget. In her image of the two women walking, their "arms holding / each other's waists," Cervantes reaches for unity, for the power of imagination to close the gap between the poet and the friend, between language and experience. But the conclusion of the poem insists on the difficulty of defining these mobile relations in any way which does not encompass both difference and sameness:

> With our arms holding
> each others waists, we walked
> the waking streets
> back to your empty flat,
> ignoring the horns and catcalls
> behind us, ignoring what
> the years had brought between us:
> my diploma and the bare bulb
> that always lit your bookless room.

We might also read these lines as a version of the divided yet interdependent relation between the literary and the literal. In *The Witness of Poetry*, Milosz says, "Mankind has always been divided by one rule into two species: those who know and do not speak; those who speak and do not know" (66). When a poet is a woman, and when her identity is constituted, in part, by minority experience, she transgresses this division, as all good poets must, but in an especially conscious way. She speaks and writes as one who knows (who knows in part how much goes unspoken), and so her poems are entangled in the literary (which gives her the power to speak) and in the literal (which is the source of what she knows). Cervantes is one such poet. "For Virginia Chavez" embodies both the gap between the diploma and the bookless room and the deep connections between the lives of these two women.

In many of the poems in *Emplumada*, Cervantes's desire to alter circumstance through imaginative power meets with what resists that desire. Her poems provide us with desire's transforming energy at the same time that they reveal her understanding of intractable circumstance. Such an understanding is present in "For Virginia Chavez" and is also powerfully evident in "Cannery Town in August." . . .

Like many other of Cervantes's poems, this one takes as its subject lives largely disregarded by literary traditions and by the culture at large.

Those lives belong to women who work at a California cannery, and Cervantes here seeks to reclaim those lives from the shadows of that disregard. Yet the poem opens in a highly literary way, with one of the oldest of literature's conventions, personification, followed by an image "the night bird"—resonant with literary associations. Personification, Barbara Johnson writes in an essay on Wordsworth, provides us with "figures of half-aliveness," with "conventionalized access to the boundary between life and death" (97). But the concern in "Cannery Town in August" is with a lived condition of "half-aliveness," one which eludes conventional literary figures. Thus the sound of the "night bird," which calls up a tradition of poetic singers, is here not song but a form of "raving," incoherently connected to the conditions in this poem. Cervantes focuses on "bodyless / uniforms and spinach specked shoes," those whom circumstance has robbed of animation and turned to ghosts. She sees that these ghosts are, in fact, "Women / who smell of whiskey and tomatoes / peach-fuzz reddening their lips and eyes," resolutely unghostlike details. Cervantes does not personify the women; they are too separated from the poet's imaginative power to become wholly literary creations. For this reason the poem can't hold the women in focus, as it can (and does) sharply evoke the sights and sounds of the cannery. It is the cannery which Cervantes personifies in her opening, as another form of coercive force against which she directs her language. The power and noise of the cannery have drowned out these women's voices and rendered them all but invisible:

> I imagine them not speaking, dumbed
> by the can's clamor and drop
> to the trucks that wait, grunting
> in their headlights below.
> They spotlight those who walk
> like a dream, with no one
> waiting in the shadows
> to palm them back to the living.

If it is the poet's task to try to "spotlight," like the truck's headlights, "those who walk / like a dream," what she spotlights is the women's "half-aliveness." That they are like ghosts, but are not ghosts, that the culture places them on its borders (between Chicana and Anglo, male and female, on the "swing shift" between day and night) is a literary and literal description. Cervantes wants to bring these women back to life, but knows that poetry cannot deliver them from deadening experience. To "palm them back to the living" would be a trick of language, a literary sleight-of-hand Cervantes's fidelity to the real won't let her perform . . . .

Source: Patricia Wallace, "Divided Loyalites: Literal and Literary in the Poetry of Lorna Dee Cervantes, Cathy Song and Rita Dove," in *MELUS*, Vol. 18, No. 3, Fall 1993, p. 3.

Frances Whyatt

In the following review, Whyatt contends that while some of the poems of Emplumada *are overwritten, the volume is an "admirable first book."*

Freeways, cactus, factory towns, rattlesnakes, heat, the dusty land of big sky: California and the American Southwest; this is Lorna Dee Cervantes' personal "barrio," her community of nature, poverty, animistic gods, eccentric amigos, racism and first love. As such, *Emplumada* (meaning "feathered" or "pen") is a highly picaresque, image-packed regional guide, specific to the experiences of a young Chicana/American poet whose work, though rooted in contemporary American poetry, reflects the unique voice of her heritage.

Last year's winner of the Pitt Series, Cervantes' first book establishes her as a poet to watch; when she's at her best the poems give off an infectious energy remarkably free from artifice and intellectuality, and yet deceptively intelligent. She writes autobiographically—almost always in the first person—viewing her own life as a journalist might, as a base from which to record nature and events in a particular landscape. In that sense, the poems are extroverted, unlike confessional poetry wherein external images are internalized as a metaphor for the poet's feelings. What the reader knows about the internal workings of Cervantes' mind takes a back seat to the images invested in the world surrounding her. Moreover, *Emplumada* is a remarkably easy book to read. The poems, with few exceptions, move rhythmically at a moderate pace and organize smoothly into three sections, clearly divisible by theme. Also it is difficult not to be "charmed" by the voice of the poet. Cervantes is often childlike, funny and entertaining—no less so within her most serious poems. There is evidence of rage, but never without its sustaining companion, black humor.

In the first section, Cervantes establishes her roots in childhood memory, persons and objects

sparking her imagination, from tender observations in "Oak Hill Cemetery" to murderous assault in a parking lot. From the beginning, she displays a superb ability to catapult the reader into the subject matter of the poem; her starting lines are consistently strong. For instance, in "Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway," a poem on her grandmother (and, less specifically, on the strong women of her family), Cervantes opens with: "Across the street—the freeway, / blind worm, wrapping the valley up / from Los Altos to Sal Si Puedes. / . . . Every day at dusk / as Grandma watered geraniums / the shadow of the freeway lengthened." The powerful "blind worm" metaphor at the beginning is typical of Cervantes' ability and highly effective. There is also a softer, musical side to a few of these first poems, and a forthrightness such as is found in "Caribou Girl." "I loved Caribou Girl, / for the woman she promised / to become, for the crows / who spoke and sent her poems . . . " There is such gentleness here, a seductive innocence, full of the delicate allusions of "lips like shadows" and "curling smoke of cold hair." It is the ultimate paradox of the poem that Cervantes is speaking about a girl who has been branded as an outcast.

Occasionally, Cervantes overwrites, particularly in her longer work. "Uncle First Rabbit," the first poem in the book, is a good example. The images fade, the energy flags toward the middle, the poem ultimately suffers from lack of oxygen for the story she wishes to tell. There is a tendency to extend certain poems throughout the book; poems that would have done better to remain within the confines of a single page are drawn out to three. But they are the exception, these forced, ambitious efforts. Generally the shorter poems appear naturally illuminated, effortless. And what is most impressive in this first section is Cervantes' overall restraint, the slightly distanced eye which allows her to render intimate detail without losing the image to confession.

The second section moves from the specific regions of childhood to more generalized poems, descriptive and sometimes abstract evocations of nature. But there is a dichotomy here, the introduction of several political poems which clearly don't belong alongside the highly imagistic "Starfish" and "Spiders." Juxtapose "Lean stuff sways on the boughs / of pitch pine: silver, almost tinsel. / all light gone blue and sprouting / orange oils in a last bouquet" (From Cervantes' mysterious "Four Portraits of Fire") with the lines "I believe in revolution / because everywhere the crosses are burning," from "Poem for the Young White Man Who Asked Me How I, An Intelligent, Well-read Person Could Believe in the War Between Races." Even without the example of the rhetoric, the title alone is absurd given the overriding context of Cervantes' nature based descriptions. To make such a leap between rhetoric and metaphor in a twenty page section does nothing but lessen the impact of her polemic as well as neutralize the sense of mystery in her lyrical imagistic poems. As the political poems are in themselves skilled, it might appear that Cervantes has misplaced a few seeds from the beginnings of [the] second book.

Love poems dominate the last section; a few are breathtaking. "Before You Go" is a spider's split hair away from perfection:

> Remember this twist:
> remember how the charcoal
> found its way out of your hand,
> how the lives feel under
> your power. You were a world
> gone inside out. When I touched you
> there was coal on my pillow all night.

The work here is the most consistent in the book and Cervantes at her best—passionate and yet controlled, the emotions lighting precise images, the poems moving toward resolution (as with the title poem "Emplumada": "When summer ended / the leaves of snapdragons withered / taking their shrill-colored, mouths with them"), then culminating in the book's last lines, "They find peace in the way they contain the wind / and are gone." There is a maturity surfacing in these final poems, a growth and logical progression from the childlike enthusiasm found earlier in the book to a more reflective calm of knowledge gained. As always, Cervantes' vision lies within the framework of nature, her uncanny ability to render an axiom on a snapdragon's withering leaf.

Stylistically, *Emplumada* bears the earmarkings of "where-we-have-been," long, vertical freeform stanzas, an occasional too-obvious display of craft, breaking no new ground and appearing to bear out influences of poets such as Levertov in the Sixties and a host of upcoming poets (Atwood, etc.) writing in the Seventies. In all probability, as Cervantes' work grows she'll take more of the risks needed to sustain such heady imagery, hopefully with a more inventive format. First books of recent vintage have an

unfortunate predictability of playing it on the safe side, sticking close to established poets' styles gleaned through anthologies and workshops. Perhaps the current marketplace conspires to defeat even the best poets' originality. Occasionally uneven . . . a few poems overwritten . . . *Emplumada* is still an admirable first book.

Source: Frances Whyatt, Review of *Emplumada*, in *American Book Review*, Vol. 4, No. 5, July–August 1982, pp. 11–12.

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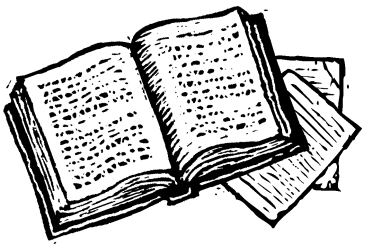
This collection of essays and stories offers autobiographical reflections and fiction by Latino authors. There are twenty-six separate entries, all telling one aspect of what it is like for people from Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Dominican Republic, and other countries in Central and South America to assimilate to life in the United States.

Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning

ALICE WALKER

1975

Poet, novelist, and short story writer Alice Walker is one of the most prominent female African American writers of the twentieth century. Her poem "Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning" is one of her most anthologized works. First published in 1975 in the *Iowa Review*, the poem later became the title piece in Walker's third collection of poetry, which was published four years later. Notably, "Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning" is the last piece presented in the collection, becoming the final word in a volume that explores what can be termed bad or dysfunctional relationships. The women Walker portrays in the collection (and throughout her work) often find themselves caught between being true to themselves and following their romantic desires, options that Walker often depicts as being mutually exclusive. In "Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning," the final word given on this subject is, remarkably, forgiveness, a forgiveness that permits redemption both in life and in death. The poem itself is brief, a mere fifty-six words, yet its message is concise, clear, and powerful. It is perhaps for these reasons that "Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning" has remained a touchstone piece in Walker's oeuvre. Widely available in anthologies and on the Internet, the poem can also be found in a 1984 edition of *Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning* (still in print) and a 1991 volume of Walker's collected poems, *Her Blue Body*





Alice Walker (AP Images)

Everything We Know: Earthling Poems, 1965–1990 Complete. Both books are published by Harvest Press.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Alice Malsenior Walker was born on February 9, 1944, in Eatonton, Georgia. She was the eighth child of Willie Lee and Minnie Tallulah Walker. Her mother worked as a maid and her father was a sharecropper, a tenant who farmed a portion of the owner's land in exchange for a percentage of the proceeds from the harvested crop. This was a typical occupation for African Americans in the South at the time, and it was one that perpetuated the poverty and inequality rampant in the region. Notably, Walker's early experiences as an African American in the Jim Crow (segregated) South heavily influenced her later work. As a child, Walker began writing her own poetry but, when she was eight years old, her brother accidentally shot her with a BB gun. As a result, she was blinded in her right eye. The disfiguring scar tissue caused her to withdraw and become more introverted, and she began to read and write in earnest. By high school, however, Walker's scars had been removed, and she proved to be popular among her fellow students.

After high school, Walker began attending Spelman College (in 1961) on a full scholarship, which was won in part on account of her disability. There, she became involved in the civil rights movement, though she soon transferred to Sarah Lawrence College in 1963. While a student, she traveled to Africa, and when she returned she was pregnant. Walker had an illegal abortion (abortion was not legal in the United States until 1973), and she wrote several poems about her decision to do so, and of the emotions that she experienced during this period. Many of these poems were later included in her first full-length publication, a 1968 collection of poetry titled *Once*. Walker graduated from Sarah Lawrence in 1965, moved to Mississippi, and continued to work in the civil rights movement. There, she met Melvyn Leventhal, a civil rights lawyer who was Jewish. The couple moved briefly to New York and married on March 17, 1967. Later that same year, they returned to Mississippi, and they were the first interracial married couple in the state, an honor that earned them death threats from the Ku Klux Klan. Walker and Leventhal had a daughter, Rebecca, in 1969, and they later divorced in 1976.

In the early years of her marriage, Walker taught at Jackson State College (from 1968 to 1969) and at Tougaloo College (from 1970 to 1971). In 1970, she published her first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, and subsequently taught at Wellesley College and the University of Massachusetts in Boston. In 1973, Walker's second book of poetry *Revolutionary Petunias and Other Poems*, was published. It was her first major success, and the collection was nominated for a National Book Award. Walker's first book of short stories, *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women*, was also published that same year. In 1974, Walker moved to New York and worked as an editor for *Ms.* magazine. Her second novel, *Meridian*, another success, was published in 1976. Following her divorce that same year, Walker moved to California.

Walker reached the height of her writing career in the ensuing period, publishing the poetry collection *Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning* in 1979. (The title poem of the collection was published four years prior in the *Iowa Review*.) She followed this success with the collection of stories *You Can't Keep a Good*

Woman Down in 1981. In 1982, Walker published her most acclaimed work, the novel *The Color Purple*, which won a Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Notably, Walker was the first African American to win the prize in that category. The same year, Walker held a writing post at the University of California in Berkeley, and a professorial post at Brandeis University. Additionally, from 1984 to 1988, Walker cofounded and ran the Wild Tree Press.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Walker continued writing fiction and poetry, though she also made forays into children's literature, essays, and nonfiction. Some of her best-known works in these genres include her essay collection *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983) and the coauthored nonfiction volume *Warrior Marks: Female Genital Mutilation and the Sexual Blinding of Women* (1993). By 2000, Walker had returned to mainly writing poetry and fiction, such as *Absolute Trust in the Goodness of the Earth: New Poems* (2003) and *Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart: A Novel* (2004). Throughout this later period, Walker has lectured around the country and has had several notable romances, including one with singer-songwriter Tracy Chapman. As of 2008, Walker was living in Northern California.

POEM SUMMARY

"Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning" is a fifteen-line poem that consists of only fifty-six words. Almost a fifth of the poem is comprised of the title phrase. Additionally, the poem is only two sentences long. The first sentence describes what the speaker has seen, and the second relates what the speaker has subsequently learned.

Lines 1–7

The first line begins with the speaker stating that she is looking at her father, who is dead. With the finality that accompanies death, the speaker's mother is described as speaking to her dead husband in a congenial and matter-of-fact tone. Much is made of the fact that the speaker's mother is not crying; nor is she angry or happy. This stress is derived from the noted absence of any strong emotion aside from the courtesy that would be extended even to a stranger. Rather than cry over his body, bid her husband goodbye, or tell him how much he was loved, the speaker's mother does something else entirely.

Lines 8–15

She instead says the words that become the title of the poem (and, ultimately, of the collection it appeared in). Notably, Walker's father was actually named Willie Lee. Thus, this is how the first sentence in the poem ends. The second sentence explains what the speaker has learned from this peculiar act. She states that her mother's words at her father's deathbed have allowed her to realize that the only way to repair the damage that people do to one another is by forgiving them. The speaker obviously sees her mother's statement as a declaration of absolution for all of the hard times that no doubt accompany a marriage.

By declaring that she will see her husband again, the speaker's mother references heaven or the afterlife or perhaps the Christian belief in the resurrection of the dead and the day of reckoning. In this sense, the word "morning" is metaphorical, indicating a spiritual awakening rather than a physical one. Yet, the mother's statement can be seen practically. The next morning she will wake and prepare the body for burial. She will see her husband in their home and the faces of their children. This, however, is not the meaning that the speaker sees; instead, she sees the former.

This is demonstrated by the final three lines, in which the speaker indicates that she understands her mother's declaration of absolution to be one that allows an assurance for her father (and for all who are forgiven) to come back after all is said and done. This concluding observation does seem closest to the Christian belief in resurrection, though it skillfully avoids any overtly religious phrases. Because of this, the possibility of return is not only spiritual but physical and emotional as well.

THEMES

Forgiveness

The main theme of "Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning" is that of forgiveness. The speaker states that her mother's words at her father's deathbed have allowed her to realize that the only way to repair the damage that people do to one another is by forgiving them.

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY



- Write an autobiographical, confessional, free verse poem in the style of "Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning" and read it aloud to your class. Be sure to discuss how writing your poem added to your understanding of Walker's poem.
- Read one of Walker's short stories, such as "Everyday Use," which is included in the 1973 collection *Love and Trouble*. Then read some of the other poems in *Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning*. What similarities and differences do you see between Walker's poetry and her prose? How do the different genres create different effects? Write an essay on your findings.
- Do you agree or disagree with the conclusion in "Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning"? Are forgiveness and absolution as powerful as the poem claims? What do you think this poem is trying to say about relationships, if anything? In an essay, discuss these topics and be sure to support your argument with quotes from the poem.
- Read the collection *Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning*. Why do you think Walker chose to conclude the volume with the title poem? Why did she title the volume after it? Present your theories in an oral report.

The speaker obviously sees her mother's statement as a declaration of absolution for all of the hard times that no doubt accompany a marriage. To the speaker, this is an awe-inspiring act, one that she feels has wider implications for her father's return. This very Christian concept of forgiveness and redemption is related to the belief that all the people who have ever lived will be resurrected from their graves and judged when the world comes to an end. This may be the "morning" that the speaker's mother is referring to. In this sense, the word *morning* is metaphorical, indicating a spiritual awakening rather than a physical one. The mother's forgiveness, in and of itself, is rather Christ-like, given that Christ is a religious symbol for, among other things, forgiveness, absolution, and redemption.

Redemption

Redemption, according to Christian belief and to the speaker in "Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning," is what follows from forgiveness. True forgiveness absolves the one who is forgiven, and they are thus redeemed. It is this redemption that allows the speaker's father to return. She indicates that she understands her mother's declaration of absolution to be one that allows an assurance for her father (and for all who are forgiven) to come back after all is said and done. This is the result of redemption. Through redemption, the spirit of the speaker's father is allowed to return to the family, to be honored as a father and husband and not as a flawed man who hurt his loved ones. The speaker's mother redeems the father simply by continuing to accept, if not welcome, his presence in their lives, despite the changed nature of that presence.

Death

The speaker's mother has the last word at her husband's deathbed; therefore, it is easier for her to forgive him. Regardless, the finality of death becomes the closing punctuation on their life together. This is how death is represented in "Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning." Death is both literally and metaphorically the occurrence that allows the speaker's mother to bid her husband goodbye and to forgive him. Arguably, it would be difficult to forgive Willie Lee while he was still alive, especially given the near certainty that he would do something else that would require forgiveness. Thus, the finality of death allows for the lasting authority of the forgiveness that is subsequently granted.

Acceptance

Acceptance is related to forgiveness in that one must fully accept the past and what has happened (without anger, sadness, fear, or any other such emotion) in order to truly forgive. Additionally the title of the poem, the essential statement that is made to Willie Lee's corpse, is one of supreme acceptance. The disconcertingly matter-of-fact tone of this statement is highly stressed in the poem. The speaker's mother is described as talking to her dead husband in a congenial manner.



Myrlie Evers and her children at the funeral of civil rights leader Medgar Evers (© Bettmann | Corbis)

Much is made of the fact that the speaker's mother is not crying; nor is she angry or happy. This stress is derived from the noted absence of any strong emotion. Thus, this lack of strong emotion indicates acceptance, not only of Willie Lee's death, but also of his life. In another reading, one could argue that the opposite is the case, and that the title statement is an act of supreme denial. Rather than bid her dead husband goodbye, the speaker's mother says she will see him tomorrow. This statement, when interpreted literally, would seem to indicate that the mother does not register the death of her husband. Nevertheless, the speaker's observations following her mother's farewell to her husband do not support this second interpretation.

STYLE

Free Verse

The term *free verse* is a catchall phrase for poetry that is not written in any sort of metrical form, which is the mindful arrangement of words according to their stressed and unstressed syllables, often in defined patterns. "Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning" is written in free verse. Other attributes typical to poems written in free verse are that they do not rhyme (or do so in irregular patterns), have erratic line breaks, and are written in colloquial, or everyday, language. All of these characteristics are also found in "Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning." This style, which is actually a calculated lack of style, is typical of the time period in which the poem was written. Free verse was extremely popular with American poets throughout the middle period of the twentieth century.

Enjambment

Enjambment defines the way in which lines of poetry end and begin. The arrangement of the line breaks affects the way the poem is read, both silently and aloud. This is because the line breaks make the eye pause as it scans the page. This minute pause, although barely discernible, affects the poem's rhythm. In some cases, this pause can also affect the meaning of a poem. For

instance an example of such an occurrence is "I ran over the cat / with my hands / petting him until he purred." At the first line, the reader would reasonably expect the phrase "I ran over my cat" to mean that the cat had been hit by a car. However, the subsequent two lines make it clear that this is not the case. If the line had read "I ran over the cat with my hands," this misunderstanding would not occur. In this manner enjambment allows poems to contain dual, even opposing meanings, thus evoking varying reactions and emotions in the reader over the course of a single poem. In "Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning," this stylistic device is used to similar effect between lines 1 and 2, in which it is not clear whether the speaker's father is dead or not. The same effect occurs between lines 7 and 8, in which the title statement is made. Based on the line break, the speaker's mother could very well be about to tell her husband "I'll see you in hell" (a common enough saying that readers could reasonably expect it). Instead, the mother says something else entirely. The rhythm of the entire poem is also dictated by its enjambment. Its fitful stops and starts, especially at the end, give it a breathless feeling, yet they also give "Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning" an authority of declaration or proclamation.

Autobiographical Poetry

"Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning" is an autobiographical poem. In the case of this poem, the autobiographical nature is exceedingly obvious. Walker's father was indeed named Willie Lee, and the speaker in the poem gives her father the same name. Notably, Willie Lee died in 1973, and Walker's poem was first published two years later. The effect of autobiographical poetry is that it is more intimate and personal than other types of poetry. This tone makes the reader feel as if he or she is being spoken to directly, and it also lends an additional aura of truth and honesty to the poem. As an autobiographical poem, "Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning" is a legacy left by the heyday of confessional poetry, a style that was immensely popular in the 1950s and 1960s. This poem, however, has much more emotional control and avoids any overly shocking content, two common hallmarks of confessional poems.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Feminism

Though Walker did not necessarily agree with critics who called her a feminist writer, no discussion of Walker's work is complete without examining this topic. Though "Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning" is not obviously feminist in tone, it portrays a strong woman who teaches her daughter the value of forgiveness. In general, historians have identified three distinct waves of the feminist movement. The first wave (i.e., fist-wave feminism) can be traced to the suffrage movement in the late nineteenth century. The term *suffrage* refers to women's right to vote, a right that was not granted in the United States until 1920, when the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified.

The second wave of feminism largely took place from the 1960 to the 1980s, the height of Walker's writing career. This wave sought to establish equality in all realms of women's lives—the household, the workplace, and society in general. It is no coincidence that this wave of feminism coincided with the sexual revolution, as women's sexual rights and desires were explored amidst the growing acknowledgment of their equality as human beings. One of the greatest gains made by this movement was in securing equal access to education for women, including an end to public funding for single-sex schools. Though the political and cultural inequalities that second-wave feminism sought to address have not yet been fully eradicated, third-wave feminism emerged in the late 1980s as a means of furthering these ends and of addressing perceived problems in the second wave. Feminists at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century argue that earlier modes of feminism focused on middle-class Caucasian women, overlooking the struggles of women outside of this demographic.

Alice Walker and the Civil Rights Movement

Walker's early experiences as an African American in the Jim Crow (segregated) South heavily influenced her later work. Walker's parents were sharecroppers, and this is the context that lies behind "Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning." As the daughter of sharecroppers, Walker grew up in the abject poverty and subjugation that African Americans were routinely

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **1970s:** Walker's work is often called feminist (though Walker does not entirely agree with this label), and supporters of women's rights at this time are called second-wave feminists. Where first-wave feminists addressed laws affecting women, such as the right to vote, second-wave feminists address less formal occurrences of discrimination, such as wage disparity.

  Today: Since the rise of third-wave feminism in the 1990s, feminism has not taken any definable form. In the wake of measurable political, social, and cultural progress in women's rights, the focus of the current movement is largely to attempt to define what it means to be a feminist today and to identify and prioritize the inequities that have yet to be addressed.
- **1970s:** Following the success of the civil rights movement, terms such as *black power* and *black pride* emerge. These terms describe the ongoing political and social movement toward equality. African Americans begin to embrace and promote their unique cultural identity, and some attain positions of power and importance.

  Today: Though inequality between the races still exists, African Americans, like women, continue to achieve greater approximations of equality. Thus, like feminism, there is no distinct cultural movement that can be ascribed to the black community today.
- **1970s:** On the heels of the popularity of confessional poetry in the 1950s and 1960s, poetry in the 1970s is often written in the first person and in free verse. Additionally, the poetry of the day emphasizes the emergence of female and African American poetic voices.

  Today: Free verse poetry is no longer as popular as it once was, and the leading poetic movement of the day is New Formalism. Poets in this movement promote a return to the formal metric poetry that was popular up to the beginning of the twentieth century.

subjected to in the years leading up to the civil rights movement. Though Walker was quite young during much of the movement (which reached its peak from 1955 to 1968), she was an active participant as a college student. Walker was invited to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s home in 1962 in recognition of her participation, and she was present at the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, where Dr. King gave his famous "I Have a Dream" speech. After graduating from Sarah Lawrence College in 1965, Walker participated in the civil rights movement by moving to Georgia and then to Mississippi, gathering voter registrations door-to-door. This action directly addressed the issue of disenfranchised voters, whose right to vote was invalidated, most of whom were African Americans. Voter registration laws in the southern states up until this point had been written to make registering to vote a difficult and complicated process. It was during this time that Walker met Melvyn Leventhal, a civil rights lawyer and a Jew. After the couple married in New York, they returned to Mississippi. They were the first interracial married couple to live in the state, an honor that earned them death threats from the Ku Klux Klan. Understanding Walker's childhood experiences and her participation in so significant a historical movement is critical to understanding the body of her work. Walker's writing largely portrays strong black women who struggle to retain their dignity in a time that seems to rob them of that very thing. The forgiveness shown in "Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning" is an essential aspect of that dignity.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

Critical reaction to Walker's collection *Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning* has been somewhat mixed. The title poem of the collection is often pointed out by reviewers as a sort of flagship work that sheds insight on Walker's entire body of writing. As a flagship work, "Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning" defines, clarifies, and distills the overarching themes and concerns that can be found throughout Walker's oeuvre. Hanna Nowak, writing in *Alice Walker: Critical Perspectives, Past and Present*, observes that the poem "appropriately set[s] the tone of the poet's voice and contain[s] her essential message: a deep concern for all human beings, optimism and affirmation of life, the feeling of continuity, and a highly personal vision." Nowak additionally notes that the collection as a whole "reveals a tendency towards more public poems. These 'facing the way' poems . . . are often directly feminist in tone."

Critics do not see "Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning" only as a work that sheds insight on Walker's writing overall but also as a work that provides insight into Walker's personal life. This is more than likely due to the poem's autobiographical nature. For instance, Philip M. Royster, writing in *Black American Literature Forum*, states that "the more the persona [in the poem] speaks of forgiveness the less assured the reader feels that Walker's fundamental attitude towards her father has changed, especially when one considers her fictive portrayal of men." Here, Royster interprets "Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning" by combining both contexts, that of Walker's oeuvre and of her personal life. Regardless of these critical viewpoints, reviewers unanimously comment on the poem's central theme of forgiveness. Kay Carmichael even uses the poem as an example in her book *Sin and Forgiveness: New Responses in a Changing World*. She calls the poem a "classic statement of human dignity, endurance and acceptance of the hand life has dealt you."

CRITICISM

Leah Tieger

Tieger is a freelance writer and editor. In this essay, she explores Walker's relationship with her father, particularly as it relates to her poem "Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning."

WHAT DO I READ NEXT?



- For further insight into Walker's role in the civil rights movement, her 1997 collection of essays, *Anything We Love Can Be Saved: A Writer's Activism*, is a valuable resource.
- No study of Walker is complete without reading her most famous novel, *The Color Purple* (1982). A modern classic, the story is often studied in American high schools.
- To gain a better understanding of feminism and its goals, as well as to understand why Walker's work was often called feminist, read *Feminism in Our Time: The Essential Writings, World War II to the Present* (1994). Edited by Miriam Schneir, this collection of essays contains landmark writings by leading twentieth-century feminist thinkers.
- Though the work of African American writer Zora Neale Hurston is well known today, it was relatively obscure during the mid-twentieth century. In fact, Walker was one of the people responsible for popularizing the author's work. The novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) is Hurston's best-known work.

Though Alice Walker's "Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning" is a meditation on forgiveness and its power, its autobiographical content naturally leads the reader to question what, exactly, is being forgiven. This curiosity arises from the strange context of the forgiveness that is granted. Certainly, it seems that grief and sadness would be the primary expressions expected of a widowed woman sitting beside her husband's body. Deathbed forgiveness is the realm of the priest, of last rites and the dying man's repentance, none of which are in evidence in the poem. What has transpired between husband and wife that forgiveness, rather than grief, is at the forefront of this deathbed scene? This question is somewhat erroneous. It is important to note that Willie Lee's wife does



WALKER'S STRUGGLE TO FORGIVE HER FATHER MAY BE WHY THE SPEAKER OF THE POEM MUST PUT THE WORDS IN HER MOTHER'S MOUTH."

not actually forgive him. Instead, she bids her dead husband "good night," addressing him as she does in the title of the poem. It is the poem's speaker, Walker, Willie Lee's daughter, who ascribes this statement with its meaning. In this sense, it is not necessarily Willie Lee's wife who forgives but his daughter who does so in her mother's stead. It is this relationship between father and daughter that bears examining.

The basic autobiographical facts that inform "Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning" are relatively apparent. Walker's father was named Willie Lee, and he died in 1973. The poem addressing his death was first published in 1975. In her biography *Alice Walker: A Life*, Evelyn C. White goes so far as to claim that Walker's mother, Minnie Tallulah, actually spoke the title phrase over her husband's casket during his funeral. Yet, the tragedies that befell Willie Lee, and his daughter Alice, inform the poem far more than these dry facts. When Willie Lee was eleven years old, his mother was shot in the chest before his eyes. When Walker was eight years old, she was accidentally shot in the eye with a BB gun. These two events would forever alter Willie Lee's relationship with the women in his life. As a child, Willie Lee attempted to protect his mother from his father, Henry, an abusive alcoholic who did not love his wife, Kate. Henry kept a steady mistress for several years. Kate, in turn, later did the same. Yet, her feelings of guilt led her to end the affair. Shortly afterwards, while Willie Lee was walking with his mother, her former lover accosted them, begging Kate to resume the affair. When she refused, he shot her in front of her eleven-year-old son. Bleeding in her son's arms, Kate asked Willie Lee to undo her corset, and the boy was forced to undress his mother in order to do so. Kate died the next day. Two months later, Willie Lee's father decided to hire a young girl to work as a nanny and cook for the family. Henry was forced by propriety to marry the girl. Thus Willie Lee's mother was summarily replaced by a woman who was barely older than Willie Lee's eldest sister.

The scars from this event became painfully evident when Willie Lee's daughter Ruth, Walker's older sister, began to mature into a woman. Willie Lee felt that Ruth was too interested in boys, and he routinely beat her and kept her locked indoors. Beneath this brutal treatment lay Willie Lee's fear of the repercussions that awaited Ruth's perceived promiscuity. Walker, naturally, resented her father for his actions toward her sister. Thus, his behavior caused a rift in his relationship with both daughters. Yet, despite his overly protective instincts toward Ruth, Willie Lee simultaneously encouraged his sons to date as many women as possible, promoting the typical double standard that admonishes women for their desires while applauding men for theirs. Additionally, Willie Lee's sexism was apparent in all aspects of his life; he firmly believed that housework and cooking was women's work, and he and his sons did not help around the house. This was a typical attitude at the time; yet, the hypocrisy of a man subjugated because of his race, who in turn subjugated others on merit of their gender, was not lost on Walker. She often discussed this fact in various interviews and articles. *Black American Literature Forum* contributor Philip M. Royster quotes one such article from 1975, published the same year as "Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning." According to Royster, Walker states, "I desperately needed my father and brothers to give me male models I could respect, because white men . . . offered man as dominator, as killer, and always as hypocrite. My father failed because he copied the hypocrisy."

Aside from the scars of Willie Lee's traumatic childhood (and their bearing on his role as a father and husband), Walker's own traumatic childhood experience further changed her relationship with her father. At the age of eight, while playing Cowboys and Indians with her brothers, Walker was accidentally shot in the eye with a BB gun. Fearing their father's anger, the children delayed telling their parents about the injury. When they finally did so, Walker lied about it, claiming she had walked into a wire that had poked her in the eye. These circumstances, brought about by the fear her father had instilled in her, likely contributed to the permanent loss of sight in Walker's right eye. Walker's parents subsequently treated her for the injury at home,

and she only saw a doctor after she developed an infection and a high fever. The doctor told the family that he could save Walker's eyesight for two-hundred fifty dollars. Though that seems a small price to pay in the early twenty-first century, the Walker family's annual income at the time was three-hundred dollars. Walker's brother Bill borrowed the money, but the doctor cheated them and Walker did not regain her sight. In fact, she was left with a disfiguring scar. Later, when Walker was fourteen, Bill again took on the role of caretaker, paying for an operation to have the scar removed.

This incident underscores Walker's fear of her father, but more importantly, it underscores Willie Lee's inability to provide adequate care for his daughter. Royster makes much of this fact in his *Black American Literature Forum* article. He notes that "Walker, as a child, naturally expected [Willie Lee] to be her protector, her comforter, her inspiration, her rescuer," adding that, "undoubtedly, one should not expect an eight-year-old, gripped by the physical and psychic trauma of impending blindness, to cope with the imperfection of her father." Yet, as Royster notes, this problem was compounded by Willie Lee's tenuous position in the Jim Crow South. He claims that "Walker plays the role of a victim who has become angry and bitter because the person she expects to rescue her is himself a victim (as well as a persecutor)." It took Walker several years to understand and forgive her father, and he died before she did so. Royston observes that Walker's "hardheartedness towards her father prevented her grieving for him until quite a while after his death." He also quotes a remark Walker made in 1975, when she stated that "it was not until I became a student of women's liberation ideology that I could understand and forgive my father."

Walker's struggle to forgive her father may be why the speaker of the poem must put the words in her mother's mouth. For instance, Thadious Davis, writing in *Alice Walker: Critical Perspectives, Past and Present*, inadvertently points out this peculiar approach by describing the poem's "tone" as being evoked by "the civility of the mother's voice and the compassion of the daughter's thought." Certainly, this statement emphasizes the true source of the poem's act of forgiveness. Consequently, because of this indirect approach, one could infer that Walker was not yet fully able to forgive her father, though she may have known that she needed to. Or, at the very least, she knew that Willie Lee deserved forgiving. In "Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning," Walker does her best to grant that forgiveness, regardless of its source. Despite the mother's statement, or the daughter's interpretation of it, the value of the forgiveness that is granted remains the same. It is the sole means through which the damage people do to one another is repaired, and it also opens up the possibility of redemption, through which the spirit of the speaker's father is honored. Davis notes that the poem thus "argues resurrection and reunion both in the here and now and in the hereafter where promised renewals and beginnings can occur." Willie Lee's presence and importance in the lives of his family members (as well as their love for him) are permitted, via this act of forgiveness, to overshadow any past wrongs. Furthermore, they open the door to understanding and empathy; and this, perhaps, is the true purpose of the poem.

Source: Leah Tieger, Critical Essay on "Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2009.

Evette Porter

In the following interview with Porter, Walker discusses the autobiographical nature of her work.

On my bookshelf, I have an old dog-eared copy of *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* that over the years has become my favorite Alice Walker book. Actually, the copy belonged to my sister who gave it to my mother. But its history is irrelevant since I now possess the book, and therefore consider it my own. For reasons that are complicated and have mostly to do with my own creative ambition, *Our Mothers' Gardens* resonates for me much like *Women Who Run With the Wolves* does for other feminist writers. It fosters a certain boldness, as well as a measure of comfort and understanding for those who struggle with self-doubt in their writing.

The first essay in *Our Mothers' Gardens* is entitled "Saving the Life That Is Your Own: The Importance of Models in the Artist's Life." I read it some years ago in an effort to find my own voice as a writer. But what was most revealing about the essay is that I never imagined such a supremely confident writer as Alice Walker would ever need a model in her writing. After all, having coined the term womanist, it seemed



THROUGHOUT HER LIFE, WALKER HAS ALWAYS SEEMED SOMETHING OF A SHAMAN—A WANDERLUST SEEKING HIGHER CONSCIOUSNESS, WHICH AT TIMES HAS EARNED HER BOTH RIDICULE AND CELEBRITY."

incredible that Walker would look for wisdom in someone else. And yet it is her confidence and her apparent vulnerability that make her such a contradiction.

At 59, Alice Walker is one of only a few writers who has enjoyed critical and popular success, albeit not without controversy. Her latest book, a collection of poetry entitled *Absolute Trust in the Goodness of the Earth*, includes works that are as literal as "Poem for Aneta Chapman on Her 33rd Birthday"; to seemingly pedestrian observations such as in "May 23, 1999"; to a series of poems that contemplate 9/11 and anticipate an increasingly hawkish climate in the U.S. While not likely to elicit as incendiary a response as some of her other books, *Absolute Trust* is no less radical in its ideas.

"In the introduction there is a section about Mari'a Sabina, a curandera [a healer] from Oaxaca," says Walker. "Her foundation in life is exactly that: absolute trust in the goodness of the earth," she says in a voice that's surprisingly soft. "Her foundation is actually my own, which is why I chose it. I also have absolute trust in the goodness of the earth. And I think that is my religion, to the extent that I have one," she adds. "I believe that what the earth produces, what the earth is, is good, and deserves our respect and adoration."

It is this decidedly more spiritual philosophy that Walker has expressed in her writing in recent years. And perhaps the best example of that philosophy and Walker's sometimes unconventionally temporal narrative is her novel *The Temple of My Familiar*, which the book jacket describes as "a romance of the last 500,000 years." The book is her favorite, says Walker. "It is more true to the way I live in the world," she says. "It is more contemporary to me. Even though it covers so much ancient history, it is still more the way that I have lived in the world, which is to be connected to many cultures, and many different kinds of people."

Throughout her life, Walker has always seemed something of a shaman—a wanderlust seeking higher consciousness, which at times has earned her both ridicule and celebrity. Though she received recognition early in her career, by and large she has earned somewhat mixed reviews. Critics and readers alike either love her or loathe her; there is no middle ground with Alice Walker.

Born in 1944, in Eatonton, Georgia, Alice Malsenior was the youngest of Willie Lee and Minnie Tallulah Grant Walker's eight children, in a family of sharecroppers. When she was eight, Walker lost her sight in one eye when her older brother accidentally shot her with a BB gun during a game of Cowboys and Indians. It was a scar she bore for years, even after the disfiguring cataract was removed when she was fourteen. When she was in high school, says Walker, her mother gave her three important gifts: a sewing machine that let her make her own clothes; a suitcase, which allowed her to leave home and travel; and a typewriter, which gave her permission to write.

After graduating from high school as valedictorian, Walker enrolled at Spelman College in Atlanta in 1961 on a scholarship. Two years later, she transferred to Sarah Lawrence College in New York, to escape Spelman's "puritanical" atmosphere. It was at Sarah Lawrence that she wrote what would be her first [collection of] published poems, *Once*. Written during a traumatic period shortly after having had an abortion, Walker's teacher at Sarah Lawrence, Muriel Rukeyser, herself a poet, gave Alice's poems to her agent, who in turn showed them to an editor at Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, which published the collection.

After graduating from Sarah Lawrence in 1965, Walker received a writing fellowship and was making plans to go to Senegal, when her life took a different turn. Instead of going to West Africa, she flew to Mississippi. "That summer marked the beginning of a realization that I could never live happily in Africa—or anywhere else—until I could live freely in Mississippi," she wrote. After spending time in Mississippi and Georgia registering black voters, she returned to New York and worked in the city's welfare

department. In 1967, she married Mel Leventhal, a white civil rights lawyer and activist who she met while in Mississippi. And in 1969, she gave birth to their daughter, Rebecca.

During this time, she continued to write; and in 1970, at age 26, Walker published *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, the manuscript of which she completed just days before giving birth. The novel, which chronicles violence and infidelity over several generations of a black family, marked an auspicious fiction debut. Two years later, she published *In Love and Trouble*, a collection of short stories, and a book of poetry entitled *Revolutionary Petunias and Other Poems*, which was nominated for a National Book Award and won the Lillian Smith Award. In 1976, she published the novel *Meridian*.

"The first books were written partly as a duty to my ancestors, to my grandparents and my parents and the ones before that," says Walker. "*Meridian* doesn't fall into that," she acknowledges. "That was more because I was living in Mississippi during the Civil Rights Movement and I wanted to write a novel that looked not just at the politics, but at the heart of the people. And I wanted to see what the relationships were like between men and women as they came up against the fascism, and racism, and Nazism of white supremacy. So since I was a writer and living in the South, it was very natural to write about what was happening," says Walker, who also taught black studies and creative writing at Jackson State University and Tougaloo College from 1968 to 1971.

"The thing about my work is that even when it's painful, it's joyful—because I can do it," says Walker. "I grew up in the South in what most people would consider fairly impoverished circumstances. It wasn't easy to actually be able to go to college and learn to write, and I did," says Walker.

"I saw a murdered woman when I was thirteen," her tone, sober. "She had been killed by her husband," she continues, "and I knew that somehow I had to learn—even as a 13-year-old—I had to learn how to make sense of this. I had to learn to make people see it for what it was—murder. When someone kills you, it is murder," she says adamantly. "I don't care if they're your husband, your boyfriend or whatever. So the pain of writing about that 20 years later, or however long it was, was intense. But so was the joy, because I had looked at her face—which had been pretty much blown off—and I had made a promise to myself, and to her, that one day I would make other people see what I saw," says Walker, echoing a theme that runs through much of her writing.

In 1978, Alice Walker moved to northern California. Four years later, she published what is probably her most celebrated work, *The Color Purple*. Though, at the time, unusual in its epistolary form, the precedent for Walker's character Celie in *The Color Purple* can be traced to Janie Crawford, Zora Neale Hurston's heroine in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Hurston, whose life and work Walker began researching in 1970, provides the model in Janie Crawford that Alice Walker chose for herself. She writes in "Saving the Life That Is Your Own":

> I love the way Janie Crawford
> left her husbands
> the one who wanted to change her
> into a mule
> and the other who tried to interest her
> in being a queen.
> A woman, unless she submits,
> is neither a mule
> nor a queen
> though like a mule she may suffer
> and like a queen pace the floor.

The novel *The Color Purple*, which takes place from 1900 to the 1940s, tells the story of Celie, a womanchild, who after years of physical and emotional abuse at the hands of her father and later her husband, finds dignity, independence and kinship in her relationships with other black women. Told mostly in a series of letters written by Celie and her sister, Nettie, the novel won the American Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize.

"Even though I wrote *The Color Purple* here [in California]—I actually lived in New York for a while. I couldn't really write there, because I was an editor at *Ms.* magazine and that took a lot of time. I had a child, and I was getting divorced, and all that life—just life, life, life," she explains.

At the time, Walker decided to move to San Francisco to write, resuming a relationship with an old friend from her college days at Spelman, *Black Scholar* editor Robert Allen, who had attended Morehouse. Almost immediately, the two decided to sell their house in San Francisco and move to Mendocino, an area in northern California that reminded Walker of her native Georgia.

"I wrote *The Color Purple* as a way of communicating with the spirit of black people and my people—in celebration. So that pretty much completed the cycle," says Walker of her early works. "I had written *In Love & Trouble: Stories of Black Women*—those were mostly black women in the South. And then, *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*—those were women North and South. It was about their spiritual development."

But it was *The Color Purple* that became a best-seller and caused quite a stir—especially among black men. Among critics, Walker's book was decried for being overly harsh in its depiction of the brutality of its black male characters, while she was chided for being too much a feminist—or womanist, to use Walker's words. In what was a generally positive review in *The New York Times*, black literary critic Mel Watkins cited the "pallid portraits of the males" as the novel's biggest transgression. Others, like poet Sonia Sanchez and Ishmael Reed, were far more biting in their criticism.

"I wrote a complete book called *The Same River Twice*, which is about the [*Color Purple*] controversy and my response to it," says Walker. "I wrote it and published it about ten years after the film *The Color Purple*." In *The Same River Twice*, she describes the sometimes vicious attacks surrounding the release of the movie *The Color Purple*, the rejection of her screenplay adaptation of the novel by Steven Spielberg, her mother's failing health, her own battle with Lyme disease and the breakup of her relationship with Allen.

"In general, I don't seem to care very much about what people think about what I'm doing," she says, pausing then, quickly adding, "if they don't actually try to physically harm me." For the most part, Walker seems to have quietly ignored her detractors. "I'm pretty clear about what I'm supposed to be doing here, and I do that," she says, calmly. "Their job is to criticize, and they do that. So I feel like, it works out. I write and speak, and band with people that I feel need me," she continues.

"I got very involved, after that, in the struggle to end genital mutilation and I wrote *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. And that was very different from anything I would have written living in Georgia or Mississippi, because we don't have that there, thank goodness. So it depends, you know. Then, with *By the Light of My Father's Smile*, I was very much interested in showing how important it is for fathers to bless the sexuality of their daughters. And if they cannot do that, then the daughter cannot bless them by having confidence in them, and letting them be a part of their lives."

Her writing sometimes mirrors her own life. In a moving collection of short stories published in 2001, *The Way Forward Is With a Broken Heart*, Walker reveals some of the intimate details of her own life. In a chapter called "Memoir of a Marriage," she writes: "Beloved, A few days ago I went to see the little house on R. Street where we were so happy. Before traveling back to Mississippi I had not thought much about it. It seemed so far away, almost another dimension." Further, in the same chapter, she continues, "I went back with the woman I love now. She had never been South, never been to Mississippi, though her grandparents are buried in one of the towns you used to sue racists in." Like much of Walker's writing, *The Way Forward* is elliptical. There is an ambiguity as to whether Walker is writing for the reader, for an intimate, or for herself.

"My job, in a way, is helping people to have that closer look—whether it's female genital mutilation, or wife battering, or child abuse," she says. "On the other hand, being able to love wherever you wish and whoever you want, and seeing that as an expression of the freedom that we have. My personal life is just like everybody's," she admits, "filled with my friends, community and events that are pretty much mine."

With *Absolute Trust*, Alice Walker returns to the genre where her literary career began. While the poems vary widely in subject, they are strongly influenced by the events of 9/11 and embrace a more "outsider" global perspective.

"I don't think there is a limit to what people can say about grief," says Walker. "And I don't think there's a limit to what one can say about the need to sit ourselves down and talk about what kind of future we want, if indeed we have one.

"I think all I can say is that now I'm an older person. I'm someone who has had much more experience than in the beginning. But in some ways, I'm concerned about the same issues, the same emotions. I'm concerned with the safety of our people, the planet, people who are in deep trouble around the world," she explains, reflecting on how her poetry has changed over the years. "I think that with time, we begin to understand a little better that some things we thought

were horrible, unbearable . . . can be bearable as we get older. For instance, in my earlier poetry . . . I wrote poems about suicide. And now I don't think about that very much. It's interesting because I think that to wage continuous war in the world is a kind of suicide. In a sense, the suicide that I see now is a global one. It's humanity that seems to be interested in ending itself. But I don't feel interested in ending myself. I think that's progress."

Finally, I ask her why she chose to publish *Absolute Trust*, since she acknowledges in the preface to the book that in the past two years she had resigned herself not to write anymore.

"Poetry comes when it wants, and it is not dependent on whether you want to write poetry or not," says Walker. "I was in Mexico a while ago last year and the poems just started to come. I think it was partly because they had been accumulating over a number of years," she says, recalling her first book of poetry. "That's why it's absurd to say I can give this up," she adds. "Creativity is so powerful that you can't give it up. It might give you up, but you can't give it up."

Source: Evette Porter, "Absolute Alice: Feminist-Writer-Poet-Activist and Literary High Priestess Alice Walker Returns to Form with a Collection of Poems about War, Falling Bodies, the Ancestors, Trees and Everything Holistic Here on Earth," in *Black Issues Book Review*, Vol. 5, No. 2, March–April 2003, pp. 34–38.

Adrian T. Oktenberg

In the following review, Oktenberg provides an overview of twenty-five years of Walker's poetry.

Alice Walker wrote poems before she ever dreamt of prose, considered herself a poet well after she published her first fiction, and yet (it seems to me) her poetry has not been taken as seriously as her fiction and essays. Is her poetry less good, less important, than her other writing? In *Her Blue Body* we now have the complete texts of all of Walker's poetry books to date, together with sixteen new poems. Walker has also provided short introductions for each volume, describing some of the circumstances or context in which each book was written. This is a retrospective as well as a forward-looking collection, and we may now be able to evaluate Walker's position as a poet in mid-life.

Alice Walker came of age in the sixties, and has always written in support of "the revolution." In one of her essays, she speaks of feeling embarrassed whenever she is introduced as an activist.



ALICE WALKER IS BOTH A MYSTICAL AND A REVOLUTIONARY POET, AN APPARENT CONTRADICTION IN TERMS BUT ONE THAT SHE EXEMPLIFIES NONETHELESS."

Although she has attended her share of meetings and demonstrations, and given speeches—a particularly brilliant one, called "What Can the White Man Say to the Black Woman?" is included in *Her Blue Body* as a prose poem—Walker's activism has taken the form of thinking and writing. But the fundamental questions in her work are all about revolution. What it means to those engaged in it; how it is to be achieved humanely against multiple oppressions which are hardly humane; where it is going and what exactly it is aimed to accomplish. That is the more public version of Walker's concern.

The parallel and more private version is how, as an oppressed person herself, Walker can survive oppression, how it can become possible for her (and by extension others like her) to live a full life. These more private concerns are the ones primarily addressed in the poems.

For Walker, any fundamental change begins first in the self. In *Her Blue Body*, she speaks of her "growing realization [in the Sixties] that the sincerest struggle to change the world must start within." In a sense, *Her Blue Body* tracks the record of that which is starting within.

Because the poems focus on "Alice Walker" herself, used as a kind of laboratory in which possibilities for change are experimented with, charted and tested, they are intensely personal. They read like a journal or notebook which ranges over Walker's characteristic themes and concerns—instances of racist or sexist oppression, and resistance; the South as crucible, home and garden; Africa as a place of struggle and also as a spiritual source; love and trouble; what she renames the "silver writes" movement, which was the formative event for much of her thinking; suicide poems and poems that celebrate life and explore growth. These themes and concerns are the same ones that appear in Walker's prose—but in the poems, freed of the

need to be of service in a narrative or argument, they appear in a much less constrained way. Walker's poems have a quality of immediacy and accessibility, as if the author happens to be thinking aloud or, in Sappho's phrase, sharing her thoughts "face to face as a friend would."

I can't be sure, but I have a sense that for Walker poetry comes before prose; it is the thought in the first instance, the one closest to the spirit, the most inspired. Walker is a writer who is capable of lyrical prose; she is also a genuinely mystical poet. Her language is full of mystical hallmarks—oxymorons, paradoxes, contradictions. Her poetry is about questions, not answers—more specifically, about the process of finding the right questions. A Walker poem starts with the self—sometimes with the body, or an impulse, an observation, an emotion, an inchoate idea—and then plays it out on the page, with all the twists, turns, backtracks, asides and outright contradictions of thought unfolding.

For this reason Walker's poems may first appear unpolished or unsophisticated, perhaps less "good" than those of some other poets. But Walker is not a "bad" poet, just one who has been misunderstood, misplaced, misconceptualized. We are locked into distinguishing art as a weapon, art that serves "the people" or "the revolution," from art that exists for itself, has a value "in itself." We find it difficult to include within the rubric of revolutionary art poetry that is mystical. Alice Walker is both a mystical and a revolutionary poet, an apparent contradiction in terms but one that she exemplifies nonetheless.

Pick almost any Walker poem—"Revolutionary Petunias" "Facing the Way," "Stripping Bark from Myself," "Family Of," "Remember," "Expect Nothing," "Be Nobody's Darling"—they are about one or another aspect of revolution but they are also all mystical poems. "Revolutionary Petunias" is a paradox, insisting that flowers and especially the exuberant color purple go on existing in the midst of, in spite of, and even because of, oppression and death. Here is "The Nature of This Flower Is to Bloom":

> Rebellious. Living.
> Against the Elemental Crush.
> A Song of Color
> Blooming
> For Deserving Eyes.
> Blooming Gloriously
> For its Self.

Revolutionary Petunias. (p. 235)

Like Walker's life and work, the poem is built on contradiction. How can a Black woman, sentenced to silence and invisibility, ever expect to write, speak, be heard, seen? I read "this flower" in the title as Walker speaking through clenched teeth. (Does anyone remember Philip Levine's poem from the sixties about pigs being brought to slaughter? "Not *this* pig.") Walker's "*this* flower" is just as rebellious, insisting on the flower's (and her own) right to bloom for no other reason but its, or her, self. If every one of us insisted, against the odds, on fully expressing our natures, then we would have revolution; the world would be turned upside down. That's her parable.

Her Blue Body tracks Walker's self over 25 years of revolutionary struggle: the "young self, the naive promiscuous self, the ill or self-destructive self, the angry and hurt self," as well as the selves that encompass resistance, change and growth. Speaking of the seventies, a period of "breakdown and spiritual disarray" for herself as for many others, Walker writes: "My years-long period of lamentation was finally ended when I realized I was capable not only of change, but of forgiveness, and could assume that others were also. For it is change in the self, along with the ability to forgive the self and others, that frees us for the next encounter." "On Stripping Bark from Myself," in *I'll See You in the Morning, Willie Lee*, is one of Walker's best and most emblematic poems. Here it is in full:

> Because women are expected to keep silent
> about
> their close escapes I will not keep silent
> and if I am destroyed (naked tree!) someone
> will please
> mark the spot
> where I fall and know I could not live
> silent in my own lies
> hearing their "how *nice* she is!"
> whose adoration of the retouched image
> I so despise.
>
> No. I am finished with living
> for what my mother believes
> for what my brother and father defend
> for what my lover elevates
> for what my sister, blushing, denies or rushes
> to embrace.
>
> I find my own
> small person
> a standing self
> against the world

an equality of wills
I finally understand.
Besides:

My struggle was always against
an inner darkness: I carry within myself
the only known keys
to my death—to unlock life, or close it shut
forever. A woman who loves wood grains,
the color yellow
and the sun, I am happy to fight
all outside murderers
as I see I must.
(pp. 270–271)

While stripping bark from a tree can kill it, in stripping herself, discarding the lies shaped by others as well as her own self-deceptions, Walker finds her true, undistorted self. She intimates that the process of healing, which *feels* like slow death or destruction, is necessary "to unlock life." This paradoxical process produces a paradoxical result, a "*small* . . . self/against the *world*/ an *equality* of wills" [my italics]. In another poem, "Having Eaten Two Pillows," she speaks of her "ambition" to be "just anyone," another contradiction in terms but one that Walker adopts from Bessie Head as "the correct relationship to other people and to the world."

Traditional mystical poetry seeks God, not earthly revolution. But Walker seeks a spiritual revolution fully as much as one that overthrows political and economic institutions. Her poems on Malcolm X, on Christ and others make clear that her revolution would include love and laughter; it would combine "Justice *and* Hope" [my italics]. Walker has always been a spiritual writer, becoming more so in recent years, until now, when she is perfectly at ease seeking union with the earth and with that long line of spirits that "stretches all the way back, perhaps, to God; or to Gods." Her spirituality is pagan, African and Native American, in its sources rather than Christian (Walker has always been ambivalent about Christianity, especially the organized kind). In *The Temple of My Familiar*, her most recent novel, she finds God not only in every human being but also in animals, trees, laughter and breath.

Walker's single best poem, which gives this book its title, is probably "We Have a Beautiful Mother." Its deep personification of the earth, its ease, make it one of her most spiritual statements:

We have a beautiful
mother
Her hills
are buffaloes
Her buffaloes
hills.

We have a beautiful
mother
Her oceans
are wombs
Her wombs
oceans.

We have a beautiful
mother
Her teeth
the white stones
at the edge
of the water
the summer
grasses
her plentiful
hair.

We have a beautiful
mother
Her green lap
immense
her brown embrace
eternal
Her blue body
everything
we know (pp. 459–460)

Her Blue Body reflects the inner journey of an extraordinary writer over 25 years of struggle. It teaches us, not yet at the end, to cherish and celebrate life.

Source: Adrian T. Oktenberg, "Revolutionary Contradictions," in *Women's Review of Books*, Vol. 9, No. 3, December 1991, pp. 24–25.

Philip M. Royster

In the following excerpt, Royster analyzes the role of black men in Walker's writing, her relationship with her father, and her portrayal of his death in her poem "Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning."

THE WRITER AS ALIENATED RESCUER

Walker has committed her efforts to at least two great social movements that have stimulated the alteration of consciousness in the last half of the twentieth century: the Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Liberation Movement. Walker's involvement with these movements both generates and reflects her intention, first articulated in 1973, to champion as a writer the causes of black people, especially black women:



AN ONGOING EFFECT OF HER CHILDHOOD ACCIDENT SEEMS TO BE THAT SHE SEES YOUNGER MEN (WHO WOULD BE IN THE AGE RANGE THAT HER FATHER WAS WHEN SHE BECAME ALIENATED FROM HIM AND HER BROTHERS) WITH A JAUNDICED EYE."

"I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the survival *whole*, of my people. But beyond that, I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women" (*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* 250).

In a 1984 interview, Walker revealed that, since childhood, she has seen herself as a writer who rescues: "'I was brought up to try to see what was wrong and right it. Since I am a writer, writing is how I right it'" (Bradley 36). Walker's fiction confronts such issues as racism, intraracism, sexism, neocolonialism, and imperialism in order to transform both society and the individual. She expressed her commitment to change in 1973 with the affirmation: "I believe in change: change personal, and change in society" (*Gardens* 252). In *The Color Purple*, she seems to be preoccupied with the task of overcoming black male sexist exploitation of black women.

Yet, along with this commitment to change, Walker holds other attitudes that have the potential to frustrate her goals. She indirectly announced one such attitude in *Revolutionary Petunias & Other Poems* through a persona who articulates the position of an outcast to the social order: "Be nobody's darling; / Be an outcast. / Qualified to live / Among your dead" (32). The concerns of this fictive persona resound in Walker's nonfictive voices, but in the nonfiction the speaker expresses a need to be both somebody's darling (that somebody is usually an older man) and an outcast (who uses her art as a means to rescue victims). The personas in both her fiction and nonfiction also experience feelings of inadequacy as rescuers, and they appear to be both infatuated with and plagued by notions concerning suicide, death, and the dead. (Although Walker seems to consider herself to be a medium, she simultaneously articulates perennial fantasies concerning suicide.)

Walker's perception of herself as a writer who is a social outcast apparently began after her brother blinded one of her eyes with a bb gun when she was eight years old: "I believe . . . that it was from this period—from my solitary, lonely position, the position of an outcast—that I began really to see people and things, really to notice relationships and to learn to be patient enough to care about how they turned out. I no longer felt like the little girl I was. I felt old, and because I felt I was unpleasant to look at, filled with shame. I retreated into solitude, and read stories and began to write poems" (*Gardens* 244–45). The accident seems to have led Walker to feel both alienated from her environment and perceptive of people and their lives. Her confidence in her insight undoubtedly helped to prepare her for the role of a rescuer, yet the fact that she no longer felt like a little girl engendered attitudes that would ultimately frustrate her goal. Her experiences of the loss of her childhood, the shame of a disfiguring scar, and social inadequacy would soon give rise, in her writing, to voices with tones of resentment, anger, and bitterness, on the one hand, and voices that articulate the desire to feel again like a little girl (or a darling to older men), on the other. The speaker of one of her poems that appears in *The American Poetry Review* (6.1 [1977]: 28–29) expresses something of the intensity of Walker's alienation when she asserts: "I find my own / small person / a standing self / against the world" (qtd. in Erickson 86–87). One of the comforts for the outcast persona is her as-yet-unending search for father figures with whom to be a darling . . . .

BLACK MEN

Undoubtedly, Walker's alienation from black men influences her portrayal of them in fiction. Her audiences may achieve greater tolerance of her perceptions of men if they consider Walker's portrayal of male characters as part of the aftermath of the childhood accident in which she was blinded in one eye after her brother shot her with a bb gun. David Bradley asserts that "after that accident, she felt her family had failed her, especially her father. She felt he had ceased to favor her, and, as a child, blamed him for the poverty that kept her from receiving adequate medical care. He also, she implies, whipped and imprisoned her sister, who had shown too much interest in boys. . . . In company with her brothers, her father had failed to 'give me male models I could respect'" (34). Walker's disenchantment

sounds like that of a child who no longer feels like her father's darling. She seems to be at odds with her father, her brothers, and her family. Walker is more explicit about her disenchantment in an article first published in 1975: "I desperately needed my father and brothers to give me male models I could respect, because white men . . . offered man as dominator, as killer, and always as hypocrite. My father failed because he copied the hypocrisy. And my brothers—except for one—never understood they must represent half the world to me, as I must represent the other half to them" (*Gardens* 330–31). Walker's assertion of a mutual need between men and women to reflect the opposite half of the world is discordant with her disapproval of the loyalty some black women feel towards black men. Her perception that there was an absence of adequate young-adult male images within her childhood influences her literary portrayals of young black males: The central characters are flat stereotypes depicting, as Bradley notes, images of malevolence or impotence (34). Also, one might ask whether Walker's alienated perception of the males in her family was involved with her decision to marry a white man, despite her articulation of a problem with the image of the white male.

Walker's father died in 1973, before she had effected a reconciliation with him, and his death aggravated her alienation before it propelled her toward confronting it. She told David Bradley: "'You know, his death was harder than I had thought at the time. We were so estranged that when I heard—I was in an airport somewhere—I didn't think I felt anything. It was years later that I really felt it. We had a wonderful reconciliation after he died'" (36). Walker's estrangement seems to date from her childhood accident. It also appears that her hardheartedness towards her father prevented her grieving for him until quite a while after his death. The year 1973 also marks Walker's last year in Mississippi, when she continued her struggles against depression and the urge to commit suicide: "My salvation that last year was a black woman psychiatrist who had also grown up in the South. Though she encouraged me to talk about whether or not I had loved and/or understood my father, I became increasingly aware that I was holding myself responsible for the conditions of black people in America. Unable to murder the oppressors, I sat in a book-lined study and wrote about lives . . . " (*Gardens* 226). The correspondence between the issue that Walker holds against herself and that which precipitated her alienation from her father is startling: She feels just as inadequate at rescuing black people as she felt he was inadequate at rescuing her after the childhood accident.

As the concerns of her therapist suggest, Walker seems ignorant of her father's life. It may be this ignorance that she tried to relieve on the visit to her father's grave that she reports in the Bradley interview: "'I didn't cry when he died, but that summer I was in terrible shape. And I went to Georgia and I went to the cemetery and I laid down on top of his grave. I wanted to see what he could see, if he could look up. And I started to cry. And all the knottedness that had been in our relationship dissolved. And we're fine now'" (36). Since Walker elsewhere says that it took years for her to allow herself to grieve for her father, it is difficult to take literally this assertion of dissolved knottedness. Moreover, this account seems to undercut her 1975 statement concerning her father's sexism: "It was not until I became a student of women's liberation ideology that I could understand and forgive my father" (*Gardens* 330). The persona of the poem "Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning" insists that there is real forgiveness of the father and a "healing / of all our wounds" (*Good Night* 53), but the more the persona speaks of forgiveness the less assured the reader feels that Walker's fundamental attitude towards her father has changed, especially when one considers her fictive portrayal of men. Yet it is certain that finding ways to forgive her father has been a continuing concern of Alice Walker's.

In 1975 she had not yet laid to rest the ghost of her father. She reveals that she perceives older men as father figures: "Dr. Benton, a friend of Zora [Neale Hurston]'s and a practicing M.D. in Fort Pierce, is one of those old, good-looking men whom I always have trouble not liking. (It no longer bothers me that I may be constantly searching for father figures; by this time, I have found several and dearly enjoyed them all.)" (*Gardens* 109). Speaking of Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps in 1971, Walker observed that "*We must cherish our old men*" (*Gardens* 135). And, speaking of old men as a category, she notes, "I love old men" (*Gardens* 138). The persona's attitudes and attachments to older men suggest that she may be in search of someone with whom she can play the role of darling, even daughter, to complete a circle involving a father figure that she abandoned in childhood in

the aftermath of an accident. Elderly black men are portrayed with at least approval and often veneration because she liked her grandfathers who to her appeared to be gentle, in contrast to younger adult black males. Walker says, "'I knew both my grandfathers and they were just doting, indulgent, sweet old men. I just loved them both and they were crazy about me'" (Bradley 36). An ongoing effect of her childhood accident seems to be that she sees younger men (who would be in the age range that her father was when she became alienated from him and her brothers) with a jaundiced eye.

Walker's attitude towards her father is further uncovered by the connections she draws between a dream she had of him while she was in Cuba (during which he returned to look at her with something missing in his eyes) and her meeting with a Cuban revolutionary, Pablo Diaz, once a poor sugar cane cutter who had risen to the role of an "official spokesperson for the Cuban Institute for Friendship Among Peoples." Of Diaz she says, "Helping to throw off his own oppressors obviously had given him a pride in himself that nothing else could, and as he talked, I saw in his eyes a quality my own father's eyes had sometimes lacked: the absolute assurance that he was a man whose words—because he had helped destroy a way of life he despised—would always be heard, with respect, by his children" (*Gardens* 214). Walker's response to the Cuban revolutionary exposes circular and emotional reasoning: She may not respect her father because, since he did not bring about the end to his own oppression, he did not afford any assurance that what he said would be respected. Walker might be paraphrased, "I don't respect you because you don't expect me to respect you"; or, more to the point, "I don't respect you because you have not fulfilled my expectations." It appears that in her nonfictive assertions concerning her father, Walker plays the role of a victim who has become angry and bitter because the person she expects to rescue her is himself a victim (as well as a persecutor). (This attitude is similar to that she expresses when she attacks the judgment of the black community that will not protect black women accosted by black men.) She will not bear the sight of her father's anguish; she will not bear its weight on her consciousness. And his anguish is all the more unbearable because Walker, as a child, naturally expected him to be her protector, her comforter, her inspiration, her rescuer. Undoubtedly, one should not expect an eight-year-old, gripped by the physical and psychic trauma of impending blindness, to cope with the imperfection of her father (and also her older brothers). Moreover, to his plight as a sharecropper, one must add whatever may have been his personal shortcomings in order to get an accurate picture of the child's confrontation with his inadequacies. Walker was not merely disappointed but also frustrated by her father's anguish: She could not rescue him or make him into what she wanted or expected him to be, just as she has been unable to rescue black people. In other words, her continual rejection and condemnation of black people because they are either victims, persecutors, or inadequate rescuers may be, indeed, a reflection of her unresolved attitudes towards her father. Walker's suicidal impulses may be the result of her feeling like a child who is unable to be a daughter and a darling because no one appears (or remains) adequate to be the father she discarded as a child. Like a pendulum, Walker's recorded attitudes swing slowly back and forth between a victim's suicidal depression and a persecutor's deadly anger and thirst for revenge. The personas of the adult Walker continue to reject the father of her youth (all young men) waiting for her in her dreams and search out older men who fit her perceptions of her grandfathers, who appear to be adequate enough to rescue her, and for whom she can be a darling. She may be in search of not so much our mothers' gardens as our fathers' protecting arms. . . .

Source: Philip M. Royster, "In Search of Our Fathers' Arms: Alice Walker's Persona of the Alienated Darling," in *Black American Literature Forum*, Vol. 20, No. 4, Winter 1986, pp. 347–67.

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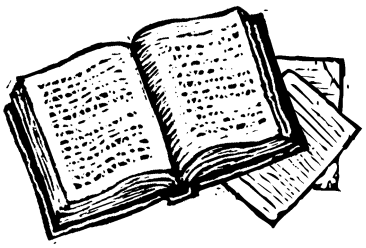
A landmark novel by a female African American author and contemporary of Walker's, *Beloved* is as well loved as Walker's *The Color Purple*. Set just after the end of the Civil War, the story features a group of freed slaves who struggle to cope with their past.

I, Too

LANGSTON HUGHES

1926

"I, Too" was included in Langston Hughes's first collection of poetry, *The Weary Blues*, published in 1926. The poem reflects Hughes's dream that one day segregation will end. According to the poem, when that happens, all men, white and black, will sit together at the same table, sharing equally in the opportunities that the American dream offers. "I, Too" is a response to nineteenth-century American poet Walt Whitman's "I Hear America Singing." Where Whitman rejoices in a country that offers him all that he wants, Hughes's poem makes clear that the United States does not provide a joyous experience for all its citizens. Hughes's poem is deceptively simple; its straightforward structure and deliberate choice of words suggest strength and determination. Hughes wrote "I, Too" in 1924 while stranded in Genoa, Italy, after his passport and wallet were stolen. Genoa had a busy port and Hughes tried to catch a ride back to the United States as a deckhand, but no ship would take him. After watching several white men easily get rides, Hughes wrote "I, Too" and mailed it to New York, hoping to sell the poem and make some money. There is no record of whether the poem brought Hughes any money, but the poem's theme of inequality reflects the world that Hughes saw around him, a world in which white sailors were free to refuse to serve with a black man, thus stranding him in Italy with no identification or money.





Langston Hughes *(The Library of Congress)*

"I, Too" is widely anthologized. In addition to its inclusion in *The Weary Blues*, it is included in such volumes as *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* (1995), *Langston Hughes: Poems* (1999) and *African American Literature: An Anthology of Nonfiction, Fiction, Poetry, and Drama* (1993).

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

James Langston Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri, on February 1, 1902, to Carrie Langston and James Nathaniel Hughes. Hughes's father was unable to find steady employment in Joplin and, by the time his son was eighteen months old, he decided to move to Mexico to live. Hughes's mother refused to join her husband and began traveling from city to city looking for work. Hughes's parents were later divorced. Although Hughes occasionally accompanied his mother as she traveled, for much of his childhood he was raised by his maternal grandmother in Lawrence, Kansas. For a year after his grandmother's death in 1915, Hughes lived occasionally with his mother and sometimes with a family friend. By 1916, he was again living with his mother, who had remarried. The family settled in Lincoln, Illinois, where Hughes enrolled at Central High School. Hughes did well in high school and began writing poetry for the school magazine. After graduation, he spent a year living with his father in Mexico, where he wrote poetry and a short play for children, both of which were published in 1921 in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) magazine *Brownies' Book*. Another poem and an essay were published in *Crisis*, also in 1921.

Hughes then enrolled at Columbia University in New York City, where he encountered racism on campus, especially in the dormitories; as a result, he left after his first year. For the next year and a half, he worked odd jobs and wrote poetry. In 1923, Hughes was able to find work as a cabin boy on a ship bound for Africa. He returned to the United States within the year but then left for Paris a few months later. After he returned to the United States in 1924 Hughes lived in Washington, D.C., and again worked a series of odd jobs while writing poetry. He was working as a busboy at a hotel restaurant in 1925 when he gave some of his poems to the poet Vachel Lindsay. The next day, Hughes read in a newspaper that Lindsay had discovered a Negro busboy poet. Lindsay told Hughes to find a publisher. That same year, Hughes won a poetry prize sponsored by the Urban League. At the award ceremony Hughes was asked by critic Carl Van Vechten if Hughes had enough poems to publish a book. Hughes's first collection of poems, which included "I, Too," was published as *The Weary Blues* in 1926.

In 1926, Hughes returned to college, enrolling at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. While at Lincoln, Hughes's second collection of poetry, *Fine Clothes to the Jew* was published in 1927. The same year, Hughes met Charlotte Mason while visiting New York City. She briefly became his literary patron and helped to provide the financial support for Hughes's first novel, *Not Without Laughter*, which Hughes revised after he graduated from Lincoln in 1929 and submitted for publication in 1930. Hughes won the Harmon Gold Medal in 1931 and a four-hundred-dollar cash prize for this first novel. During this time, Hughes was also working with Zora Neale Hurston on a play that they called *Mule Bone*. When she submitted the play as her sole work, refusing to share royalties, Hughes broke off his friendship with Hurston.

Hughes's first collection of short fiction, *The Ways of White Folks*, was published in 1934 and a series of sketches known as his Simple tales, which were about a black Everyman, were published in the *Chicago Defender*. The Simple tales were very popular with African American readers and were eventually published in a series of books, as *Simple Speaks His Mind* (1950) and *Simple Takes a Wife* (1953). Hughes always considered himself primarily a poet. Over the course of his life, more than twenty collections of his poetry were published, including *The Negro Mother* (1931), *The Dream Keeper and Other Poems* (1932), *Jim Crow's Last Stand* (1943), and *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951). In addition to the poetry, drama, novels, and short stories that he created, Hughes wrote two autobiographies and a number of essays. Although his work sometimes received mixed reactions from black individuals who were concerned that he emphasized lower-class life and presented an unfavorable image of his race, Hughes's work was a critical success. He received many writing awards during his life, including a Guggenheim fellowship in 1935, a Rosenwald fellowship in 1941, a National Institute and American Academy of Arts and Letters grant in 1947, and a Spingarn Medal, presented by the NAACP in 1960. Hughes became the first black poet to earn a living through his writing. Hughes died of congestive heart failure on May 22, 1967, at the age of sixty-five. During his lifetime he published nearly fifty books.

POEM TEXT

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.

Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed—

I, too, am America.

POEM SUMMARY

Stanza 1

The first stanza of "I, Too" consists of only one line, in which the speaker asserts that he is also celebrating being an American. The title, with its use of the word *too* suggests that the speaker is replying to another literary work. The emphasis in the line is on this word, since that is the most important word in this four-word line. In fact, "I, Too" is a response to Walt Whitman's 1860 poem, "I Hear America Singing." Whitman's poem celebrates American patriotism. The poet lists a number of different professions, including a carpenter and a mason, all of whom sing about their happiness at being American. Hughes's response is a reminder that black Americans also form part of this culture. By beginning with the singular personal pronoun, *I*, Hughes quickly establishes that the poet is also the subject of the poem. He also sings of the greatness of the United States just as Whitman's singers of the nineteenth century sang their tribute.

Stanza 2

In the second stanza, the narrator begins by defining himself as a brother, albeit the darker brother who is set apart, segregated from his white brother when company visits. The use of the word *brother* is not intended to be read as the literal brother but symbolically, as all men are brothers. All Americans are united as one. The United States welcomes all people to its shores and offers all the opportunity to achieve the American dream. Hughes's poem, however, suggests that not all Americans are given the same opportunity to achieve their dreams. Some—those with dark skin—are cast aside and kept from achieving the dream. Hughes reminds his readers that those people are equal to all others; they are brothers to the white majority.

The second line of stanza 2 refers to more than just being sent to the kitchen to eat. African Americans were victims of Jim Crow laws in the 1920s, when Hughes was a young writer. These laws kept black people separate from white people on public transportation, in restaurants, in theaters, at drinking fountains, and in public bathrooms. Miscegenation laws made it illegal for a black person to marry a white person, and poll taxes and literacy tests kept black Americans from voting. Black children were educated separately from white children. Hughes's reference to being sent to the kitchen when company



MEDIA ADAPTATIONS

- Hughes reads "I, Too" on the recording *Anthology of Negro Poetry*, released in 1954 by Folkways Records.
- Hughes reads "I, Too" on the recording *The Dream Keeper and Other Poems of Langston Hughes*, released in 1955 by Folkways Records and rereleased in 2004 by Smithsonian Folkways Recordings.
- Hughes reads "I, Too" on the recording *The Voice of Langston Hughes*, released in 1995 by Smithsonian Folkways Records.
- Hughes reads "I, Too" on the recording *American Black History*, released in 2008 by Master Classics Records.

arrived is intended to represent all of the ways in which blacks and whites were separated in American life during the early twentieth century.

The last three lines of this stanza are a reminder that the darker brothers, who are cast aside, are not defeated. The poet suggests that he uses the time in which he has been segregated to his own advantage. He is able to grow stronger. The second stanza establishes that segregation is still a part of life for many black Americans, but the last lines of the stanza indicate that segregation will not last.

Stanza 3

This stanza begins with only a word. *Tomorrow* is a word filled with hope that the next day will be better than the current one. The first lines of stanza 3 are a promise that the world will change for black Americans. Someday they will not live in segregation, isolated from the rest of humankind. Someday, whenever that elusive "tomorrow" occurs, black brothers will not be separated from their white brothers. They will all be at the same table, enjoying the abundance that all Americans experience. This is the promise of the American dream, which will someday be enjoyed by all people, black and white.

In the last few lines of stanza 3, the poet issues a warning. There will come a time when no one will cast him aside and when no American will be cast aside because his skin is darker. The poet is issuing a challenge. He is daring anyone who thinks that black people can be cast aside to try and hold him back. He makes clear that when tomorrow arrives and black people are treated as equals, the past cannot then be recalled. Once the dark brother sits at the table, he will not willingly return to the past.

Stanza 4

In stanza 4, the narrator reminds readers that there are additional reasons for giving the black American the equality he deserves. Although the narrator suggests that his beauty provides a reason to end segregation, he is not talking solely about the kind of physical beauty that sets him apart from other people. He is talking about the beauty of existence. There is beauty in life, in living. The poet claims that once white people realize that black people are beautiful, they will be ashamed that they denied black people their equality. This is an optimistic view that all people will regret segregation. The speaker is hopeful that all people will see that each human being deserves life and opportunity.

Stanza 5

The final line of this poem parallels the first line, with only a single word change. The poet is an American. Where the opening line claims that the poet joins his white brothers in singing to celebrate America, in the final lines, the speaker states that he *is* America. The speaker, an individual, suggests that he also represents all Americans and American values. This final line is a declaration of equality, a resounding claim to equal opportunity to achieve the American dream.

THEMES

American Identity

Hughes's poem "I, Too" explores the duality of identity that defined black life in the United States in the 1920s. Black Americans claimed citizenship in a country that denied black citizens the same rights that were provided to white citizens. The poet claims that he is an American and entitled to the same privileges as all other

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY



- Writing a response to a poem written by another poet is a common literary activity undertaken by many poets. Hughes's poem is a response to Walt Whitman's poem, "I Hear America Singing." Take the first line of "I, Too" and write a poem of at least fifteen lines that responds to Hughes's poem. Write a brief paragraph to attach to your poem in which you evaluate what your poem says about your identity as an American.
- Read Hughes's poem aloud to yourself and then read it aloud to an audience of friends or classmates. Ask one or two of your friends to read the poem aloud and listen to their voices, noting the inflections of tone as they read aloud. What do you discover about the poem in each of these readings? Does the poem seem to change with different readings? Prepare a one-page reflection paper in which you discuss what you learn about the poem when you hear it aloud.
- Read Whitman's poem "I Hear America Singing" and compare it to Hughes's poem "I, Too." In an essay, compare such elements as content, theme, tone, syntax, and word choice. In your evaluation of these two works, consider the different approaches of these two male poets. Can these differences be attributed to the historical context of each work or to some other influence?
- Although it is often compared to Whitman's poem, Hughes's poem "I, Too" might also be compared to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech of August 1963. After either reading or listening to King's speech, prepare an oral report in which you discuss the nature of each man's dream for African Americans.
- Research the Harlem Renaissance and write a paper in which you discuss Hughes's literary role in this movement. You may also consider how white Americans responded to the Harlem Renaissance and to Hughes's work, including the role of white patronage in the movement.

Americans, including the right to eat with Americans of any racial or ethnic background. "I, Too" shows the poet trying to establish his identity through the progress of the poem. In the beginning of the poem, the narrator embraces his right to sing America, the same as all other people who sing to celebrate America. Ironically, his identity as an American grows stronger each time he is cast out of American society. Each time he is excluded, the process reinforces his identity as an American, until he is finally strong enough to demand that he be recognized as an American. By the last line of the poem, the narrator no longer sings of America's greatness; he *is* America's greatness. He is ready to claim the identity that has been too-long denied him. He is an American.

Equality & Inequality

In Hughes's poem, the poet shares his hope for a future in which all black people will share equally with white people. The poet looks toward a tomorrow in which black Americans will be invited to sit at the table with white Americans and share in the same dreams and opportunities that white people have enjoyed. Hughes is not only demanding equality for all black people, he is demanding that black people no longer be willing to leave the table just for white people to use. The poet envisions a future when all will sit at the same table, when equality will not be a dream but a reality. In stanza 2, when he promises that he will grow stronger, he is rejecting the world as it exists and claiming a world that will exist tomorrow. The "tomorrow" of the poem is still a dream,



A policeman talks with two young women arrested on trespassing charges at a restaurant in Atlanta in 1962. The women, one white and the other African American, refused to leave when asked by restaurant employees. (AP Images)

but it is representative of the dreams of a better life that caused so many immigrants to leave their homes and come to the United States. It is the promise of a future in which every person will have the opportunity to live the American dream. This is a tomorrow when all human beings will be recognized as beautiful and equally deserving of life. For Hughes, the dream is still just that—a dream. But he does promise that when he is strong enough, no one will dare to deny him what he deserves: the same chance, the same opportunity, the same equality that all white Americans enjoy.

Segregation

In "I, Too" the poet demands that basic rights for all humanity be extended to all people, regardless of skin color. In the second stanza, the poet states that black people are not invited to sit at the same table as their white brothers. Instead, blacks are relegated to the kitchen, where the reader presumes that less important people congregate. The table and the kitchen in the poem are symbolic of the many areas in which blacks and whites are separated. They are separated in restaurants, as the poem suggests, and they are separated on public transportation, in theaters, and in public

restrooms. African Americans also live in separate neighborhoods and are offered lower-paying jobs. They attend segregated schools and are often subject to violent attacks. All of this segregation is represented by the metaphor of the kitchen. He envisions a future in which all people will sit at the same table. Blacks and whites will attend the same schools and live in the same neighborhoods. The poet goes beyond hoping that tomorrow will be better for black Americans; he proclaims that it will be so. His claim that he is also an American is a call for the end of segregation.

STYLE

Free Verse

Free verse is verse with no discernable structure, rhyme scheme, or meter. Free verse allows the poet to fit the poetic line to the content of the poem. The poet is not restricted by the need to shape the poem to a particular meter but can instead create a varied or irregular rhythm and syntax, or sentence structure. Free verse is not the same as blank verse, which also does not use a rhyme scheme. Blank verse almost always adheres to iambic pentameter, while free verse relies on line breaks to create a rhythm.

Free verse was a popular style of poetic composition in the twentieth century and it was not uncommon for poets of Hughs's time to compose in free verse. Whitman, to whom Hughes responds in this poem, is sometimes called the father of free verse. There is no pattern of formal rhyme or meter to "I, Too" and, instead, the irregular line breaks give the poem a songlike rhythm that is most pronounced when the poem is read aloud. Over the course of his career, Hughes was renowned for the musicality of his verse. Many of the poems published alongside "I, Too" in *The Weary Blues* are songs.

Metaphor

A metaphor is an analogy that identifies one object with another and ascribes to one object the qualities of a second object. A metaphor can also be an object used to represent an idea. The metaphor may be simple, as with a single comparison, or extended, where one object is central to the meaning of the work. For example, the table in Hughes's poem represents status, power, and opportunity, which the darker brother is denied by being relegated to the kitchen. The kitchen represents segregation and lack of opportunity. When blacks sit at the same table as whites, true equality will result.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The "New Negro" and the Harlem Renaissance

In March 1925, Howard University professor, Alain Locke coined the term "The New Negro" for a special issue of *Survey Graphic* that emphasized and celebrated the diversity of black life in the United States. Of particular interest to Locke were the many examples of black art, literature, and intellectual thought that heralded a new life for black people and communities. Locke thought that this creative expression was an essential component of a progressive community in which black Americans contributed their talents and would then be recognized as contributing to the formation of one nation. Locke envisioned the "new Negro" as representative of greater self-respect and self-reliance. The new Negro was a black American who contributed to his social and cultural community and for Locke the center of this change was in Harlem.

The influx of southern black Americans into the North included many young and talented writers, intellectuals, actors, musicians, and artists. Many of these talented young black men and women moved into the center of black life in Harlem, the area north of 125th Street in Upper Manhattan. Theater, literature, art, and music that depicted black life flourished. White customers became audiences and patrons, allowing for greater support of black talent. The creation of two major periodicals, *The Crisis*, published by the NAACP and *Opportunity*, published by the National Urban League, provided a forum for the publication of black art, literature, and intellectual opinions. Many black intellectuals thought that the cultural renaissance that was taking place in Harlem would allow blacks to erase many of the false images that had been perpetuated about black life since the end of the Civil War.

The Harlem Renaissance was the first formal literary movement that focused solely on the work of black writers. The literature of this period was a self-conscious exploration of racism and identity, particularly what it meant to be black and an American. This duality of life as an

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **1920s:** An influx of black men and women from the South move north, hoping to create a better life in the industrial cities where there is less segregation. In the 1920s, Harlem, a borough in New York City, becomes the center for black poetry, drama, and music. The decade of artistic growth is known as the Harlem Renaissance. Hughes is a major poet of this movement.

  Today: Many of the dance halls and theaters that were associated with the Harlem Renaissance, including the Savoy Ballroom, have been torn down. In their place are churches, grocery stores, and parking lots. The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem maintains photographs and historical documents associated with the Harlem Renaissance that help to recall the way the city used to appear.

- **1920s:** In 1920, Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) holds its national convention in Harlem. The UNIA is the first effort to unite all individuals of African descent into one nation. In 1921, the UNIA negotiates with the government of Liberia to acquire land that will be used by black emigrants from the United States who want to return to Africa. Negotiations for a proposed African American homeland eventually fail.

  Today: The UNIA continues to exist as a humanitarian and social organization working for equality and to improve the lives of people of African ancestry.

- **1920s:** Between 1920 and 1925, 225 black Americans are known to have been lynched. The U.S. House of Representatives passes three anti-lynching bills between 1920 and 1940, but the Senate does not pass any anti-lynching bills during this period.

  Today: Lynching is extremely rare, though hate crimes, or crimes based on prejudice, still occur. In June 2005, the U.S. Senate apologizes for its failure to ever pass anti-lynching legislation.

- **1920s:** In 1925, Alain Locke, a Rhodes Scholar and Harvard University Ph.D. graduate, publishes an anthology called *The New Negro*. Locke's book examines the diversity of black life in the United States following the influx of southern blacks to large northern cities.

  Today: Where Locke was focused on the intermingling of educated, city, rural, and folk black life at the beginning of the twentieth century, black neighborhoods at the beginning of the twenty-first century are more ethnically diverse. In the last decade of the twentieth century, a large influx of African Caribbean immigrants settle in northern cities. In some large cities, the number of Caribbean blacks account for 25 percent or more of the black population.

- **1920s:** On August 8, 1925, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), which claims anywhere from three to five million members in the 1920s, marches down Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D.C. More than forty thousand members of the KKK show up to march in support of white supremacy.

  Today: Though far less extensive than it once was, the KKK remains active in the United States and still holds events, including rallies at Gettysburg National Military Park in Pennsylvania; Antietam National Battlefield near Sharpsburg, Maryland; and Harpers Ferry National Historical Park in West Virginia. At these rallies Klansmen are protected by the U.S. Park Police on the basis of the First Amendment's grant of freedom of speech. The KKK closely guards membership information, but it is known that Klan membership has dropped since the 1980s and is believed to consist of fewer than six thousand.

American and as a black American was a common theme of writers during the Harlem Reassurance, as it is in Hughes's poem "I, Too." The speaker evokes the image of two brothers, one white and one black. The dark brother is excluded from the life of the white brother, but the speaker in the poem prophesies that the world is changing and that eventually the dark brother will be equally recognized as an American. Hughes's effort to create two lives within his poem is one of the defining characteristics of the Harlem Renaissance.

Hughes was a principal writer of this period. His writing helped to illuminate the lives of ordinary black citizens and corrected distorted images of African Americans as stereotypical figures in literature and entertainment. The Harlem Renaissance ended shortly after the stock market crash of 1929, but Hughes's contributions to the Harlem Renaissance help to illustrate the important impact of black artists in American society.

Injustice, Inequity, and Segregation in the United States

The Harlem Renaissance was a result of a great migration of southern blacks to the northern United States. The reasons for this migration were varied. In some cases, African Americans fled to the North because there were greater economic opportunities. These economic opportunities were a result of changes in immigration laws in 1921 and 1924 that severely limited the number of new immigrants allowed into the United States. New immigrants had been a continuing source of cheap labor. With that resource severely limited, northern factories and businesses looked to the southern states for a source of cheap labor. Northern employers needed labor that was close at hand, and southern blacks needed jobs and a place to live in relative safety. Many of these new black migrants were looking for better jobs, housing, and education. In the early twentieth century the American South was a place that offered few opportunities for African Americans. As Hughes noted in "I, Too," there were two separate Americas for black and white citizens. While the end of the Civil War promised freedom to slaves, the end of slavery did not bring freedom from discrimination, segregation, or racial violence.

After Civil War Reconstruction ended in 1876, many southern states began to create laws, called Jim Crow laws, that segregated African Americans. Sharecropping practices prevented black farmers from owning their own land, while separate school systems kept black children from receiving an education equal to that received by white children. Blacks and whites lived in separate neighborhoods and ate at separate restaurants; they also used separate public drinking fountains and bathrooms. Violence, including lynching, prevented many African Americans from taking action against Jim Crow laws. The emergence of the second Ku Klux Klan (KKK) in the early 1920s (the first KKK had been formed in 1865 by a group of Confederate army veterans) added to the atmosphere of hatred and fear directed against blacks. There was little justice for African Americans in the South, who rarely protested against this discrimination. Even though many black Americans moved north to escape hostility, the North was not free of racial violence. The same fear of outsiders and the competition for jobs that had led to stricter immigration policies in the early 1920s also led to several race riots in northern cities. The KKK was active in the North as well as in the South. In spite of encountering some of the same problems in the North that they had endured in the South, many southern black Americans found greater freedom and less oppression in the northern cities.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

When Hughes's first book of poetry, *The Weary Blues*, was published in 1926, both the author and his work received a great deal more attention than would be customary for either a young black poet or first book of poetry. In part, the extra attention was due to Hughes winning a 1925 poetry prize sponsored by *Opportunity* magazine for the title poem, "The Weary Blues." The same poem also won a prize offered by *Crisis* magazine. Even more important than these two prizes was the introduction to *The Weary Blues*, written by Carl Van Vechten, an important critic for the *New York Times* and patron of the Harlem Renaissance. Thus, critics at nearly forty newspapers and magazines published reviews of *The Weary Blues*.

Many of these reviews claim that Hughes is "destined to be one of the great poets of his race," in the words of Ruth Peiter, writing for the *Toledo Times* Sunday magazine. Peiter notes that Hughes's poems invoke "many moods,"

which reflect Hughes's experiences from extensive traveling. Among the varied poems in this first collection are those that "are like a cry from the heart of his race." In his review for the *New York Herald Tribune Books*, critic Du Bose Heyward concurs with other critics, who envision a great future for Hughes. According to Heyward, Hughes captures the rhythms, the mood, and the very essence of jazz in his poetry.

Hughes's ability to turn jazz into poetry is a talent that Corinne Meaux notes in her review, published in the *New York Amsterdam News*, of *The Weary Blues*. Meaux writes that each poem in Hughes's first collection of poetry is like "a brilliant splotch among the riot of colors that blend themselves into Negro life in America." Meaux suggests that Hughes is able to capture Harlem's night life in "jazzy poetry throbbing with syncopated rhythm." Not all reviews in Hughes's day were glowing, however. Writing in the *Boston Transcript*, a critic known only by his or her initials, F. B. B., states that the prize-winning poem, "The Weary Blues" contains the "dominant note that is a mark of the thinking black man, i.e., a touch of tragedy blended with cynicism and a heart tearing melancholy." According to F. B. B., "only a Negro poet can write on mundane subjects and fill his readers with a sense of racial rhythm and melody." While F. B. B. is enthusiastic about the title poem, the critic asserts that "much of the poetry within the volume is crude." "I, Too," according to F. B. B., "strikes a warning note" about what might happen "when the great black tide of American Negroes" surge into "present-day higher civilization." F. B. B. ends by comparing Hughes to Paul Laurence Dunbar, the first African American poet to gain national prominence, at the end of the nineteenth century.

Despite the reservations of some critics like F. B. B., the critics who foresaw future success for Hughes proved to be prophetic. In celebration of what would have been Hughes's one-hundredth birthday in February 2002, Sue Corbett, writing for the *Knight Ridder/Tribune News Service*, states that "it is impossible to underestimate the lasting impact of Langston Hughes' work on American letters." In her article, "Langston Hughes: The Gentle Giant of the Harlem Renaissance," Corbett claims that Hughes "brought the literary excellence of black writers to the attention of the world." As Stephen Kinzer notes in his *New York Times* tribute to Hughes, "For a Poet, Centennial Appreciation," at the centennial celebration of the poet's birth, Hughes was "the first African-American to succeed in making his living as a creative writer and the first to have a literary society devoted to studying his life and work." The Langston Hughes Society was founded in 1981. The following year, in 1982, the University of Missouri Press began publishing *The Langston Hughes Review*, a journal devoted to the study of Hughes's work.

CRITICISM

Sheri Metzger Karmiol

Karmiol has a doctorate in English Renaissance literature. She teaches literature and drama at the University of New Mexico, and she is also a professional writer and the author of several reference texts on poetry and drama. In this essay, Karmiol discusses the role of poetry, particularly poems like "I, Too," in revealing truth and combating injustice and racism.

Poetry offers readers a multifaceted opportunity to experience the world in a different way. Poetry can create beauty. It can also be witty and entertaining, sometimes even comedic. But perhaps poetry's most important functions are to educate readers about injustice and to rouse readers to actions that can change the world. On occasion, poetry illuminates what is hidden, ignored, or just so distasteful that it is buried in the reader's unconscious mind. Throughout much of the twentieth century, racism was one of those topics that too few people discussed and that far too many people tolerated. Poetry is one tool that can lead to discussions about racism, and perhaps, to change. In his poetry, Langston Hughes is able to depict reality in such a way that readers emerge from their reading of his poetry with knowledge about a world they may not have directly experienced in their lives.

A quick and superficial reading of Hughes's "I, Too" leaves readers with the impression that the poet foresees a time when all Americans will sit together around a table, happy to be at last joined together in a nation in which white and black coexist harmoniously. The truth of the poem is more complex than this and requires that readers carefully consider Hughes's words. They reveal a deeper truth and a warning: once the black narrator has grown strong, whites will no longer dare to exclude him. The joining



WHEN, AT THE END OF 'I, TOO,' BLACK AND WHITE PEOPLE SIT TOGETHER AT THE TABLE, IT IS IN THE CREATED WORLD OF THE POET, ONE THAT HE INSISTS WILL ALIGN WITH REALITY."

of black and white people envisioned in the poem is not a willing union, but one that occurs because black Americans will no longer tolerate segregation.

James Finn Cotter claims in his essay "The Truth of Poetry," published in *The Hudson Review*, that "the truth of poetry is not in reciting facts but in creating veracity." Poetry is not autocratic; rather it must create a reality that readers can locate in the images that the poet produces. This production of reality is even more important for poetry that seeks to expose injustice. Cotter explains that a poem must "be true to itself." A poem must be honest enough to "convince me and to capture my attention with its thought, emotion, imagery, and language." An honest poem leaves the reader feeling changed in some way, having experienced an awakening. An important function of poetry, according to Cotter, is to remind readers of "the injustices and stupidities of small-minded men," who seek to keep other men in their "place." Poetry, then, does more than offer truth; it illuminates injustice and impeaches those who continue to endorse discrimination. This is what Hughes accomplishes in his image of two separate tables, one table defined by privilege and one table defined by injustice. Hughes is not satisfied to know his "place" and promises a fight when he is strong enough to seize what is rightfully his. "I, Too" reveals the truth about ending segregation—that joining together at one table would not be easy, but it would be deserved, as the last line of the poem promises.

When Hughes wrote "I, Too" in the 1920s the world was a long way from ending segregation, but the poet was able to imagine the day when that change would come. In Robert W. Blake's 1990 essay "Poets on Poetry: Writing and the Reconstruction of Reality," published in the *English Journal*, he claims that when a poet creates poetry, he or she "reconstructs

WHAT DO I READ NEXT?



- *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927) is Hughes's second collection of poetry. The central subject is Harlem's lower class. Hughes also includes several ballads.
- *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* (1995) includes 860 poems written by Hughes during his career. The poems are arranged chronologically.
- *The Ways of White Folks* (1934) is a collection of short stories that Hughes wrote after he noted similarities between his writing and that of D. H. Lawrence.
- In *Race, Writing, and Difference* (1985) Henry Louis Gates compiles a number of essays that discuss the role of race in literature.
- Nikki Giovanni's *Racism 101* (1985) is a collection of essays in which Giovanni, a contemporary black poet, writes about what it means to be a black American and how she feels about her experiences with race and racism.
- Hughes wrote two autobiographies, *The Big Sea: An Autobiography* (1940, reissued in 1993) and *I Wonder as I Wander: An Autobiographical Journey* (1956, reissued in 1993). Both of Hughes's autobiographies document the world in which he lived and can help readers better understand how that world influenced his writings.
- *Shadowed Dreams: Women's Poetry of the Harlem Renaissance* (2006), edited by Maureen Honey, is an anthology of women's poetry composed between 1919 and 1939. The poems in this anthology are divided into four sections—Protest, Heritage, Love and Passion, and Nature. Although most readers will find that the poets' names are unfamiliar, their poems complement Hughes's poetry, as these women poets also focus on inequality and lack of opportunity.

reality." The poet uses his or her imagination to create a new reality for the reader. The hope and expectation is that eventually the imagined reality will become a new reality. This is also what Percy Bysshe Shelley argues in *A Defense of Poetry*, first published in 1840, when he claims that poetry does not simply reflect the world, it changes the world. Poetry makes things happen. When Hughes weaves his narrative about merging two separate Americas, one for blacks and one for whites, he is envisioning a future changed and a society created with equality for both races. When, at the end of "I, Too," black and white people sit together at the table, it is in the created world of the poet, one that he insists will align with reality. The creation of a new world is what Shelley emphasizes when he writes of the social importance of poetry, which plays upon the subconscious and thus can transcend ideology and can create "anew the universe," a universe without unjust laws. This is because, for Shelley, poets "are the institutors of laws, and the founders of civil society." Poetry is more than beauty, much more than just words; it is useful and beneficial to society because it removes distinctions like class, gender, and by extension, race. According to Shelley, a person must possess the ability to imagine the pain of others, to "put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own." Poetry allows readers to feel the pain of the poet— in this case, to experience the anguish of being excluded from the same world in which whites are given privilege and blacks are denied the same opportunities to succeed.

Poetry provides an opportunity for the reader to imagine another world. Hughes creates that kind of opportunity when he allows readers to imagine the pain of being excluded and then to see a tomorrow in which the poet will be included. Shelley claims that for a "man, to be greatly good, [he] must imagine intensely and comprehensively." The poet's ability, as defined by Shelley, is not only to behold "intensely the present at it is," or as it should be, according to moral laws, but to hold forth the promise of "the future in the present." The poet allows readers to envision a better world, in which an unjust world can be changed, just as Hughes does in "I, Too." Because selfish men are reluctant to change unjust laws, poetry is, as Shelley claims, "never more to be desired than at periods" when "an excess of selfish and calculating principle" exceeds the laws of human nature. It is the poet who fulfills the need for change by creating poetry that illuminates the injustice of the world and the need for a better world. The poet, then, is the bridge from inhumanity to humanity.

The poet's ability to use his art to expose the truth is perhaps his greatest obligation. Poetry is in the unique position of being able to tell the truth, even when the truth might be unpleasant or even dangerous. Not all readers take the time to understand the nuances of poetry; therefore, the poet is sometimes able to cleverly disguise meaning, using the language of poetry. The meaning can be confused and explained away as simply a poem misunderstood. For example, Andrew Marvell did this in his poem, "An Horatian Ode upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland." Because the ode is a poetic form used to celebrate greatness, it is not immediately clear to the reader that Marvell is being sarcastic in his faint praise of Oliver Cromwell, Lord Protector of the Commonwealth. The Horatian ode, in particular, is reserved for praising and honoring a great man. However, in this ode Marvell compares Cromwell to Caesar, who was assassinated as a tyrant. Marvell's depiction of the deposed King Charles I, as he meets his death on the scaffold, is one of noble kingship. Cromwell might have been confused about whether Marvell was praising him, but scholars who dissect the poem know that Marvell was doing quite the opposite. Since Marvell did not lose his head over his ode, presumably Cromwell did not probe the poem's truth too closely. In his essay, Blake argues that "poetry is for telling people what they hadn't noticed or thought about before." Poetry brings injustice into public view and exposes the inequities of human existence. Whether in exposing a tyrant for the murder of a king or in exposing prejudice, poets use words, says Blake, to "reveal what people and living creatures are really like." Readers can see the truth and the injustice in Hughes's words. Therefore they can also envision the need to change the world.

In *The Defence of Poesy*, sixteenth-century poet Sir Philip Sidney defends the work of poets to the Puritan writer Stephen Gosson who, in his 1579 text *Schoole of Abuse*, argues that poetry is a waste of time, that it is composed of lies, and that it teaches sinful practices. Sidney's response to these claims argues that the role of literature in a civilized society is to educate and to inspire people to undertake ethical and virtuous actions.

That is also the hope four hundred years later. Hughes wrote "I, Too" after being denied several opportunities in Genoa, Italy, to board ships bound for the United States. White crews did not want to work with a black man. "I, Too" is a testimony to the need for change, for all humankind to recognize the rights of others. The best way to comprehend this need for change is to visualize a world in which equality is denied. In an essay for the *English Journal* that argues for the importance of reading modern poetry, Virginia M. Schauble suggests that poetry "can actually be a voice of rare clarity." Poetry allows readers to experience a world they have never known, a world in which people are oppressed and denied basic human rights. In her essay, "Reading American Modernist Poetry with High-School Seniors," Schauble points out that poetry's value "is not merely aesthetic"; instead, poetry "speaks a word counter to cultural expectations." It forces readers to think about difference and about changing the world. Poetry creates change and, as Sidney argued so many centuries earlier, it urges readers to ethical actions.

Poetry has an important role in the modern world, just as it did in the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries when Sidney and Shelley each argued so eloquently for its worth in their worlds, which were also filled with conflict and injustice. Poetry can teach readers about truth, but it can also teach readers about the difference between right and wrong. Poetry can create the expectation of change and the desire to make that change real. Most importantly, poetry is a way to learn the truth about the world we live in. "I, Too" both reveals injustice and offers the promise of change. As such, the poem inspired black readers in Hughes's day to anticipate the day when they too would join their brethren at the American table. For those who endorsed segregation, it issued a warning that they dare not resist this change.

Source: Sheri Metzger Karmiol, Critical Essay on "I Too," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2009.

Jeff Westover

In the following excerpt, Westover analyzes Hughes's struggle with national identity, as evidenced in such poems as "I, Too."

The concept of America is multifaceted in the work of Langston Hughes. In one respect, America's political self-definitions provide the poet with the basis for challenging the status quo and

"THE POLITICAL INFLECTIONS OF HUGHES' POETIC PERSONAE, THE COMMUNAL 'I' AND 'WE' THAT HE ARTICULATES IN VARIOUS WAYS, REVEAL THE CONFLICT AND INJUSTICES OF AMERICAN HISTORY."

demanding change from the government that supports it. As James Presley puts it, "for Hughes the American Dream . . . is the *raison d'être* of this nation" (380). When writing from this perspective, Hughes draws on the ideas behind the Declaration of Independence, the American Revolution, and the Bill of Rights in order to criticize racial injustice in both domestic and international arenas. Lloyd Brown makes this argument, writing that

> the majority culture's dream of a progressive society based on individual fulfillment and social harmony . . . has created its own inevitable legacy—that is, the Black American Dream of realizing those dreams and ideals that have been written down for white folks. (17)

Brown develops this argument in the context of his discussion of "Harlem" and other "Dream-poems" by Hughes, but it applies to many others as well. In a similar vein, Donald B. Gibson writes that "Hughes's commitment to the American ideal was deep . . . and abiding. He held on to it despite his acute awareness of the inequities of democracy, and he seemed to feel that in time justice would prevail, that the promises of the dream would be fulfilled. His early poem "I, Too" (*The Weary Blues*, 1926) is testimony to his faith" (45). Finally, as Anthony Dawahare argues, in "Let America Be America Again," "the true 'America' of the future will embody Jeffersonian political ideals: it will be a nation of, by, and for 'the people,' based on the notion of inalienable rights, and free from tyranny" (34).

From another perspective that Hughes also sometimes adopts, however, the United States is a place to be deeply criticized, if not rejected altogether. Hughes expresses his ambivalent attitudes toward his country through the repeated motifs of the Middle Passage, slavery, African American culture, and a diasporan "pan-Africanism."

Hughes' work reveals an ongoing conflict between Africa-centered and African-American ideals. As Adam Lively points out, this conflict reflects the immediate context of the period in which Hughes began to write. "The 1920s," he observes, "saw the birth of the idea of blacks as the inside outsiders of modern life" (7). In line with this idea, the poet's reflections on his country and its history are double-tongued, exemplifying the double consciousness W. E. B. Du Bois regarded as constitutive of African-American experience in general. As Raymond Smith puts it, Hughes "could affirm with equal assurance his two credos of identity: 'I am a Negro' and 'I, Too, Sing America.' But while affirming these polar commitments, Hughes was alienated from both of them. As a black man, he was aware that his race had never been granted full participation in the American dream" (270). The political inflections of Hughes' poetic personae, the communal "I" and "we" that he articulates in various ways, reveal the conflict and injustices of American history. In this essay, I reflect upon the fact that Hughes' poetic configurations of "I" and "we" sometimes also refer to a diasporan black community, rather than to the imagined community of the United States, a fact which indicates the complex nature of his national consciousness. In particular, I suggest that it is from his dual vantage as a U.S. citizen and a member of the African diaspora that Hughes criticizes the failures of American democracy and challenges the United States to live up to its founding dream of freedom.

Paul Gilroy's emphasis in *The Black Atlantic* on the concept of double consciousness provides the point of departure for my analysis of Hughes' writing. Through his concept of a continuum of black culture on both sides of the Atlantic, he extends the idea of double consciousness to the entire African diaspora, arguing that modern blacks simultaneously live both inside and outside the West. For Gilroy, the promise of such dual existence lies in its dialectical potential, for along with the alienation attendant upon the forced displacements of slavery, this habitation in two worlds gives rise to a valuable new perspective:

> What was initially felt to be a curse—the curse of homelessness or the curse of forced exile—gets repossessed. It becomes affirmed and is reconstructed as the basis of a privileged standpoint from which certain useful and critical perceptions about the modern world become more likely. (111)

Gilroy's suggestive theorization of black modernity offers a model of double consciousness that points in the different directions of Africa and America at once. In addition, while he persuasively argues on behalf of the African diaspora as a paradigm for black cultural analysis, he also acknowledges the fictionality of such a model, recognizing the conflicts within its widely dispersed communities. This model is useful for understanding Hughes, whose poetry both evokes the African diaspora as a cultural ideal and registers the discrepancies between that ideal and the reality of diasporan disunity. Because Hughes defines the category of the national through recourse to the ideas of Africa and an African diaspora, I focus on his representations of Africa in order to show how they inform, and even constitute, his conceptions of the United States and his place within it. Africa is a necessary term in Hughes' figurations of the nation, and conversely, the category of the nation mediates his relationship to Africa . . . .

Hughes traveled to Africa as a young seaman in 1923 and gained some sense of its colonial domination *and* of his status as an outsider there. Hughes' story of his encounter with Africans reflects his awareness of Marcus Garvey and his effort to "unify the black world, and free and exalt Africa" (*Big Sea* 102). In other words, he experienced his first direct contact with Africa within the context of a diasporan consciousness. In the first volume of his autobiography, *The Big Sea*, Hughes demonstrates the far from idyllic character of that initial interaction, as well as the discrepancy between, on the one hand, the vision that Garvey championed and, on the other, the disunity between black Africans and lighter skinned people of African descent:

> "Our problems in America are very much like yours," I told the Africans, "especially in the South. I am a Negro, too."
>
> But they only laughed at me and shook their heads and said:
>
> "You, white man! You, white man!"
>
> It was the only place in the world where I've ever been called a white man. They looked at my copper-brown skin and straight black hair—like my grandmother's Indian hair, except a little curly—and they said: "You—white man." (102–103)

Hughes goes on to point out that one of the Africans, a Kru from Liberia "who had seen

many American Negroes, of various shades and colors, and knew much of America," explained their response to him:

> "Here . . . on the West Coast, there are not many colored people—people of mixed blood—and those foreign colored men who are here come mostly as missionaries, to teach us something, since they think we know nothing. Or they come from the West Indies, as clerks and administrators in the colonial governments, to help carry out the white man's laws. So the Africans call them all *white* men."
>
> "But I am not white," I said.
>
> "You are not black either," the Kru man said simply. "There is a man of my color." And he pointed to George, the pantryman, who protested loudly.
>
> "Don't point at me," George said. "I'm from Lexington, Kentucky, U.S.A. And no African blood, nowhere."
>
> "You black," said the Kru man. (*The Big Sea* 103)

As Rampersad hints, this and other stories of Hughes' experiences in and offshore Africa reflect the poet's concomitant desire for and alienation from it as his historic motherland. "That he would want to be considered black," Rampersad writes, "struck the Africans as perverse, perhaps even subtle mockery. In vain he protested that he was not white" (1: 78). Hughes' prose account of these interactions with Africans plainly shows the lack of unity between Africans and colored peoples of African descent, but his poems often work against this lack by asserting the reality of a unified African diaspora. This assertion is Hughes' poetic effort to project an imagined community that is at once American and not-American. This metaphorical "dual citizenship" corresponds to Gilroy's redefinition of Du Bois's double consciousness as a uniquely black perspective on the nature of modernity (111).

As Rampersad observes, the Africans' rejection of Hughes as a fellow black "stirred [him] to assert the unity of blacks everywhere, as in his little poem 'Brothers': 'We are related—you and I. / You from the West Indies, / I from Kentucky.' And both were related to Africa." Rampersad characterizes the contradictions between Hughes' desire for Africa and his exclusion from it as "anxiety." I am arguing that this anxiety has both a psychological and sociological dimension to it, and Hughes not only suffers from this anxiety but also sublimates it in the texts of many of his poems. According to Rampersad, for example, Hughes' "anxiety over Africa also inspired" "My People," which was first entitled "Poem" (1: 78):

> The night is beautiful
> So the faces of my people.
>
> The stars are beautiful,
> So the eyes of my people.
>
> Beautiful, also, is the sun.
> Beautiful, also, are the souls of my people.
> (*Collected Poems* 36)

Rampersad's characterization of Hughes' feelings about Africa as "anxiety" points to the political and cultural disunity of the African diaspora at the time such poems were composed. Hughes' relationship to the "we" this poem articulates is a vexed one, for it includes both yearning and alienation. The repeated invocation of "my people" in the poem has two contrasting aspects. On the one hand, the repetition attests to the "anxiety" Rampersad describes, for the poem's insistence on the speaker's membership in the "family of Africa"—understated and gracious though it is—points to a lingering fear that the people of Africa are not really "his" at all. The poet's desire for Africa reflects his corresponding alienation from the United States, which fails to function for him as a definitive homeland. As Kenneth W. Warren puts it, "To be cognizant of oneself as a diasporan subject is always to be aware of oneself no matter where one is, as from elsewhere, in the process of making a not quite legitimate appeal to be considered as if one were from there" (400–1).

On the other hand, Hughes' articulation of "my people" and a sometimes national, sometimes international "we" in a range of poems (including not only "My People" but also "Our Land," "Afraid," "Poem to a Dead Soldier," "Fog," "Prelude to Our Age," "Children's Rhymes," and "A Ballad of Negro History") call that community into being, performing it into existence by constituting the poet's audience as a common body. As a speech act, the poem imagines the diaspora as a viable community, celebrating it as a realistic as well as desirable goal. It presents an alternatively imagined community that offers a sense of belonging, heritage, and pride to African Americans in general. In contrast, in "Afro-American Fragment" Hughes variously evokes communities of black *Americans* through the plural pronouns *we* and *us* and through his remarks to a generalized *you* in such poems as "Black Dancers," "How Thin a Blanket," "Vagabonds,"

and possibly "Youth," "Walkers with the Dawn," and "Being Old."

Hughes' autobiographical accounts of his reception in Africa and of his fellow seamen's economic deception of native Africans show that his poems praising Africa as the symbol of black unity were deliberate fictions (*The Big Sea* 108–109). His response may be read as a psychological compensation for the alienation from Africans he must have felt but carefully avoids recording in his autobiography. At the same time, however, the many poems that praise Africa or that imagine links between America and Africa may be interpreted in political terms as the expression of a utopian hope for genuine diasporan unity . . . .

Source: Jeff Westover, "Fragmentation and Diaspora in the Work of Langston Hughes," in *Callaloo*, Vol. 25, No. 4, Autumn 2002, pp. 1207–23.

Robert E. Hemenway

In the following excerpt, Hemenway discusses the inspiration for Hughes's poetry and his lack of early success as a writer.

There is no more enigmatic figure in black letters than James Langston Hughes, despite his life-long effort to appear as simple and transparent as his famous urban philosopher, Jesse B. Semple.

Hughes was both radical and conservative, open and closed, a man who constructed an adult personality blending innocent wonder at the world, studied passivity, a profound sense of personal privacy, and a single-minded commitment to a literary career. He was capable of complete sincerity while publishing willful autobiographical falsehoods. A writer who once threw away his books, he loved words, but refused to seek language for his most personal experiences.

Hughes always remained something of a mystery, even to his closest friends. A private door lay just beneath the surface marked "DO NOT ENTER." He retreated there often to fulfill his talent, but he never shared that interior apartment with others. A high school friend heard him read his poems and wrote Hughes: "I like you on that platform, that you which you had never shown us before. You wear a mask so that you can keep that you for work."

The best glimpse of this inner space may come not from poetry, but from psychosomatic illness—Hughes's periodic physical breakdowns at moments of personal crisis. As revealing as these illnesses are, they only give shape to the offstage turmoil. His deepest emotions never reached center stage in anything other than symbolic form.



THE UNHAPPINESS OF CHILDHOOD PRODUCED A RESERVOIR OF EMOTION THAT FLOWED FREELY TO HIS TALENT, WITH THE RESULT THAT HUGHES ACHIEVED SUCCESS AT A VERY YOUNG AGE."

Hughes was the most important black poet in the world for most of his life, primarily because at the same time he protected what was within, he could project himself into the feelings of others; his enormous empathy empowered him to articulate people's emotions, especially those inarticulate in the heroism of survival.

As Arnold Rampersad authoritatively argues, in this first volume of a two volume biography, Hughes redefined the standards for poetry and prose written by black authors. He became a revered, almost saintly figure, helpful to young writers, patient and generous to a fault, willing to give his name to any cause which would help the race. Rampersad believes that one source of Hughes's inspiration was a sense of humility, a feeling that his own art was inferior to the collective artistry of black religion and black music. Having lived much of his early life "outside the culture he worshipped," Hughes regretted that "so much of his life had been spent away from consistent, normal involvement with the black masses whose affection and regard he craved." . . .

Hughes had an unhappy childhood, poverty-stricken and virtually abandoned by both his parents, and some of Rampersad's best insights into the private Hughes grow from his imaginative recreation of that boyhood. From his first sentence (written with a stylistic grace characteristic of the entire volume)—"In some respects he grew up a motherless and a fatherless child, who never forgot the hurts of his childhood"—Rampersad brings light to what Hughes held tightly within. Rampersad sees Hughes with "an unappeased hunger" for affection that led to a "chronic unwillingness to

vent anger," a "fundamental urge . . . toward passivity," and a "practiced humility."

The unhappiness of childhood produced a reservoir of emotion that flowed freely to his talent, with the result that Hughes achieved success at a very young age. Rampersad reminds us of just how many "great" Hughes poems—those canonized for decades, such as "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," or "Mother To Son"—were written while he was still a teenager. These poems were widely published in the black community, but it wasn't until the Harlem Renaissance that Hughes attracted notice in the white world as well. Eighteen days after Carl Van Vechten offered to help Hughes place his poetry, *The Weary Blues* was accepted by Knopf. Hughes was 23 years old, only months away from enrolling as a college freshman.

That so much of Hughes's best poetry was inspired by the hurts of his youth lends credence to Rampersad's assertion that "Langston understood that he needed to be unhappy to write good verse." Rampersad uses this thought as a motif. In 1935, Hughes sought to rejuvenate his verse. Rampersad speculates that "he also knew from bitter experience what he had to do immediately. He needed to retreat; he also needed to feel, like broken bones in his flesh, the twinned pains of isolation and poverty, the forces that shaped his life and his art." I believe Rampersad is correct in this analysis, but some might argue that it is a romantic view of the poet. Certainly the notion that poverty was his inspiration was an idea Hughes resisted. He grew increasingly frustrated by his poverty, and spent most of his life trying to achieve a financial success. One of Rampersad's most revealing reports is the jealousy that Hughes, the "Dean" of Afro-American letters, felt about the royalties which rolled in following *Native Son*'s selection as a Book of the Month. What is admirable here is that Rampersad can see through Hughes's often expressed desire to make money as a writer. Behind that private door, Hughes really did see himself as a romantic figure, a lonely poet who transcended material needs. For example, roaming the Soviet Union as a solitary wanderer, Hughes saw himself fulfilling a romantic vision: "Most of my life from childhood on has been spent moving, traveling, changing places, knowing people in one school, in one town or in one group, or on one ship a little while, but soon never seeing most of them again."

Whatever the ambivalence of his hopes, Hughes's public career had a lack of commercial success. His second volume, *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, was a better collection, but a commercial failure, partly because of its title. *All* the Hughes books published prior to 1941 were commercial failures, despite his talent for self-publicity, willingness to personally market them, and a generally positive critical reception. One of the reasons may be Hughes's desire to market his books in the black community at a time when the economy was not structured to support such a market. The one public aspect of Hughes's career which Rampersad leaves for future scholars is the *phenomenon* of Langston Hughes as a poet, the *commodity* that his work became.

By the 1930s, Hughes had achieved a different kind of public fame as a radical, a vociferous voice in defense of the Scottsboro Boys, a communist sympathizer who was active in the John Reed Club and president of the League of Struggle for Negro Rights, an organization supported by the American Communist Party. He spent a year in Russia praising the Bolshevik Revolution for its lack of racial prejudice, and wrote a number of poems that he would later try to excuse, if not repudiate. One of them, "Good Bye Christ," would lead to the evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson breaking up a book signing party for *The Big Sea* a decade after the poem was written.

Rampersad makes the argument that Hughes's career as a radical probably diminished his talent, and it seems an assertion supported by the quality of Hughes's work in the thirties, even if one avoids the label, "proletarian doggerel," that his biographer applies to some of his efforts. The conclusion I draw is that Hughes's radicalism was always a bit superficial, tied to the Left's support for black equality, and grounded in Hughes's love for humanity, particularly for the underdog. One might like to know more about the intellectual rationale, the *ideology* for his leftist politics, but Hughes was not about to supply it. He had a hatred of injustice and an instinctive identification with the proletariat, but he avoided Marxism as an intellectual regimen. Rampersad reports Hughes's own words, written after the German-Soviet Non-aggression Pact and the end of the Spanish Civil War, suggesting that radical poetry may have been only a career path: "To Noel Sullivan, Hughes presented himself, in a remarkable confession, as

using his influence with the left only to ease his way through the Depression. Since poverty seemed to be his lot, 'the only thing I can do is to string along with the Left until maybe someday all of us poor folks will get enough to eat, including rent, gas, light and water.'"

Rampersad generally emphasizes the public Hughes of the radical years, both because Hughes did not communicate his ideology, and also because he acted out his political instincts. Rampersad describes Hughes's presidency of the League of Struggle for Negro Rights—"improbably, Hughes at some point became president of the league"—but Hughes left no evidence which would describe the intellectual commitments that led to such a position. Rampersad's belief is that Hughes's politics were based on human beings in need rather than a dialectical sense of history; it is a conclusion supported by Hughes's life long suspicion of intellectual solutions to human problems. The ideological underpinnings of such a poem as "Put one more 's' in the USA / and make it Soviet," did not play a large part in Hughes's life. He was not comfortable with abstract ideas (Alberta Bontemps claimed he almost never read a book), and although clearly something in Leftist ideology struck a deep chord in the private self, his public actions were seldom given an intellectual defense. It may have been that the Left offered a version of the collectivity, the sense of community, that Hughes saw in black religion and music . . . .

Source: Robert E. Hemenway, "Most Public of Poets, Most Private of Men," in *Callaloo*, No. 36, Summer 1988, pp. 636–42.

John W. Parker

In the following essay, Parker discusses Hughes's hope for an egalitarian American future in his poem "I, Too."

Carl Van Vechten once referred to Langston Hughes as the "Negro Poet Laureate," and in his introduction to the young poet's first book of poems, *The Weary Blues*, confessed that he could recall no other person whatsoever who, at the age of twenty-three, had enjoyed so picturesque and so rambling an experience. Hughes's facility in interpreting feelingly and understandingly to themselves and to others the emotional heights and depths of the Negro people has increasingly lengthened his shadow as a man of letters and fastened him unmistakably upon the popular imagination of the American people. Since the publication in 1921 of the poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," his first selection to attract wide attention, Hughes has succeeded as poet, fictionist, essayist, dramatist, and lecturer; and many of his poems and some of his articles and stories have been translated into German, French, Spanish, Russian, Chinese, Japanese, and Dutch.

> **"HUGHES HAS STORED NO HATE IN HIS SOUL, NOR HAS HE DESCENDED TO THE LEVEL OF THE PROPAGANDIST."**

Hughes made his appearance upon the literary scene amid the developments which followed in the wake of World War I and witnessed the impact of the depression upon American life and letters. One result of the war was that many Negroes whose experiences had been limited to their own back yards were suddenly snatched up and transported to foreign shores where they witnessed new modes of thinking and of living; and many others left behind straightway forsook the southern cotton fields for the industrial centers of the North and West. To the complex urban problems encountered, many fell prey as flies that seek out the beautiful only to find sure death.

A corresponding change in Negro literature dates from around the 1920's, when a movement popularly known as the "Negro Literary Renaissance" got under way; for one thing, it amounted to a new awakening on the part of the younger Negro writers themselves; for another, a greater spirit of acceptance on the part of the American whites. Langston Hughes became perhaps the most representative exponent of the new spirit in Negro literature.

Three themes have for the most part engaged Hughes's attention: the primitivistic naturalism of the Harlem dweller, the propagandistic left-wing writing in support of a more articulate proletarian group, and the literature of protest against the social and economic maladjustments of the Negro people. That Harlem should have been the basis of much that Hughes wrote may be

explained by the fact that, far more than any other single spot, here were the foreign-born blacks, the carefree Negro from the South, the disappointed Negro veteran back from the war, in fact, the "melting pot" of Negro culture. Life, at least much of it, was characterized by a spirit of abandon, and it was this emphasis upon the hectic, the coarse, and the sensational that brought Hughes in for many a critical lashing. When in his *Shakespeare in Harlem*, Hughes returned to the Harlem theme, Owen Dodson charged that he was "backing into the future looking at the past."

The emphasis of the Negro renaissance came to an end with the change of the decade, and during the years immediately following Hughes devoted much of his effort to a rapidly expanding proletarian movement as is evidenced by such selections as *The Ways of White Folks* (1934), *A New Song* (1938), and *Front Porch* (1939). Likewise, the self-conscious revolt against the American scheme of things is a theme to which the poet recurs. Color prejudice, segregation and discrimination, in fact, the totality of the black man's marginal existence in American life is implied in four lines from *Fields of Wonder:*

> Four walls can shelter
> So much sorrow,
> Garnered from yesterday
> And held for tomorrow!

The events of the past two decades have been accompanied by a depressing sense of futility and a loss of faith. Security has seemed nowhere. Today's youth have seen more struggle and chaos and groping in the darkness than any generation of youth in the entire span of our national history. Nor has Hughes escaped the impact of this upheaval; but, while he has been pre-eminently a man of the present, he has maintained a healthful view of the future. The night and the gloom and the darkness have offered a challenge, but never disillusionment.

> Being walkers with the dawn and morning,
> Walkers with the sun and morning,
> We are not afraid of the night,
> Nor days of gloom,
> Nor darkness—
> Being walkers with the sun and morning.

But Hughes's view of a new day for his people, somehow inevitable in the nature and in the trend of things, is not always a clear one; frequently it is beclouded by a "weariness that bows me down," a "dream that is vague and all confused." Recalling the injured pride and the pent-up emotions of the porter at the railroad station, Hughes asks defiantly,

> Must I say
> Yes, Sir
> To you all the time.
> Yes, Sir!
> Yes, Sir!
> All my days?

Doors closed permanently, and hence a meaninglessness to the black man's striving is the definition of the situation in which Jamie

> sits on a hill
> Looking out to sea
> Toward a mirage-land
> That will never be.

Loss of faith, however, is a temporary condition. Before long the poet regains perspective and sees, if but imperfectly, the new order being carved out of the old. In "Park Bench," as in "Porter," he continues in the vein of the "Crusader," as Verna Anery once labeled him; for here he makes a savage thrust at the wealthy class on Park Avenue and offers a sober warning that the new awakening which is settling upon the Negro people may subsequently find expression in a change of the mores:

> But I'm wakin' up!
> Say ain't you afraid
> That I might, just maybe,
> In a year or two
> Move on over
> To Park Avenue?

Although he writes mainly concerning his own people, Hughes has proceeded on the sound assumption that the so-called Negro problem is not an isolated one but a single segment of a complex American culture. Color prejudice moves hand in hand with race prejudice and religious prejudice, and, despite the artificial line that divides them, humble folk of all races face a common lot; their children in the swamps of Mississippi as in the orange groves of California, weary and disillusioned, march toward a common destiny. "The Kids Who Die," to which a Darwinian note attaches, is disarmingly forthright:

> But the day will come—
> You are sure yourself that it is coming—
> When the marching feet of the masses
> Will raise for a monument of love,
> And joy, and laughter,
> And black hands and white hands clasped
> as one

And a song that reaches the sky—
The song of the new life triumphant
Through the Kids that die!

Complete assurance that "America will be" and that black and white will some day look neither *up* nor *down* but *across* at each other is implicit in lines from the poem "I, Too":

Tomorrow,
I'll [be] at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me
"Eat in the Kitchen"
Then.

Although increasingly, as *Fields of Wonder* reveals, Langston Hughes has written on a variety of topics, it is true that in the main he has followed the course of the "social poet"; he has been concerned not so much with moonlight and roses, sweetness and light, as with "whole groups of people's problems"—poverty, the ghetto, trade-unions, color lines, and Georgia lynchings. But, like Chesnutt, Hughes has stored no hate in his soul, nor has he descended to the level of the propagandist. His healthy view of the tomorrows yet to be is an outgrowth of his faith in the essential goodness of the human heart and hence the ultimate flowering of the democratic way of life in America.

Source: John W. Parker, "'Tomorrow' in the Writings of Langston Hughes," in *College English*, Vol. 10, No. 8, May 1949, pp. 438–41.

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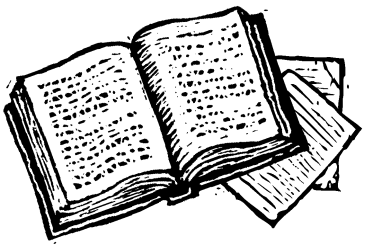
A Nocturnal Reverie

ANNE FINCH

1713

During her lifetime, Anne Finch received limited recognition as a poet, despite the care she took with her writing. She was an aristocrat and a woman, therefore few took her work seriously. In the twentieth century, Finch's work was rediscovered and appreciated. Written in 1713, Finch's "A Nocturnal Reverie" is among the works that has garnered serious critical attention for the poet. Characteristically Augustan in style and content, the poem contains classical references and descriptions of nature (particularly flowers and the moon) that are consistent with the English Augustan Age. Some consider the poem to be a precursor to the romantic movement. This position is supported by the fact that William Wordsworth, one of the fathers of romantic literature in English, referenced Finch's poem in the supplement to the preface of the second edition of his famous collection *Lyrical Ballads* (1815), coauthored with Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

The poem is serene in tone and rich in imagery. Finch creates a natural scene that is inviting and relaxing—a nighttime wonderland that, unfortunately, must be left as daybreak approaches. The speaker is saddened that dawn is coming and she must return to the harsh reality of the world and the day. This poem remains one of Finch's best-loved and most-anthologized works. It appears in 2003's *Anne Finch: Countess of Winchilsea: Selected Poems*, edited by Denys Thompson.



AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea, was born in April 1661 to Anne Haselwood and Sir William Kingsmill. Finch was their third child, and would be their last, as William died when Finch was only five months old. Fortunately, William made arrangements for all of his children's educations before his death. After her mother was remarried to Sir Thomas Ogle in 1662, the couple had a daughter named Dorothy who was a close sister and lifelong friend to Finch. Anne died, leaving Thomas with the formidable task of rearing four young children alone. All were under seven years old at the time.

Finch was a member of Charles II's court at the age of twenty-one, when she became a maid of honor to Mary of Modena, wife of the Duke of York. There she befriended other young women with literary interests, and Finch began to dabble in poetry. She also met Colonel Heneage Finch, a soldier and courtier appointed as Groom of the Bedchamber to the Duke of York. The Colonel courted the young maid until she agreed to marry him in 1684 and leave her position in the court. By all accounts, the marriage was happy for both of them. He continued to work in government affairs, and they first lived in Westminster before moving to London when Colonel Finch became increasingly involved with work duties upon the accession of King James II in 1685. The Finches' support of James and their Stuart sympathies cost Colonel Finch his position when James was deposed in 1688. Because Colonel Finch refused to compromise his beliefs and give his support to William and Mary, he had difficulty finding a new job. Colonel Finch's nephew encouraged the couple to live on the family estate in Eastwell, where they spent the next twenty-five years. The Colonel became the Earl of Winchilsea in 1712.

Through the ups and downs of her early years in marriage, Finch's interest in writing did not wane. Taking the pseudonym "Ardelia," she wrote poetry about her husband, whom she loved and honored. A tendency to express personal feelings in her poetry would continue as she matured in her writing; her poetry became a sort of diary through which she related personal experiences, feelings, religious convictions, and observations about the world around her. At the same time, her work reflects knowledge of and respect for seventeenth-century poetry and the conventions that characterize it. Biblical allusions, or references, appear in her work, as do metaphysical tendencies in imagery and verse that combines the spiritual and the logical. Fables became a sizeable part of her writing, comprising nearly one-third of her total work. Still, it has been poems such as "A Nocturnal Reverie" and "The Spleen" that have kept Finch's work in the canon of English literature of interest to scholars.

Because of her early position in the court and her husband's political career, Finch retained an interest in the throne, religion, and the politics of the day. Her early poetry reflects on the days she spent in court and how much she enjoys those memories; her later poetry reveals a mature understanding of the gravity of the politics surrounding the throne, and the seriousness of taking a stand for one's loyalties.

Although some of Finch's work was published beginning in 1701, it was not until the appearance of her 1713 collection *Miscellany Poems* that she began to enjoy limited recognition by her contemporaries. To most, the idea of a woman writing serious poetry was still a bit farfetched. It was not until the twentieth century that her work began to receive much critical attention. A modern edition of her work was published in 1903, and various poems appear in major anthologies and studies of women's writing.

After enduring failing health for a number of years, Finch died on August 5, 1720. She was buried in Eastwell. At her funeral, her husband honored her memory by expressing to those in attendance how much he admired her faith, her loyalty, her friendship and support, and her writing.

POEM TEXT

In such a night, when every louder wind
Is to its distant cavern safe confined;
And only gentle Zephyr fans his wings,
And lonely Philomel, still waking, sings;
Or from some tree, famed for the owl's delight,
She, hollowing clear, directs the wanderer right;
In such a night, when passing clouds give place,
Or thinly veil the heavens' mysterious face;
When in some river, overhung with green,
The waving moon and trembling leaves are seen;
When freshened grass now bears itself upright,
And makes cool banks to pleasing rest invite,
Whence springs the woodbind and the bramble-rose,
And where the sleepy cowslip sheltered grows;

Whilst now a paler hue the foxglove takes,
Yet checkers still with red the dusky brakes;
When scattered glow-worms, but in twilight fine,
Show trivial beauties watch their hour to shine;
Whilst Salisbury stands the test of every light,
In perfect charms, and perfect virtue bright;
When odors, which declined repelling day,
Through temperate air uninterrupted stray;
When darkened groves their softest shadows wear,
And falling waters we distinctly hear;
When through the gloom more venerable shows
Some ancient fabric, awful in repose,
While sunburnt hills their swarthy looks conceal,
And swelling haycocks thicken up the vale:
When the loosed horse now, as his pasture leads,
Comes slowly grazing through the adjoining meads,
Whose stealing pace and lengthened shade we fear,
Till torn-up foliage in his teeth we hear:
When nibbling sheep at large pursue their food,
And unmolested kine rechew the cud;
When curlews cry beneath the village walls,
And to her straggling brood the partridge calls;
Their shortlived jubilee the creatures keep,
Which but endures, whilst tyrant man does sleep;
When a sedate content the spirit feels,
And no fierce light disturbs, whilst it reveals;
But silent musings urge the mind to seek
Something, too high for syllables to speak;
Till the free soul to a composedness charmed,
Finding the elements of rage disarmed,
O'er all below a solemn quiet grown,
Joys in the inferior world, and thinks it like her own:
In such a night let me abroad remain
Till morning breaks, and all's confused again;
Our cares, our toils, our clamors are renewed,
Or pleasures, seldom reached, again pursued.

POEM SUMMARY

"A Nocturnal Reverie" is a fifty-line poem describing an inviting nighttime scene and the speaker's disappointment when dawn brings it to an end, forcing her back to the real world. It is written in iambic pentameter, a meter that consists of five feet (or units), each containing an unstressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable. Moreover, it is written in heroic couplets—two lines of rhyming verse in iambic pentameter, usually self-contained so that the meaning of the two lines is complete without relying on lines before or after them.

Lines 1–5

The poem's opening phrase is repeated three times over the course of the poem, and originates in William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. It becomes a sort of refrain that pulls the reader through the poem. The speaker describes a night in which all harsh winds are far away, and the gentle breeze of Zephyr, Greek god of the west wind, is soothing. The other winds are characterized as louder; therefore, the speaker is subtly making a comparison. She does this in other ways throughout the poem, contrasting the near-perfection of her surroundings with other, lesser settings. It communicates the idea that she is in the most perfect place on earth.

The song of a nightingale (Philomel) is heard, along with the sound of an owl. Both sounds are inviting and cheerful. Bird sounds at night are familiar and something to which the reader can readily relate. This makes it easier for the reader to surrender to the imagery of the poem. More birds will enter the sense imagery of the poem, but not until near the end.

Lines 6–10

Clouds pass gently overhead, at times allowing the sky to shine through to the speaker. The distant night sky is depicted as enigmatic and elusive. There is a river with large trees hanging their leaves over it, and as it flows, its surface reflects the leaves and the moon. The reflections have movement, which simultaneously brings the moon and the leaves to life while also reminding the reader of the aforementioned breeze. The leaves shake partly because of the flow of the river, but also because the leaves themselves are moving with the wind.

Lines 11–15

Fresh grass stands strong and upright, suggesting that this poem takes place during spring. The grass seems to be freshly grown and maybe even recently rained upon. The grass invites the speaker to rest in it on the banks of the river. Various plants and flowers, including woodbind, bramble-rose, cowslip, and foxglove, grow there. The speaker describes the plants and flowers as not only being colorful but also as almost having personalities and interactions with one another. The images of the trees, the descriptions of overgrown foliage, and the mention of flowers being sheltered indicates that this is a shady area during the day, meaning it is especially cozy at night.

Lines 16–20

The speaker then notices that glowworms have appeared during the twilight hour, and she

comments that their beauty can only last a limited time because they rely on the dark to show their light. The speaker then mentions a lady named Salisbury (who is believed to have been a friend's daughter), whose beauty and virtue are superior to the glowworms because they hold up in any light.

Lines 21–25

The speaker's senses next pick up certain aromas that are not present during the day but only waft through the night air. It is as if they were waiting for just the right air for their arrival. Again, Finch enlivens nature through personification. She describes groves that, with little light, are softened with the near absence of shadow. In the distance, she hears a waterfall.

Lines 26–30

A large edifice seems menacing in the darkened setting, and unshaded hills are hidden. In a field, there are haystacks and a horse grazing.

Lines 31–35

The horse's slow pace across the field seems sneaky and his large shadow frightening, until the sound of his eating grass sets the speaker at ease. She suggests that the darkness sometimes makes people fearful of what they cannot see, but once she recognizes it is only a horse, her fear vanishes. She next mentions sheep grazing and cows chewing their cud without being bothered by anyone at all, and then she turns her attention to what the birds are doing. She hears the curlews.

Lines 36–40

The partridge calls out for her young. All of this sound she considers celebratory noise carrying on while men sleep; at night, nature is free of man's rules and domination. She also remarks that the nighttime celebration does not last long. The speaker contemplates the relaxation and contentment of the setting, which is free of strong and piercing light.

Lines 41–45

The speaker describes how the scene inspires silent, peaceful musings about profound things that are hard to put into words. In fact, according to the speaker, it is impossible in such a setting for a person to hold onto anger. The serenity and seriousness of her spirit embraces the charm and joy of nature in such a way that her very soul is engaged.

Lines 46–50

As the poem draws to a close, the speaker longs to stay in the nighttime world of nature until morning comes and forces her back into her world of confusion. In the daytime, in man's world, there are the worries of everyday life, the complications of living in society, work that must be done, and sounds that are not relaxing; however, she adds that people continue their pursuit of pleasure in the day. Because the poem's title refers to a reverie, the reader is left wondering if the entire experience was a dream, or if her musings on the river bank were the dreamy state to which it refers.

THEMES

Natural World versus Civilized World

The speaker evokes a strong sense of serenity and escape in "A Nocturnal Reverie." The speaker has left her ordinary life behind in favor of exploring the inviting and relaxing nighttime landscape. Everything from the sights, sounds, and smells of the night creates an almost perfect world that comforts her and allows her the luxury of going deeply into her own thoughts and feelings. At no point does she feel lonely or hurried because nature in the twilight provides everything her real self—her spiritual self—needs.

In contrast, the world of her day-lit society is depicted as restrictive and overpowering. It lacks all the peace and sensitivity of the natural setting she enjoys at night. Although Finch's fifty lines only contain four that refer to the civilized world, they are enough to demonstrate the sharp contrast at the heart of "A Nocturnal Reverie." In line 38, men are described as tyrannical beings. When they sleep is when nature can enjoy its celebratory expression. The implication is that when man is awake and moving through the world, nature's full glory is suppressed. It also implies that man really has no idea how alive nature is when he is out of the way. Toward the end of the poem, the speaker longs to remain in the nighttime setting. She resists returning to her everyday world of worrying and working. The pleasures of that world, she feels, are pursued but rarely reached.

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY



- "A Nocturnal Reverie" is rich in imagery and sensory descriptions. Find three to five works of art that, when combined, give a sense of the poem's setting. Create a display that features the artwork and the poem. If you can find nature sounds that are consistent with the poem, add those for a multimedia experience.
- The speaker lovingly embraces the serenity of nature at night. How does being outside at night make you feel? Drawing on your personal experiences, write a poem or a prose piece expressing your thoughts and feelings in such a different set of surroundings. The speaker prefers this setting to that of her everyday life. Which setting do you prefer?
- Some scholars claim that this poem was a pre-romantic poem. Read about the romantic movement in England to find out what the writers were trying to accomplish and what the poetry of the movement was like. Who were the major poets of the time? Read at least five romantic poems and write an essay examining how Finch's poem is like or unlike the other romantic poems you have selected.
- Finch was hindered in seriously pursuing poetry by her society and her status in it. Who were some of the first prominent women poets in England? What were their backgrounds and what subjects did they choose for their work? Create a digital "Hall of Fame" (in the form of a Web site or multimedia slideshow) presenting your findings in writing and in images.

Nature as Living Community

Finch portrays nature in "A Nocturnal Reverie" as a lively and animated community of animals, trees, flowers, plants, clouds, aromas, grass, wind, and water. These elements of nature are described as if they have feelings, opinions, and joy. The wind is not merely a lucky turn of the weather, but an act by the Greek god of the west wind himself. The owl sounds in the night for the purpose of leading the speaker to the right place. Clouds do not randomly float across the sky but act to hide and reveal the mysterious night sky. Grass stands tall of its own accord. The cowslip is sleepy, and the foxglove goes pale. Glowworms seize the right moment to show off their light, knowing that they can only do so for a limited time. Odors intentionally wait until evening to come out, when the air is more suitable. An edifice is both venerable and resting, and hills have expressions hidden by the night. The entire scene is a jubilee, a group celebration shared by the elements of nature and witnessed by the speaker. In the poem, nature is active instead of passive, and relational instead of merely existing. In short, the speaker brings nature to life in the same way that describing a person makes him or her seem like a real person to those who do not know him or her. The message behind this approach is that nature is alive and has much more to offer than aesthetic value. Finch is suggesting that nature can teach and minister to people wise enough to submit to it.

Escape

The poem's title bears the word *reverie* which is a dream or dream-like state. The poem is so rich, lavish, and utterly inviting, the reader must wonder if the speaker is describing a dream she had just before she awoke in the morning, or if she actually wandered through nature at night and, in her relaxation, fell into a dreamlike state. After all, as she rests on the riverbank, she describes thinking about things that are hard to put into words, and she admits the experience of being in that setting is spiritual. Either way, the appeal of the nocturnal setting she describes is that it affords her the opportunity to escape completely her humdrum daytime life. At the end of the poem, she describes the day as a time of confusion, work, and worry. She longs to stay in her reverie because it is an escape, real or imagined, from the life that makes her feel oppressed.

STYLE

Syntax

This poem is one continuous telling of the speaker's experience; it tells a story in a clear path from the beginning to the end. Although it is fifty lines long, there is no period until the very end. Still,



Owl perching on a tree branch *(© moodboard / Corbis)*

Finch's command of the verse is steady throughout the poem and it never feels out of control or rambling. In fact, Finch controls the poem so carefully that all of the dreamy language and imaginative scenes are expressed in heroic couplets from start to finish. The effect of the ongoing punctuation is that the poem reads like a natural flow of thought as the speaker experiences the nighttime setting and allows her feelings to respond. It also propels the poem forward; as there are no hard breaks brought on by periods, other punctuation such as colons, commas, and semicolons instead serve to show the reader how one thought or image leads to the next. By the time the reader gets to line 39, in which the speaker describes her relaxed spirit surrendering to high-level spiritual thoughts, the reader is already accustomed to an almost stream-of-consciousness feel. Like the speaker, the reader experiences the flow and relaxation of the nighttime setting.

Personification

Using personification, Finch breathes life into the natural elements in "A Nocturnal Reverie" so thoroughly that the scene seems populated with friends, old and new, rather than with trees, animals, and breezes. Every element that the speaker encounters in her nighttime adventure is alive and familiar because it possesses some characteristic or behavior that seems human. Personification is a literary device with which the author assigns human characteristics to non-human entities and is similar to anthropomorphism. When an author employs anthropomorphism, he or she assigns these human characteristics literally, such as having a character who is a talking animal. Finch, however, opts for the more subtle device of personification, bringing her setting to life through figures of speech that humanize the natural elements. Examples in "A Nocturnal Reverie" include the owl directing the visitor where to go, the grass

intentionally standing up straight, the glowworms enjoying showing off their light, the aromas that choose when they will float through the air, the night sky and the hills having faces, and the portrayal of the entire scene as one in which all of nature celebrates together. Ultimately, Finch's use of personification evokes the theme of nature as a living community.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Glorious Revolution of 1688

James II was the king of England, Scotland, and Ireland from 1685–88. He was a Catholic king whose strong arm angered and disgruntled Protestant Britain. He succeeded his brother King Charles II, who died in 1685 after achieving a peaceful working relationship between the king and Parliament. James was less interested in a mutual sharing of power, and quickly grabbed power back from Parliament. Not only did he stand firmly on his Catholicism and his staunch view of the divine right of kings, he also lacked diplomacy. Because James did not seem likely to produce an heir, whereas his Protestant brother already had children, most of James's opponents were willing to tolerate a temporary Catholic rule on the hope that another Protestant reign was in the offing.

When James set about aggressively restoring Catholicism as the predominant religion in Great Britain, he attempted to enlist Parliament to pave the way by overturning certain legislation that got in his way. Rebellions against the king did nothing to slow him down in his mission. When James assigned handpicked judges to the King's Bench, or high court of common law, he began to make real headway; he was able to appoint staunch Catholics to various government posts, along with positions in the military and academia. When Church leaders, especially a group of bishops, resisted James's orders to bring politics to the pulpit, the winds began to blow more strongly against James. Then James and his wife gave birth to an heir, which provoked his opponents to take action.

In June 1688, seven prominent political leaders from both the Whig and the Tory parties sent a letter to Holland to William III of Orange. The clandestine letter encouraged William to come to England, overthrow James, and assume the throne. William was chosen because he was Protestant and also in the Stuart bloodline. The letter was well timed for William, as the Dutch Republic faced war with France. Having the English military on his country's side would make all the difference. He arrived in England in November, and by December, he had overthrown James in the Glorious Revolution, at the conclusion of which James fled to France.

A convention parliament met to arrange for the lawful transfer of the crown to William and his wife, Mary. On February 13, 1689, the two officially assumed the throne. Finch's husband, Colonel Heneage Finch, built a career in government affairs and was active in James II's court. The Finches' refusal to support William and Mary after James was deposed created some difficulties for the couple.

Augustan Age in England

"A Nocturnal Reverie" is strongly associated with Augustan writing in England. The term comes from the rule of Emperor Augustus in Rome, who was known for his love of learning and careful attention to writing. In Great Britain, the dominant writers of what is considered the Augustan Age were Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope, Sir Richard Steele, and Joseph Addison. The exact dates of this age are a matter of debate; some put them as following Queen Anne's reign (1702–14), while others equate them with the life of Alexander Pope (1688–1744). Writing during this period intentionally paid homage to classical literature, using allusion to draw parallels between their own world and that of the ancients. The novel saw tremendous growth as a literary form, satire was popular, and poetry took on a more personal character. Writers often addressed political issues and concerns, yet did so from a philosophical or detached position. The serious writer was more of a keen observer of the world, rather than a figure trying to assert influence over his readers. Of course, in making observations, writers did exert a certain amount of influence, and this was especially seen through the satire that so characterized much Augustan writing.

In poetry, Pope was the primary writer and representation of the Augustan Age. Poetry gave satire another venue, but poetry grew in its purpose in the Augustan Age. Poets adhered to conventions of form and versification, but also experimented with adaptations. For example, a traditional form might be applied to a subject not normally associated with that form. Most

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **1713:** Few aristocratic women attempt to become serious poets, regardless of their skill or education. Women generally are not considered major literary figures. A woman trying to position herself as a serious poet would invite ridicule from the social elite and potentially embarrass her family.

  Today: Women are some of the most popular, celebrated, and frequently published poets. Many of the most well-known living poets are women, including Adrienne Rich and Louise Glück. Numerous women have earned the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, including Natasha Trethewey in 2007.

- **1713:** Well-bred, well-educated young women like Finch are employed by the court, live with their fathers, live off a family inheritance, or marry respected men with desirable incomes.

  Today: Well-educated young women have the option of pursuing any number of career fields, including medicine, writing, teaching, law, science, or ministry. Such women also retain the choice to marry men of their choosing and to stay home to care for their families.

- **1713:** People are frequently drawn to the outdoors as a source of peaceful relaxation. It is common for aristocrats to unwind by enjoying a leisurely walk around the grounds of their property, or to enjoy a horse ride in the countryside. Nature is rarely far away, and this type of relaxation is readily accessible.

  Today: People are still drawn to the outdoors for recreation and relaxation. For the many people who live in suburbs and cities, going outdoors usually means walking around a neighborhood or visiting a park. Experiencing nature for an extended period of time might involve travel. While some still enjoy leisurely outdoor activities like walks, many Americans are drawn to rigorous activities like hiking, rock climbing, and white water rafting.

notably, Augustan poets used classical forms to make modern statements. For example, a classical poem could be recast in a seventeenth-century setting or could merely be retold in a way that thinly veiled criticism of current events. Poetry was not only political and social, and an increasing body of work showed how personal poetry could be, and how well it suited the poet's need to reflect on his or her world. Many scholars have argued that the seeds of romanticism are in the Augustan Age.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

In Finch's lifetime, she enjoyed a minimal amount of attention and respect for her work. Her reputation was largely based on "The Spleen" and "A Nocturnal Reverie." Renewed interest in women writers, and especially overlooked women writers, led to Finch's rediscovery in the twentieth century and inclusion among major English poets. Prior to that, William Wordsworth mentioned "A Nocturnal Reverie" in the supplement to the preface of his and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1815). Because of this mention, some scholars place the poem in the pre-romantic tradition, while others maintain that the poem rightly belongs among the Augustan poetry of Finch's time. Jamie Stanesa in *Dictionary of Literary Biography* weighs in with the comment, "Finch's expression is more immediate and simple, and her versification ultimately exhibits an Augustan rather than a pre-Romantic sensibility." Reuben A. Brower notes in *Studies in Philology*, "In the eighteenth century the poetry

of religious meditation and moral reflection merged with the poetry of natural description in a composite type," which includes Finch's "A Nocturnal Reverie." He adds that those seeking the roots of romanticism in such poems should look beyond the mere setting.

Other critics are more interested in the poem itself than in its proper category within English poetry. Charles H. Hinnant in *Studies in English Literature 1500–1900* comments on Finch's view of imagination. He writes that, as in other examples of her poetry, here "poetic consciousness is envisaged as an 'emptiness' or 'lack' which seeks to coincide with a peace or plenitude that it attributes to something outside of itself." In *Anne Finch and Her Poetry: A Critical Biography*, Barbara McGovern comments on the melancholy imagery that permeates the poem. She explains that the images "are common to melancholic verse: moonlight, an owl's screech, darkened groves and distant caverns, falling waters, winds, ancient ruins, and shadows that cast an eerie gloom over the entire isolated scene." Among the strongest advocates for considering "A Nocturnal Reverie" as serious poetry is Christopher Miller, writing in *Studies in English Literature*. In his essay, he openly regards Finch's work as a masterpiece in its own right. While he considers the weight of Wordsworth's endorsement in a romantic context, Miller finds plenty to like in "A Nocturnal Reverie" apart from that. He deems it "remarkable," noting the poem's wandering in content and continuous subordinate clause. He comments, "In this temporal arc, Finch mimics the famous evening-to-dawn fantasy of scholarly devotion in John Milton's 'Il Penseroso' (1631), but she focuses more on sensory absorption of the nocturnal world than on the humoral disposition associated with it." He adds that the poem is "a lyric that responds in innovative ways to other poetic traditions."

WHAT DO I READ NEXT?



- Barbara McGovern is one of the most well-known experts on Finch and her work. In *Anne Finch and Her Poetry: A Critical Biography* (1992), McGovern combines autobiographical material with her own expertise on Finch's work to give the reader a full sense of how the two influenced one another.
- Edited by Eva Simmons, *Augustan Literature, 1660–1789* (1994) compiles the greatest writing of the age by the writers who characterized the Augustan Age in England. Poetry, prose, and essays are all included and discussed in an easy-to-use volume organized by writer.
- Edited by Denys Thompson, *Selected Poems: Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea* (2006) is the most complete current collection of Finch's poetry. It includes "A Nocturnal Reverie," "The Spleen," and numerous other poems not often included in anthologies.
- Edward Vallance's *The Glorious Revolution: 1688—Britain's Fight for Liberty* (2007) is among the more engaging treatments of the bloodless overthrow of James II by William and Mary. To further enliven the topic, Vallance includes comments by Karl Marx, Margaret Thatcher, and others.

CRITICISM

Jennifer Bussey

Bussey has a master's degree in interdisciplinary studies and a bachelor's degree in English literature. She is an independent writer specializing in literature. In this essay, Bussey explores in more depth the debate about whether Anne Finch's "A Nocturnal Reverie" is Augustan or pre-romantic.

Modern readers of Anne Finch's work take a particular interest in "A Nocturnal Reverie" with regard to its categorization. With the benefit of significant historical and literary hindsight, some scholars regard the poem as an example of the Augustan literature that was so popular in England at the time the poem was written (1713). But others see in the poem glimpses of one of the most influential literary movements to come—romanticism.

From a chronological standpoint, "A Nocturnal Reverie" seems best positioned among Augustan literature. This would place Finch alongside writers such as Alexander Pope,



IT IS REASONABLE TO CONCLUDE, THEN, THAT FINCH WAS FAR MORE INFLUENCED AND INSPIRED BY THE AUGUSTANS THAN BY ANY PRE-ROMANTIC INFLUENCES THAT MAY HAVE BEEN STIRRING IN ENGLAND IN 1713."

Joseph Addison, Richard Steele, and Jonathan Swift, who are considered great British writers and some of the best satirists ever published. But Augustan literature was not merely biting wit and lengthy verse and prose. Augustan literature paid homage to the Roman Augustan Age, in which language was exalted and treated carefully. Education and inquiry were also embraced, which is reflected in poetry that is technically sharp. English Augustan poets followed suit, writing verse that followed conventions and demonstrated mastery of language and technique. They relied on allusion to draw clear comparisons between their society and that of ancient Rome, or to bring to their verse the flavor of classical poetry. Like the novelists, playwrights, and essayists of the time, Augustan poets observed and commented on the world around them, but often retained a level of detachment. The result is poetry that is contemplative and insightful without being overly emotional or desperate. Augustan writers were not interested in the kind of rhetoric that seeks to sway readers to the author's point of view, but wrote merely to comment and let the reader decide. In this way, Finch's fables are consistent with the Augustan approach to literature; a fable simply relates a story, but the story happens to have a message that the reader may find compelling.

Given the overall character of Augustan literature, why is "A Nocturnal Reverie" considered one of its titles? The poem features many of the qualities that typified poetry of this period. It contains classical allusions to Zephyr and Philomel. Zephyr was the Greek god of the west wind, which was considered the most gentle and inviting wind. Philomel was a person who, according the Greek mythology, was turned into a nightingale. "A Nocturnal Reverie" also boasts highly technical construction. The poem is a neat and even fifty lines long, composed of twenty-five heroic couplets. The rhyme scheme and the rhythm are held consistently over the course of all fifty lines. This is an impressive technical feat, and Finch succeeds in maintaining the integrity of her poem's restrictive construction while smoothly relating the subject of the poem in a way that does not call too much attention to the pains she takes in writing in heroic couplets. Finch offers the reader a story of a nighttime experience (or vision), telling it as if she has no motive but to relate a story. The end of the poem, however, reveals the comment the poet makes about the struggles of daily life in civilization. Like a good Augustan poet, she offers it only as an observation of her own life, leaving it to the reader to personalize it to himself or his community.

In the supplement to the preface of his and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1815, the renowned romantic poet William Wordsworth praised "A Nocturnal Reverie" for its imagery in describing nature. Wordsworth himself saw something in Finch's work that caught his romantic eye and resonated with him in its depiction of nature. For this reason, critics took another look at "A Nocturnal Reverie" and many concluded that the poem is truly a pre-romantic work. Since all literary movements arise out of a set of circumstances before becoming full-fledged movements, it is not at all unusual to see the seeds of a movement in works that precede it. Wordsworth's appreciation of the poem for something as distinctly romantic in its depiction of nature is enough to make any serious critic consider whether "A Nocturnal Reverie" should be positioned among the earliest romantic poems.

The romantic period officially began with the publication of Wordsworth and Coleridge's first edition of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798 and lasted until about the mid-nineteenth century. For nearly a century, romanticism dominated English literature. During this time, England saw its own Industrial Revolution, major political reform, and the introduction of such philosophical perspectives as Utilitarianism. It was a dynamic time of upheaval, opportunity, and possibility, and optimism generally bested cynicism in the early years of romanticism. Toward the end of the period, literature raised questions and expressed doubt. Out of this came a view of

the individual as very important, along with a deep appreciation for art and nature. In fact, many romantics considered nature to be among their wisest teachers. The great romantic poets included Wordsworth, Coleridge, Alfred Tennyson, Robert Browning, John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Lord Byron. In addition to love of nature, the romantics exalted imagination and freedom from creative restraints.

Finding romantic elements in "A Nocturnal Reverie" is not difficult. The setting is nature, and it is described in affectionate detail. The speaker is completely enthralled by her experience outdoors, and she appreciates every aspect of it, making sure to include every animal, plant, flower, cloud, river, and glowworm in her telling. Nature is humanized through extensive use of anthropomorphism and personification, and the effect is that nature is characterized as being friendly, welcoming, and nurturing. The speaker is so at ease in the natural setting that she dreads returning to the life she leads in the civilized world. This assessment of the natural world versus man's world is very much in line with the romantic way of thinking. Finch's style in "A Nocturnal Reverie" is also very lush and descriptive, as so much of romantic poetry is, and the experience is described in relation to the speaker's emotional response to it. There is only one figure in the poem, which places emphasis on an individual and the value of that individual's experience and imagination. All of these elements make it easy to see why so many scholars are anxious to line "A Nocturnal Reverie" up with the classics of romantic poetry.

"A Nocturnal Reverie" contains qualities of both Augustan and romantic literature, therefore a look at the literary-historical context of the poem's composition helps determine where it properly belongs. Finch was a well-educated woman who took care with her poetry to ensure that it was technically sound. She read the predominant poets of her time, and learned from what she read. She was, from an early age, drawn to poetry as a means of self-expression, even knowing that her pursuit would likely be only personal. When Finch wrote "A Nocturnal Reverie," the romantic period in England was still eighty-five years away. For her to explore romantic tendencies, there would have to have been something influential in her world leading her to turn her attentions to the things that would be uniquely romantic. Because there is not a large body of work by Finch that explores romantic themes, it seems unlikely that she was working out a new philosophy in "A Nocturnal Reverie."

Further, the giants of the Augustan Age were in full force at the time Finch wrote "A Nocturnal Reverie." Pope's classic *An Essay on Criticism* was published in 1711. Pope is not at all associated with the romantic period, and his views on criticism, like his writing, are consistent with the Augustan perspective. Also in 1711, two other major players in Augustan literature, Joseph Addison and Richard Steele established *The Spectator*, a journal that would become the most influential periodical of the century. Pope's essay and Addison and Steele's periodical are two major additions to England's literary history, and "A Nocturnal Reverie" comes on their heels, written by a woman who kept up with such things. It is reasonable to conclude, then, that Finch was far more influenced and inspired by the Augustans than by any pre-romantic influences that may have been stirring in England in 1713.

Source: Jennifer Bussey, Critical Essay on "A Nocturnal Reverie," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2009.

Susannah B. Mintz

In the following excerpt, Mintz discusses how Finch's nature poems, including "A Nocturnal Reverie," utilize the natural world as a spiritual and political counterbalance to an anti-feminist society.

Anne Kingsmill Finch, the Countess of Winchelsea (1661–1720), holds an established position in the history of women's writing, but scholars have not always agreed on whether Finch reproduces or challenges the gender-bias of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century poetic conventions. On the one hand, Finch could be outspoken in her critique of male resistance to women's poetry, but on the other, Finch herself clearly worries about how her poetry will be received, and thus seems at times to uphold the very standards against which her own writing might be doomed to fall short. The complaint that opens "The Introduction," for example, is well known for its pithy illustration of the obstacles facing women writers. Here, Finch anticipates the "censure" (2) that will attend any woman's entrance into the public sphere, and



ON THE ONE HAND, FINCH COULD BE OUTSPOKEN IN HER CRITIQUE OF MALE RESISTANCE TO WOMEN'S POETRY, BUT ON THE OTHER, FINCH HERSELF CLEARLY WORRIES ABOUT HOW HER POETRY WILL BE RECEIVED, AND THUS SEEMS AT TIMES TO UPHOLD THE VERY STANDARDS AGAINST WHICH HER OWN WRITING MIGHT BE DOOMED TO FALL SHORT."

assumes that men will be quick to "condemn" (7) women's writing as "insipid, empty, uncorrect" (4):

> Alas! a woman that attempts the pen,
> Such an intruder on the rights of men,
> Such a presumptuous creature is esteem'd,
> The fault can by no virtue be redeemed.
> They tell us, we mistake our sex and way;
> Good breeding, fashion, dancing, dressing, play
> Are the accomplishments we should desire;
> To write, or read, or think, or to enquire
> Would cloud our beauty . . . (9–17)

Worried about exposing a lack of wit, Finch displays her intelligence through irony, appeal to biblical authority, and rhetorical sophistication, thus proving the inadequacy of misogynistic denouncement. But at the very same time, such poetic strategies demonstrate the lengths to which she must go to ensure that her work will not be read as "uncorrect" (the "fair" sex may be deemed but "fair," mediocre writers). The poem thus records a tectonic unsteadiness, working to deconstruct the myth of women as beautiful but insignificant even as it manifests the poet's anxiety about the "beauty" of her work in the very world that imposes that censure.

In what follows, I will argue that poetry, for Finch, becomes a site of contest over the refracting discourse of "fair." By manipulating her culture's assumptions about beauty, femininity, and intellect, Finch's work ultimately exposes the insufficiencies of a patriarchal law that reproduces "unfairness" in both its construction of women and its determination of what counts as aesthetically pleasing. In a deceptively witty manner, Finch admits that by presenting herself to the world intellectually, she may render that self a monstrous deviation—the "ugly" spectacle that is the woman writer. By dint of such acknowledgment, however, she exacts her own form of condemnation, utilizing this catalogue of patriarchal insults ("an intruder," "a presumptuous creature") to impugn the culture's construction of a "fair sex" confined to "the dull manage of a servile house" (19) and to the shallow maintenance of beauty. Despite, but also because of, insecurity about their worth, Finch's poems work to rescue women from confinement as objects in men's poetry, and insist upon the legitimacy of female visibility and speech . . . .

Poetry, Finch acknowledges, is dangerous, because it becomes a public act, its creator enters into the realm of evaluation with its arbitrary criteria and its arbiters of taste. What's more—and indeed as an exact result of that value-making domain—art is dismayingly prone to obscuring true feeling, and can thus keep two people at odds with one another. In "A Song" ("'Tis strange, this Heart"), for example, the speaker longs to know "what's done" (4) in the heart of her other (lover, husband, friend?):

> In vain I ask it of your Eyes
> Which subt'ly would my Fears controul;
> For Art has taught them to disguise,
> Which Nature made t' explain the Soul. (5–8)

The speaker here invites a certain kind of looking, one so completely stripped of artifice that the soul's integrity would be appropriately revealed through the windows of the eyes. Significantly, though, she also seems to recognize that even an honest gaze, a gaze unencumbered or unmediated by the influence of cultural narrative—if such a look could be posited at all, as Finch implies that it could not—would nonetheless be a containing, limiting, even policing one, capable of a form of "controul" over female emotion. The point is moot, however, since even "your Eyes" have succumbed to the false show of Art's disguises.

At one level, "A Song" seems tonally to be addressed to an intimate other, one whose openness and, perhaps more desperately, whose genuine affection the speaker craves a guarantee of. A second possible referent for the poem's "you," however, is not a single auditor at all, but rather the audience—male readers both specifically (as

opposed to women) and in general (in their powerful collectivity). Such a reading turns a private lament about the failure of interpersonal communication into a direct statement about the poet's wish for public approval of her writing as well as her careful perusal of readers' responses for the approbation she hopes they might contain. In this sense the poem proliferates and reiterates a set of interlocking worries that pervades much of Finch's work. Since words can dissemble, be untrue, or are too heavy, too many, too deceptive, to find "Truth" (12) in them, how can one—especially a woman—write poetry that expresses oneself, with words that match feelings and intent; and, more troublingly, how could anyone else understand those words as they were meant? Since readers (men, writers, critics) are far too schooled in manipulating words to their advantage for any positive judgment to be trusted, how can a woman penetrate to the essence of another's evaluation of her work? If a writer can't trust words, how can she trust that an unfriendly audience will accept poetry from a woman? In short, how can, and should, a woman write?

By way of unfolding this set of questions, I would like to argue for Finch's "The Petition for an Absolute Retreat" as an ars poetica that takes the mobius strip of writing and specularity as its thematic and structural principle. "The Petition" is usually categorized, along with "The Tree" and "A Nocturnal Reverie," as one of Finch's best-known nature poems, works contingent upon a distinction between nature and culture and which posit the natural world as a spiritual or political counteractant to an unfriendly (anti-feminist, anti-Stuart) society. The retreat of "The Petition" can thus be read as a location—for example, of solidarity with other women, in what Carol Barash describes as a "rethink[ing of] the pastoral topos of political retreat as a place where women's shared political sympathies can be legitimately expressed"; or a process—an elaborated metaphor for what Charles Hinnant reads as "a philosophic ascent of the human mind" (150). I would add to these convincing readings the possibility that the petition is a suit for and mapping out of both a place and a process of writing, which could be protected from the incursions of artifice, ambition, dishonesty, and isolating competitiveness. In this sense "The Petition" stands as a potent manifesto of a way of composing poetry that could resist the pressure of writing to satisfy the demands of patriarchal readers, a constraint to which, Finch reveals elsewhere, she often felt compelled to succumb.

The fantasized locale of "The Petition" is an abundant natural place laden with "All, that did in Eden grow" (except the "Forbidden Tree") (35–36), a place of "Unaffected Carelesness" (71) far "from Crouds, and Noise" (126), a place where, the speaker exults, she might "remain secure, / Waste, in humble Joys and pure" (202–3). The speaker repeatedly longs to relieve herself of the trappings of a stylized femininity, and to realign "inside" with "outside" in a new form of poetic, philosophical, psychical wholeness: she asks for "plain, and wholesome Fare" (33); for clothes "light, and fresh as May" (65), and "Habit cheap and new" (67); for "No Perfumes [to] have there a Part, / Borrow'd from the Chymists Art" (72–73); and when she "must be fine," she will "In . . . natural Coulours shine" (96–97). It is significant, then, that the express longing to inhabit a domain unfettered by the accouterments and affectations of culture is dressed in so foliate a poetry, whose stanzas are thick with allusion and detail—and, more to our purposes, that the poem repeatedly returns to, and turns on, the phrasing and imagery of "those Windings, and that Shade," the line that closes each of the seven substantial stanzas. The image (the psychical "syntax," as it were) of arriving at a feminized realm of writing and psychic pleasure through "Windings" and "Shade" works to establish an opposition far more pointed (if deceptively counterintuitive) than a dichotomy between an idealized, pure, female landscape and the corrupted involutions of patriarchal civilization. If "Windings" conducts us on a topographical level along a path designed to ward off "Intruders" (8), it also traces the contours of a poetic impulse. Only by twisting and turning, Finch seems to say, does the woman poet avoid the traps of copping to male desire; only by (with the use of) and through (by sustaining the duration of) a deliberate traveling along a winding course, entangling and coiling oneself in one's own poetic energies, can freedom from male expectation be found.

In one way, the very lushness of the natural setting and the poetry that describes it acts as a corrective to institutionalized cultural (human, male) rigidities of politics or social grace. At the same time, though, the poem's depiction of this pastoral Retreat is undeniably laced with

references to the very human world it purports to eschew, as when the "Willows, on the Banks" are shown to be "Gather'd into social Ranks" (134–35). What is at work, I think, is Finch's understanding that her own call for "an Absolute Retreat" leaves in place a problematic set of binary oppositions (male/female, culture/nature, reason/emotion, ornamentation/purity, and so on) without defying the epistemology on which such ideologies rest. Instead, Finch suggests a wholly different method of breaking down patriarchal schema via poetic meandering—kind of post-lapsarian revision of the scene of errored wandering that constitutes lapsarian loss—that might conduct women to paradisal space.

In a complicated sense, to doff the ornamentation demanded of women might in itself be linked to the act of writing poetry, which, according to convention, engenders a mannishly unfeminine woman. But Finch goes further than this, arguing instead for a woman writer to symbolically divest herself of dependence upon the apparel of male-centered literary standards (to make herself "plain") and then to redress herself by following a symbolically "Winding" course that separates her from the domain of men and conducts her to a self-determined place that cannot be seen from without. Finch deepens this desire to disentangle herself from constructions (and constrictions) of gender in the poem, but the desire is further problematized by virtue of the poem's very composition, which re-enacts a "feminine" adorning. Thus the poem in part exhibits what is both "male" and "female"—but in such a way as to deprive each category of ontological status. In this "The Petition" sets in high relief an axiomatic paradox, that the oppositional categories of "masculine" and "feminine" are in fact present to and in each other, and that the toppling of patriarchal authority may best be achieved not simply by reversing the standings of those terms but by a more involved process of poetic "windings" and in a place of "shade" that emphatically contradict masculinist standards of reason, genius, and the pursuit of convention as "enlightened" states of being or mental activities.

That the retreat holds out the promise of intellectual stimulation for women in particular becomes clear in the relationship between two passages, one requesting "A Partner" (106), the other "a Friend" (197). Though the speaker asks in the first instance for a partner "suited to my Mind" (106), the heterosexual bond is described primarily in terms of a pre-lapsarian fantasy of the "Love" and "Passion" (120) of "but two" (112) whose union is undisturbed by "Bus'ness," "Wars," or "Domestick Cares" (114–15). In contrast to a vision of interconnectedness which enumerates no other pastime but being "In Love" (120), the model for friendship is the woman Arminda, who,

> Warm'd anew [Ardelia's] drooping Heart,
> and Life diffus'd thro' every Part;
> Mixing Words, in wise Discourse,
> Of such Weight and won'drous Force,
> As could all her Sorrows charm,
> And transitory Ills disarm;
>
> With Wit, from an unmeasured Store,
> To Woman ne'er allow'd before. (166–75)

Women, once situated in the symbolic realm of the "Retreat," will be able to enjoy a wider set of options for how to be and behave, both individually and in consort with each other, than the earlier description of wedded happiness had seemed to offer. Women can soothe and rejuvenate each other—unsurprisingly feminine tasks that take on subtly new meaning in the context of a definitively feminine space—but also, more defiantly, they can discover themselves capable of "Mixing Words, in wise Discourse," of using language with "such Weight and wond'rous Force" that it would "charm," "disarm," and "Chea[r]" one another in a way that seems magically "delightful." Further, women might find "Wit" here, that elusive quality of mind and poetry held so firmly—"To Woman ne'er allow'd before"—by men. The ambiguity of "allow'd" conveys the point exactly: that women have been excluded from the ranks of male poets not because they can't produce good work, but because of the "mistaken rules" of men who won't concede women as equal participants in artistic creation ("The Introduction"). Arminda, then, serves as less the singular exception than as an embodied metaphor for what might obtain for women by pursuing "those Windings and that Shade"—what the speaker herself calls, later in the poem, "Contemplations of the Mind" (283).

Throughout her work, Finch's concern is not simply to vent "spleen" against anti-feminist bias, but to ironically undercut the paradigms of that bias by manipulating the very language of its constructions of femininity. "The Petition"

reiterates that project in a striking way, suggesting that the subversive ambiguities of a woman's work may provide the necessary "overgrowth" to protect it from male dismissal. As many have noted, Finch's complete oeuvre includes a broad range of poetic forms; Hinnant remarks that it is "one of the most diverse of any English poet—encompassing songs, pastorals, dialogues, Pindaric odes, tales, beast fables, hymns, didactic compositions, biblical paraphrases, verse epistles, and satires" (17). Such variety implies another form of "winding," the trying-on of different poetic styles (and selves) that manifest the search for a way of writing that could both legitimize her and solidify an interior sense of poetic integrity.

It is crucial, I think, to Finch's ideological and literary purposes that though the poem amply analogizes the quality of experience possible in the "Retreat," it also rests in a subjective mood, called for and imagined but never realized within the frame of the poem itself. The closest we come, in a sense, are the "windings" and "shade" that act as threshold to—but also, powerfully, as guards of—the actual place of a woman's poetic spirit. It is often said of Finch that she was a pivotal writer, echoing predominant seventeenth-century poetic patterns (in particular, the theme of female friendship in Katherine Philips and the poetry of pastoral retreat); using popular eighteenth-century forms to her own, sometimes feminist, sometimes sociopolitical aims; and finally, gesturing toward the inward-looking preoccupations of the Romantics. Such ambiguity in temporally locating Finch seems doubly apt: it accounts for the stylistic, tonal, and structural complexity of her work, but also, in a less direct way, suggests that she has followed her own advice, writing poems "through those Windings, and that Shade."

Source: Susannah B. Mintz, "Anne Finch's 'Fair' Play," in *Midwest Quarterly*, Vol. 45, No. 1, Autumn 2003, pp. 74–95.

Harriett Devine Jump

In the following essay, Jump addresses the misrepresentation of Finch as a nature poet and the resultant popularity of such poems as "A Nocturnal Reverie."

Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea (1661–1720), has the distinction of being one of the few women poets whose works—some of them, at least—have consistently found their way into anthologies. Wordsworth admired her poetry: his comments in the 'Essay Supplementary' to the *Preface of the Lyrical Ballads* (1815) on the 'new image[s] of external nature' in her 'Nocturnal Reverie' are well known, he included sixteen of her poems in a collection of women's poetry compiled for Lady Mary Lowther in 1819, and, in a letter to Alexander Dyce of May 1830, described her style as 'often admirable, chaste, tender and vigorous'. Despite Finch's obvious importance, however, the standard edition remains Myra Reynolds's *The Poems of Anne Countess of Winchilsea* (Chicago, 1903), although this has long been recognized as incomplete: it omits, among other things, the large body of manuscript poems held at Wellesley College, Massachusetts and recently edited by J. M. Ellis D'Allesandro (Florence, 1988). She has been equally badly served by biographers and critics: no full-length biography or comprehensive critical assessment has hitherto been attempted.

Barbara McGovern sets out to redress the balance. Her critical biography of Finch covers new ground in a number of ways. Finch's life has been painstakingly researched; her poetry—published and unpublished—is analysed; and, by reference to the political and historical conditions prevailing during her lifetime, her work is placed in context for the first time. This is, perhaps, of particular importance, since Finch was, as Barbara McGovern points out, displaced not only by her gender but also by her political ideology and her religious affiliation. Having been appointed, at the age of 21, maid of honour to Mary of Modena, the future wife of James II, she (and her husband) remained loyal to James when he was forced into exile by the Glorious Revolution of 1688, and were among the Nonjurors who refused to take the oath of allegiance to the new monarchs William and Mary. As a result of their persistent Jacobitism they were exiled from court and faced a future of persecution and financial hardship. They settled for a modest existence in Kent, in some ways beneficial for Finch's poetry, but it is clear that they frequently found country life lonely and isolated and, as time went on, Finch evidently felt restless and longed for the stimulation of London and its literary world. She did manage relatively brief periods of residence in London, and made the acquaintance of Swift and Pope and their circle, but it is not impossible that some of the melancholy which dogged her for most of her adult life resulted from the marginalized position in which she almost always felt herself to be.

Barbara McGovern argues that, as a poet, Anne Finch has been continually misrepresented. The fact that Wordsworth praised her in terms which suggest that she was primarily a nature poet has led to the inclusion in standard anthologies of her 'Nocturnal Reverie' and 'Petition for an Absolute Retreat' despite the fact that, as Barbara McGovern points out, 'of the more than 230 poems she wrote . . . only about half a dozen are devoted primarily to descriptions of external nature, and these, with the exception of the two just named, are not among her better poems' (p. 78). These poems, she goes on to argue, are products of their age which do not prefigure Romanticism in any significant way: Finch sees human beings as providing the spiritual continuity and depth to life, even within the context of a natural retreat. Those elements (images of wandering in lonely haunts, concern with shade and darkness) which could be read as Romantic have recently been identified as characteristic of feminist poetics.

Barbara McGovern devotes two chapters to Finch's use of the pastoral, a genre to which she returned constantly throughout her life and which she adapted to a wide range of styles and themes. The pastoral mode not only allowed her to write about love and passion in ways which, as a woman, she would not otherwise have been able to do with propriety, it also enabled her publicly to criticize her own age from the standpoint of a moral spokesperson confronting the ills of society. Barbara McGovern argues that Finch's most sustained effort at satire, 'Ardelia's Answer to Ephelia', bears many thematic and technical similarities to Rochester's 'Letter from Artemesia in the Town to Chloe in the Country', and points out that both poets were Royalists who moved for a time in the same circles. However, she sees Finch's poem as a revisionary version of Rochester's more famous satire.

Another chapter is devoted to 'The Spleen', the Pindaric ode for which Finch was best known in her own lifetime and throughout the eighteenth century. Barbara McGovern sees this as one of Finch's most important poems, representative in both style and content of a large body of her work. Finch herself was afflicted by melancholy—a disorder much more likely to affect women than men, and thus having gender-discriminatory implications—for most of her adult life. Although, as Barbara McGovern points out, there was a tradition of melancholic poetry at the period, Finch's poem is unique in that it combines an intensely personal approach with rigorous analysis and stark realism, and because the subject raises issues regarding both the nature of poetic commitment and the right of a woman to become a poet. The final years before Finch's death in 1720 seem to have been filled with adversity, and much of her later poetry places a marked emphasis on themes of religion and the significance of human suffering.

Barbara McGovern includes, as an Appendix, a selection of poems from the Wellesley Manuscript. These, together with the works discussed within the text, testify to the impressively wide range of style and subject-matter at Finch's command. Capable of both serious reflection and satirical wit, of tender tributes to marital love and female friendship as well as harsh judgements on the modes and manners of her time, she was clearly a considerable poet, and it is easy to agree with Barbara McGovern's judgement that she has been seriously underestimated.

Anne Finch and her Poetry has many virtues. Barbara McGovern has dealt efficiently with the biographical and historical material, although the lack of much in the way of documentary evidence means that her account of Finch's childhood and education, in particular, is based largely on surmise 'from what is known about her as an adult and from what is known about the typical upbringing for girls from upper class families at the time' (p. 10). The footnotes are extremely full and satisfyingly scholarly, although a reasonably well-informed reader may feel that some of the better-known historical background—the Great Fire of London, or the Glorious Revolution, for example—has been annotated rather too heavily. Although, admittedly, the lack of ready availability of much of the poetry means that paraphrase is sometimes called for, the analysis of individual poems seems at times a little ponderous and heavy-handed. Overall, however, the book is a useful addition to a relatively new field of English studies.

Source: Harriett Devine Jump, "Anne Finch and Her Poetry: A Critical Biography," in *Review of English Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 183, August 1995, pp. 410–12.

Charles H. Hinnant

In the following excerpt, Hinnant compares the themes in Finch's poems "To the Nightingale" and "A Nocturnal Reverie."

. . . The critics of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who once searched Finch's poetry for Romantic tendencies usually overlooked or minimized the doubts that prevent her from recognizing a transcendental legitimizing source of inspiration. They tacitly acknowledged her demystifying rejection of transcendent flight in their praise of her as an earth-bound "nature" poet. She is usually described as a poet of sensation, not song. Edmund Gosse is typical in his assessment of her capacity for "seeing nature and describing what she sees" and so of offering "accurate transcripts of country life." But even this conventional estimate of her poetry as descriptive rather than inspired or reflective appears misleading. On the surface, it seems reminiscent of Addison's Lockean distinction between the primary pleasures of imagination deriving from perceived objects and the secondary pleasures deriving from remembered or absent objects (*Spectator* 411). Yet it is not so easy to determine whether Finch was ever a nature poet in the Addisonian sense. Her two most famous nature poems, "The Petition for an Absolute Retreat" and "A Nocturnal Reverie," are not really descriptive, as is James Thomson's georgic "The Seasons," but elegiac or invocatory, summoning up a landscape that is either absent or hypothetical. A similar sense of absence also haunts Finch's powerful elegy, "Upon the Death of Sir William Twisden," where the weeping clouds and rivers of the pastoral elegist are exposed as illusory, fictive transmutations of reality. In a sense the poem argues that the mind must resist this seduction into illusion and hence must confront the unpleasant fact that "Nature (unconcern'd for our relief) / Persues her settl'd path, her fixt, and steaddy course" (lines 27–28). Description, a poetic strategy that fuses the eye and its object, seems to overlook the skepticism inherent in "Upon the Death of Sir William Twisden" as well as in "To The Nightingale," both of which presuppose a disjunction between subject and object.

"To the Nightingale" is also important in the history of poetry for another reason. It exemplifies what is perhaps Finch's most sophisticated attempt to master a recurrent problem of the seventeenth-century female poet: how to participate in a discourse in which the poet is defined as a masculine subject. Outwardly, the poem remains faithful to the conventional structure of ode and lyric, organizing itself around the dyad of (masculine) poet and (feminine) muse.



THE CRITICS OF THE NINETEENTH AND EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURIES WHO ONCE SEARCHED FINCH'S POETRY FOR ROMANTIC TENDENCIES USUALLY OVERLOOKED OR MINIMIZED THE DOUBTS THAT PREVENT HER FROM RECOGNIZING A TRANSCENDENTAL LEGITIMIZING SOURCE OF INSPIRATION."

But the nature of their roles is altogether different from that traditionally associated with the two figures. Finch's purpose is certainly not to show the archetypal permanence of the distinction, nor is it (as in "The Introduction") to show the ill effects of the distinction upon the female poet. Instead, Finch initially at least wants to universalize the opposition radically, by stripping it of the customary attributes of gender, by elevating the poet, muse, and nightingale to ideal categories. All of the characteristics that make the muse feminine—beauty, grace, pity, harmony with nature, and so on—disappear. There is no room in this version of the nightingale for an explicit allusion to the mute Philomela—the classical archetype of woman as victim, nor for Sidney's nightingale whose "throat in tunes expresseth / What grief her breast oppresseth, / For Tereus' force on her chaste will prevailing" (lines 6–8). There is instead a process of idealization, an exchange of attributes, which transforms the grief-stricken female singer into an exemplary model, one that applies to all poets. Yet this process of idealization necessarily involves a suppression of the gender that enables this model to come into existence. The universality of the figure of the poet who "when best he sings, is plac'd against a Thorn" (line 13) depends upon a figure herself mute, unable to make herself intelligible.

Because the figure of the poet is universalized in "To The Nightingale," the anxiety of female authorship is not problematical in this poem. Suppressing the customary attributes of gender helps to make room for a different kind of concern, one that is poetic rather than cultural. The muse is called forth to incarnate an

ideal in which there will be no disparity between sound and meaning: "Words" and "Accents" are to be fused into a single "fluent Vein" in which "Syllables" and "Sense" are inseparable (lines 17–21). The muse and the nightingale are not, however, to be allowed to collapse into one another. The muse is rather asked to retain "Still some Spirit of the Brain" because it would otherwise yield a primitive and undifferentiated world of sound, instead of a complex and organized unison of sound and sense which can serve as the goal as well as the inspiration of poetry. This distinction is linked to Henry More's contention that while "a Nightingale may vary with her voice into a multitude of interchangeable Notes, and various Musical falls and risings . . . should she but sing one Hymn or *Hallelujah*, I should deem her no bird but an Angel." But Finch lacks More's faith in the superiority of a divinely inspired human art to nature: while the muse of "To The Nightingale" may inspire, she is finally powerless. The speaker's recognition of this impotence is undoubtedly accompanied by the loss of a conviction in the possibility of a union of sound and sense. This loss of faith is consistent with the new understanding of language that emerged in the late seventeenth century. By acknowledging a gulf between the nightingale's song and the poet's speech, Finch tacitly adopts the point of view of theorists like Hobbes and Locke who deny the naturalness of the received link between signifier and signified.

"To The Nightingale" is thus explicitly concerned with the limits of poetic signification. Because the invocation to the muse is evoked in terms of its possible relation to a surrogate self with whom the poet cannot identify, we become aware that poetry cannot become the unequivocal reappropriation of natural song. In *An Essay on Criticism* Pope was to give canonical formulation to the doctrine that the sound must at least "seem an echo to the sense." But here the attempt at imitative harmony seems only futile, not "poetic." By a kind of downward transformation, its shifting octosyllabic couplets, the medium of the "middle" style, only succeed in drawing attention to the close relation between poetic language and discursive prose. Through the contrast between music and speech, Finch acknowledges a collapse of faith in the power of the poet as singer rather than as persuader. Yet it is precisely this collapse of faith which may help us to assess the main body of her poetry. Implicit in many other poems is a tendency to self-consciousness which results from their overtly explicit secondariness. The characteristic late seventeenth-century forms of beast fable, religious meditation, pastoral dialogue, and moralizing reflection, functioning as they do within the framework of the poetic enunciated in "To The Nightingale," recognize something substitutive and sentimental in lyric inspiration. As Brower said, though in another context, "there are in Lady Anne's poetry traces" of a "union of lyricism with the diction and movement of speech." By retaining touches of humor and wit, by refusing to purge diction of common usage, her poetry draws attention to the element of rhetoric and representation in poetic language. Many of Finch's poems may, as Brower insisted, be characterized as attenuated metaphysical verse, the work of a "minor poetess" in a period of transition. But one can also argue that "To The Nightingale" occupies a place in Finch's poetry analogous to Swift's renunciation of the Muse's "visionary pow'r" (line 152) in "Occasioned by Sir William Temple's Late Illness and Recovery" and to Pope's decision, announced in the "Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot," to abandon "Fancy's maze" and moralize "his song" (lines 340–41). The union of "rapture and cool gaiety" in her poetry, its reliance upon colloquial idiom, and its relative looseness of "texture," may imply a similar demystified rejection of transcendent flight—something which is asserted explicitly through the thematic concerns of "To The Nightingale."

Finch thus makes opposite use of a convention which previous poetic generations had used to affirm the validity of poetry as inspired discourse. The implications of her loss of confidence in that discourse are not confined to "To The Nightingale" but can be seen, in different ways, in such poems as "A Nocturnal Reverie" and "The Bird." In these poems, as in "To The Nightingale," poetic consciousness is envisaged as an "emptiness" or "lack" which seeks to coincide with a peace or plenitude that it attributes to something outside of itself—whether it be the "inferiour World" of domestic animals, a bird, or more specifically, the nightingale. In the conventional ode, this lack is reflected, as Norman Maclean put it, in the speaker's hope "that the quality he is contemplating . . . will make its power felt again in him." Yet the ambivalence generated by the speaker's failure to achieve this hope, which is evident in "To The Nightingale,"

is also present in the other two poems. In "A Nocturnal Reverie," this ambivalence is not only manifested in the hypothetical mode in which the poem's argument is cast but also in the restraint which confines "the free Soul" to the claim that it "thinks" the "inferiour World" is like its own (lines 43, 46). Also at issue is the anticipation of morning that prevents the speaker's experience of "solemn Quiet" from becoming anything more than a momentary respite from a renewal of "Our Cares, our Toils, our Clamours . . . / Or Pleasures, seldom reach'd, again pursu'd" (lines 45–50). In "The Bird" the speaker's ambivalence is manifested in a doubt which represents the bird as alternatively guardian of the heart and male surrogate, the "false accomplice" of love (line 30). "The Tree," by contrast, avoids this ambivalence because it presupposes an absolute separation between human spectator and natural object and thus achieves the serene classical beauty that Ivor Winters detected in the poem. That "The Tree" is epideictic and commemorative only serves to confirm its detachment from a surrogate which the poet seeks to praise rather than to emulate . . . .

Source: Charles H. Hinnant, "Song and Speech in Anne Finch's 'To the Nightingale,'" in *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, Vol. 31, No. 3, Summer 1991, pp. 499–513.

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FURTHER READING

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Down and Ackerle demonstrate how women in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England used writing as a means of self-expression and how their social and familial position affected how and why they wrote. The authors consider many types of writing, ranging from recipe cards to diaries.

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McGovern, Barbara, and Charles Hinnant, eds., *The Anne Finch Wellesley Manuscript Poems*, University of Georgia Press, 1998.

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Mendelson, Sarah, and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England: 1550–1720*, Oxford University Press, 2000.

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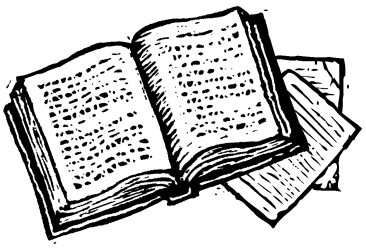
Oranges

GARY SOTO

1985

The poem "Oranges" by Gary Soto tells the story of a twelve-year-old boy who goes over to a girl's house on a cold December morning, bringing two oranges in his pocket. They go out walking and end up at a drugstore candy counter, where he offers to buy her any candy she wants. When the chocolate bar she chooses costs more than he has in his pocket, the boy finds himself in a potentially embarrassing situation. He quickly manages to appeal to the store's cashier, subtly, without the girl noticing, and is given the candy. As they walk back to her house, he basks in both the gratitude of the girl and the charity of the store clerk, feeling warmth and heat emanate from himself, as if he were able to hold not just the orange he is peeling but fire itself.

This is one of the most popular, widely recognized poems by the renowned Chicano poet. Soto first gained fame as a poet, then went on to use his stories about his childhood, with its poverty and the conflicts of growing up in a bicultural household, to become a familiar name in the field of young adult literature. Originally published in Soto's 1985 poetry collection *Black Hair*, "Oranges" is also included in his 1995 collection *New and Selected Poems*. In addition, the last line of this poem was used for the title of another book that "Oranges" is included in called *A Fire in My Hands*, which is a collection of poems intended for grades six through ten.





Gary Soto (AP Images)

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Gary Soto was born in Fresno, California, on April 12, 1952. His grandparents were born in Mexico and came to California to work in the booming agricultural industry of the San Joaquin Valley. His father picked grapes for the Sunmaid Raisin Company and his mother worked in potato fields. When Soto was five, his father was killed in an industrial accident at work, and his mother raised Gary, his older brother, and his younger sister on her own. Soto attended public schools in Fresno and was admittedly a poor student, graduating from Roosevelt High School with a low "C" average. He started reading in high school though, and more importantly, that is where he began thinking like a poet. After graduating from Roosevelt in 1970, he went to Fresno City College for a short time before transferring to California State University—Fresno. He graduated magna cum laude from California State in 1974 with a bachelor of arts degree and then went on to earn his master of fine arts in Creative Writing at University of California—Irvine in 1976. While in graduate school he married Carolyn Sadako Oda; they had one daughter, Mariko Heidi, who grew up to be a veterinarian.

In 1979, Soto began a long association with the University of California—Berkeley: he was an assistant professor from 1979 to 1985, an associate professor of English and ethnic studies from 1985 to 1991, and a part-time senior lecturer from 1991 to 1993. During that time, his fame as a writer grew. Among the many forms of recognition awarded him in his early years were a U.S. Award at the International Poetry Forum in 1976 for his first collection of poems, *The Elements of San Joaquin*; a Guggenheim fellowship from 1979 to 1980; and National Endowment for the Arts fellowships in 1981 and 1991. He first published "Oranges" in his 1985 poetry collection *Black Hair*.

As Soto's reputation as a poet grew, he also published several books of memoirs, relating what childhood in the San Joaquin Valley was like for the son of immigrants. These memoirs include *Living Up the Street* (1985), *Small Faces* (1986), *Lesser Evils: Ten Quartets* (1988), and *A Summer Life* (1990). His memories of his childhood led him to writing for children and he has become an acclaimed author in the field of children's literature, starting with the 1990 publication of *Baseball in April and Other Stories*. His works for children range from picture books for young children to short story and poem collections geared for young adults. In 1992 he stopped teaching to devote all of his energies to his prolific writing career.

POEM SUMMARY

Stanza 1

"Oranges" begins with a narrator looking back at his childhood. He remembers a particular experience of walking side by side with a girl. All that readers know about the two characters in this poem is that he is twelve years old at the time of its events, and that she is presumably twelve or near that. When the poem begins, the narrator is alone, having not reached the girl's house yet.

In the third and fourth lines, the speaker introduces the oranges that are referred to in the title of the poem. There are two of them, and the boy is on his way to pick up his date, so readers might infer that he means to share the oranges with the girl. They are not represented here as something positive, though, but rather as a burden. In addition, he allows his focus to stray

MEDIA ADAPTATIONS



- Soto reads his poem "Oranges" and discusses his interpretation of it in *Seeing Anew: Rhetorical Figures in Poetry*, a videotape released by Maryland Public Television in 1992.
- Soto maintains a Web site at http://www.garysoto.com that includes descriptions of his works and thoughts about his life.

from the poem's main situation, his first experience with a girl, and instead makes a point of dwelling on the cold weather.

Lines 5 through 7 offer readers a graphic, sensory description of the cold of the day that had been referred to earlier. Soto's description of frost on the ground and breath condensing as it is exhaled indicates that it may have been an unusual cold snap, as most of his poems are autobiographical and take place in Fresno, California, where he grew up: the average temperature in Fresno barely touches the freezing mark at night in December. The fact that the weather was strangely colder than usual could account in part for the prominent place it has in the speaker's memory.

Lines 8 through 12 show the young protagonist approaching the house of the girl he is to go walking with. Though he has never been out with her before, he knows her house well, having looked at it in the night and in the day, familiar with the porch light that burns continuously. Almost as foreboding as the cold weather is the fact that her dog barks at the boy; readers can assume that the barking dog is hers because she comes out of the house in response to its noise, with no mention of the boy knocking or ringing a doorbell.

The fact that this is no casual meeting, but a prearranged date, is indicated in line 13 by the fact that the girl comes to the boy when she sees him. The fact that it is a date is implied in line 15 by the fact that she has taken the time to apply makeup to her face, wanting to make herself look appealing. She has a bright, happy face, and he smiles, and in line 16 the narrator makes a point of mentioning that he touched her on the shoulder, a significant enough gesture to mention, though nothing is made of it.

Lines 17 through 21 describe the neighborhood that they walk through together. It is a commercial area that has a used car lot that twelve-year-olds would feel comfortable cutting through, and it is a conscientious enough community to have recently planted new trees in an effort toward civic beautification.

In lines 22 through 24, the poem describes the feel of the old time drugstore that they enter. The bell rings when the door is opened so that whoever is working there, involved in other things, can know when a customer has entered the shop. The saleslady is a matronly woman who approaches her customers with individual care and attention. The narrow aisles indicate an emphasis on stocking products, without the kind of savvy attention to customer psychology that goes into organizing modern shops.

The boy's grand gesture in lines 25 through 27 is obviously the fulfillment of what he has been planning all along. He gestures to the candy display, offering to buy whichever candy she picks.

Though it is never explicitly addressed, readers can infer that these two young people live in poverty. For one thing, the girl reacts with glee to an offer of a candy bar in lines 28 through 30, implying that she does not have much chance to purchase any candy for herself. The most obvious indicator of their depressed situation, however, is the fact that the boy does not even have the price of a candy bar in his pocket; he only has a nickel, while the candy bar she chooses costs a dime (lines 31–33).

In lines 34 through 38, the boy quickly thinks of a way to deal with the embarrassing situation of having offered to buy the girl a candy bar but not having enough to pay for it. He does not object, or draw attention to his poverty. Instead, he approaches the woman who is running the store and silently offers her a deal, offering her half of the price of the candy and one of the two oranges that he brought along to share with the girl.

One of the most significant actions in this poem occurs in lines 38 through 43. The boy and the saleslady establish eye contact across the

candy bar, nickel, and orange that he has put on the counter. From the look in his eyes, she can tell why he is not offering her the correct price of the candy he wishes to buy, and why it is so very important to him to buy that candy without being embarrassed. Soto does not even bother to tell readers that the woman allowed him to pay half the price of the candy with an orange, leaving readers instead to understand that his offer has been accepted from the empathy that develops between the boy and the salesclerk.

Stanza 2

The second stanza starts on line 43 with one word, indented, to give readers a sense that more than the setting has changed: the mood of the poem has changed, too, as the boy and the girl have reached a new point in their relationship, with a new closeness. While the first stanza emphasized the coldness outside when the boy was walking alone, the descriptions in the second stanza, lines 44–46, show that the day has warmed a little bit: the hiss of the cars as they pass on the street shows that the frost that once crunched beneath the boy's feet has melted, and the fog that hangs in the air would not be possible if the weather were below freezing.

In lines 47 and 48, the boy takes hold of the girl's hand. She does not object, but still he does not hold it for long, letting go in line 49 after only two blocks. He knows that she accepts him, but that the chocolate that he has bought her is very important to her as well.

The last six lines of the poem, lines 51–56, contain an extended description of the orange that the boy peels as the girl is unwrapping her chocolate bar. Soto does not explicitly describe what makes it so special; that much is made clear through the events that preceded this moment, with the boy bringing an orange for the girl he likes and the salesclerk accepting the orange as payment. Instead, the poem leaves reader with a visual image. The brightness of the orange is contrasted with the grayness of the dark, cool day, and then it is described as looking from afar like a fire in the boy's hand. Since the connotations of fire, in this context, are all positive, readers are left feeling that the boy's outing with the girl has warmed and enlightened him, and that the one orange left is an emblem of the special feeling that came over him that day.

THEMES

Coming of Age

"Oranges" is the story of a twelve-year-old boy who is crossing an emotional threshold and entering into a new period of his life, facing things that he has never encountered before. This is made clear in the first few words of the poem. The fact that he has never walked with a girl until the events related here indicates to readers that they are about to witness something that will change his life. In doing something for the first time ever, especially in entering into his first adult relationship, the boy is gaining some aspect of maturity.

A literary work about a young person who is entering into a phase of adulthood that he or she has never experienced before is referred to as a coming-of-age story. Such tales often end with the protagonist losing his or her idealism, though as "Oranges" shows, this is not always the case. In this poem, the narrator does pass over from being inexperienced with the opposite sex to feeling comfortable in a relationship with a girl. He does not acquire the cynicism that is often associated with a loss of innocence. If anything, the way that his walk with the girl turns out makes the boy more trusting of life and its possibilities than he was before. Though writers often use coming-of-age stories to introduce characters to the crushing responsibilities of adulthood, Soto uses "Oranges" to show that growing and learning can lead to a sense of wonder.

Empathy

The dramatic tension of this story derives from the fact that the boy finds his desires in conflict with his means. He wants to impress the girl by buying her whatever she wants, but the chocolate she chooses costs twice what he can afford. It is a situation that could end tragically, leaving the boy humiliated and cynical about women, but instead Soto shows the boy making a tacit agreement with the woman he is supposed to pay, offering her an orange for half the price of the candy bar. No words pass between them about this deal. He does not have to explain his situation; it is clear. She sees the young people together and she knows what the boy is trying to do when he buys the candy bar, just as she knows, from the fact that he has done what he can to make up the missing money with what he

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY



- Examine the changes in dating patterns since the 1960s, when this poem probably takes place. Create a graph that shows the ages at which young people have generally started dating throughout the past hundred years, and then make another graph that shows how the average life span has changed over the same time. Write a short essay that explains what you think the two have to do with each other.
- Write a short story or a poem that is a sequel to "Oranges" from the first-person point of view of the girl.
- The ability to make fire has always been considered a defining human achievement. Consider the poem's last line. Are the boy's accomplishments in the poem comparable to the historic discovery of the fire-making process? If so, how? If not, why? Write an essay in which you discuss whether or not the events outlined in the poem are momentous.
- One theme of "Oranges" is commercialism. Collect advertisements for processed foods, like candy, and natural foods, like fruit, and create a collage. Identify the advertising techniques used in each item you included. Who seems to be the target audience for each advertisement? Which advertisements are most persuasive? Summarize your analysis in an oral presentation, using your collage as a visual aid.

does have—an orange—that he does not want to cheat the store.

She is able to understand how he feels so thoroughly that she falls into an unspoken conspiracy with him, helping him keep the girl unaware that her choice of candy is a burden to him. Soto shows that empathy, the ability to understand the emotions of another person, is one of the most important human emotions by using symbolism. The title of the poem is "Oranges"; one orange is used at the end to show that the boy has a newfound sense of warmth; the other orange is left with the woman at the drugstore, not as a substitute for cash as much as a way of giving her something truly good in thanks for her understanding.

Commercialism

In this poem, Soto makes a subtle comment on the different economic values that are held by people living in the same community. The boy, who is presumably from a poor background if he cannot easily afford a candy bar, arrives for his walk with the girl with two oranges in his pocket, which he must intend to share with her. His plan fails, however, when she does not want the natural, available fruit that he has, but instead finds that the manufactured, packaged chocolate on the store shelf has more appeal.

Soto does not use the girl's choice to indicate that she is wrong to be swayed by the consumer product. In fact, the girl does not have a choice at all: the boy does not offer her one of the oranges before trying to impress her by offering her pick from the candy counter. By doing so, he is implicitly saying that the products on the candy shelf must necessarily be more impressive than the orange that he brought for her. From the way that the girl lights up at his offer of candy, it is likely that she comes from a family that is just as impoverished as his, making the store-bought product more alluring than the oranges that grow commonly around Soto's native San Joaquin Valley.

STYLE

Narrative Verse and Free Verse

"Oranges" is an example of a narrative poem, or one that tells a story. Narrative verse is traditionally considered to be one of the four basic literary modes of poetry, along with lyric, dramatic, and didactic poetry. Narrative poems include the oldest poems known to history: epics such as the *Iliad* of Homer (circa eighth or ninth century BCE) and the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, which is dated to the seventh century BCE. Geoffrey Chaucer's fourteenth-century story *The Canterbury Tales* is a collection of interrelated narrative poems tied together to make one overall story. Many older narrative poems are believed to be stories that were passed



Boy looking in frosted window at a pile of oranges (© Minnesota Historical Society | Corbis)

from one person to another, from generation to generation for hundreds of years before finally being written down.

As with most narratives, Soto's poem is more concerned with the story that it is telling than with using a particular poetic style to capture readers' imaginations. "Oranges" is written in free verse—it does not use any particular rhyme scheme or rhythm pattern to enforce its message. Instead, Soto keeps the action moving so that readers want to know what happens next. The fact that the story of the poem is something that happened to him, or at least could have happened to him, helps create a personal bond with readers, making the fate of the boy in the poem that much more meaningful to them.

First-Person Point of View

"Oranges" is told in the first person, from the perspective of one of the participants in the poem, but in some sense the person who is telling the story is a very different person from the boy who walks with the girl. The speaker of the poem is clearly telling the story years after the action took place. This distance in time gives the poem a feeling of calmness that would be lacking if the events were presented with more immediacy. The very fact that he has chosen to tell about this event, noting that it was the first time he was in a date-like situation, indicates by itself that this was an important moment of his life. Soto's decision to draw attention to the adult speaker in the first line, though, helps to show readers that this one long-ago event is a relatively small part of an overall life. In the last line, he takes an even wider perspective, switching to a different point of view, relating what an observer who was far away from the action might have seen and how they might have interpreted what they saw.

Motif

Soto uses the cold weather as a motif, or recurring device or image used to emphasize the mood or message of the work. In the first segment, the boy's loneliness and foreboding about approaching a girl's house for the first time is magnified by the fact that he is cold. Mentioning the external effects of the cold, such as his visible breath and the sound of frost crunching beneath his footsteps, draws attention to his apprehension by showing just how hyper-aware he is to sensory input. When the girl comes out of her house the first thing she does is pull on her gloves, which is a reasonable defense against the cold air but also draws readers' attention to her overall defensiveness in this new and uncertain situation.

By contrast, the weather seems warmer after they leave drug store. The crunchy frost has melted to wetness, which makes cars on the street hiss on the pavement and moisture has risen into the air as fog. The girl's hand is uncovered during the walk home, allowing the boy to take hold of it briefly. At the end of the poem, Soto uses the weather as a visual aid. The gray, foggy day is invoked to contrast the brightness of the orange in his hand, making it look even more vibrant, like fire.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Mexican Immigration in California

Soto's poetry is often autobiographical, as is the case with "Oranges." Soto was twelve—the age of the boy in this poem—in 1964. He grew up in a Mexican American family in Fresno, California, a city that drew many Mexican immigrants who came to the United States looking for jobs in the agricultural fields of the surrounding San Joaquin Valley. Field work has always been difficult physical labor, often involving stooping to the ground to harvest low-growing fruits and vegetables such as lettuce, artichoke, or strawberries. It is the physical labor involved in harvesting produce in the sun that has traditionally made the work unappealing for Americans who are able to find jobs that offer more money for less work. Workers from Mexico, which has had a more subdued economy, have crossed over to the United States for decades into border states like California, Texas, and New Mexico, to accept salaries that were much higher than they could earn in their own country.

Many of the workers came into the United States without proper documentation, which left them at the mercy of their employers, who could withhold wages, refuse decent housing or toilet facilities, or even physically abuse undocumented workers without much fear of punishment. That changed during the early 1960s, around the time when this poem takes place.

The factor that had the most effect on the lives of Mexican farm laborers was the advent of the United Farm Workers. It was founded by Dolores Huerta and Cesar Chávez, two community organizers who met while working for the Community Service Organization in Stockton, California. In 1962 they left to form the National Farm Workers Association, an organization devoted to fighting for the rights of migrant field workers. In 1965, the NFWA came to national prominence when it joined with the predominantly Filipino Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee in a five-year strike against grape growers in Delano, California. The two groups merged into the United Farm Workers, and Chávez, who led a 350-mile march from Delano to the state capitol in Sacramento, became the recognizable face of the labor movement and an iconic personality in many Mexican American households. His powerful influence on the Latinos of California is evident in Soto's 2003 biography, *Cesar Chávez: A Hero for Everyone*.

Multicultural Literature

Soto is often associated with the movement toward cultural diversity in literary studies because he has frequently written about his Mexican American background. Since the 1960s, there has been more emphasis on introducing examples from other cultures into recommended reading lists for schools in the United States. Although founded on the principle of the melting pot, which holds that the country is a place where people from around the world bring their cultural backgrounds to mix with those of others, the standard literature in the United States was, for most of the country's history, very narrow in focus. It favored those of European background, using the country's historical ties to Great Britain as an explanation for treating British literature as the United States's antecedent. In the 1960s, however, different segments

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **1960s:** The standard price for a Hershey's chocolate bar is uniformly five cents, suggesting that the candy bar chosen by the girl was a more exclusive brand. Hershey bars do not rise in price to ten cents until 1969.

  1980s: Variations in the costs of ingredients have made the Hershey Company give up the practice of holding to a standard national price for their chocolates.

  Today: The Hershey's chocolate bar still dominates the candy market, though there are many other inexpensive brands of chocolate as well as more expensive ones that appeal to refined tastes.

- **1960s:** The local drugstore is a place known by everyone in the neighborhood. A clerk in a drugstore has discretion about how to enter a sale in the cash register.

  1980s: Due to corporate expansion, large nationwide chains begin to replace local drug stores, offering lower prices. The Universal Product Code (UPC) has been developed and is printed on most items; prices automatically come up on the cash register when the code is scanned.

  Today: Few communities have independently owned drugstores. UPCs have made cashier work so automated that many stores now trust customers to check out their own orders.

- **1960s:** The number of Mexican American authors with national reputations is very limited. Writers like Tomás Rivera and Luis Valdez become standout members of California collaborative projects such as Quinto Sol Publications and Teatro Campesino.

  1980s: One result of the civil rights movements of the 1960s is a growing respect for writers who come from outside of the familiar mainstream culture. Writers such as Soto, Sandra Cisneros, and Al Martinez are just a few of the authors who comprise a blossoming in Mexican American/Chicano literature.

  Today: While literature by Mexican Americans continues to flourish, many Mexican American writers resist being categorized by ethnicity. Writers are frequently discussed on the basis of the quality of their works and not their ethnic background.

of society began to claim their traditions were at least as relevant as those handed down from Europe. The most conspicuous of these was the black pride movement, which took the tenets of the civil rights movement of the postwar generation to the next logical step, asserting that it is just as wrong to deny the importance of black Americans' historical experiences as it is to deny that they deserve equal treatment under the law. Another influential social movement in the 1960s was the American Indian movement, organized in 1968 to advance the rights of Native Americans. The National Council of La Raza began in the same year as an advocacy group for Mexicans, and quickly expanded to support Hispanics of various national origins. The successes of these movements, as well as others like them, stemmed from a broadening awareness of the many different cultures that work together in the United States.

Throughout the 1970s and '80s, as awareness of cultural diversity in the United States grew, schools gave more attention to representing members of ethnic and cultural minorities in their assigned readings. Standard reading lists that favored traditional writers, mostly the males of European descent of earlier generations who came to be referred to as "dead white men," were opened up to contemporary writers, women, and minorities. In particular, the writings of Mexican American writers, referred to collectively as Chicano literature, came to the attention

of literary critics and audiences in unprecedented numbers, owing to the wave of immigrants from Spanish-speaking countries under new, relaxed immigration laws and to a heightened sense of ethnic pride in the Mexican American community.

It was around this time that Soto began publishing his writing. His clear voice and control of language made him a poet respected among his peers, and the fact that he brought to literature a perspective on Mexican American life that had not been represented often in print fit in well with the drive to create reading lists that reflected broader cultural diversity.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

Critics have been impressed with Soto's poetry throughout his entire poetic career. By the time "Oranges" was published in the mid-1980s, Soto was already frequently published in magazines with national circulation and was often included in poetry anthologies. His work was often included as an example of Chicano poetry, though reviewers often made a point of mentioning that his poetry was, regardless of ethnic labels, simply fine work. For instance, Tim D'Evelyn, reviewing the 1985 poetry collection *Black Hair*, which included "Oranges," for the *Christian Science Monitor*, mentions early in his review that Soto taught in the department of Chicano studies at Berkeley; later in his review D'Evelyn notes that "Soto deserves attention. His extremely plain style keeps him honest. But I'm pretty sure he won't take praise if it is offered to him as a representative Chicano poet.... Somehow Gary Soto has become not an important Chicano poet but an important American poet."

A few years later, some of Soto's poems for young adults, including "Oranges," were brought together in a collection called *A Fire In My Hands*. Because of the plain style and the author's notes about his inspiration for each poem, reviewers began looking at Soto as an inspiration for beginning writers. Barbara Chatton, writing in *School Library Journal* in 1992, praises the collection, noting that Soto's writing "provide[s] gentle encouragement" to young writers. Heather M. Lisowski made the same point when, fourteen years later, she reviewed the revised and expanded edition of *A Fire In My Hands* for *School Library Journal*, adding that the book "demonstrates the genesis of a poem as well as the compelling universality of the human experience."

Overall, critical response to Soto's poetry has been consistently positive. Rochelle Ratner, reviewing Soto's *New and Selected Poems* in *Library Journal* summed up the feeling that seems to be the consensus: "Soto has it all—the learned craft,... a fascinating autobiography, and the storyteller's ability to manipulate memories into folklore."

CRITICISM

David Kelly

Kelly is a writer and an instructor of creative writing and literature. In this essay, he rejects the standard interpretation that "Oranges" presents a vision of childhood innocence.

The poem "Oranges" by Gary Soto is frequently included in anthologies of literature as a sole example of Soto's writing. Readers praise it, finding it to be pleasant and unchallenging. The assumption that this poem is about a charming courtship between innocent children may be touching, but it does not really respond to the facts given in the poem. "Oranges" does reaffirm the basic goodness of life, but its view of young love finding its way is anything but sweet.

The poem tells readers nothing about its narrator at the start except that he is telling about a time when he was twelve years old. In the story, the boy goes to a girl's house one December morning to walk with her. The fact that it is just a walk with her, nothing more, is quaint enough without it being something he has never had a chance to do before, and readers are naturally inclined to root for the innocent, nonthreatening child. Though it may be his first romantic experience, the walk together is not spontaneous: the girl is waiting for him wearing makeup, and she runs out to join him on the sidewalk as soon as he has arrived. Soto refers to this as walking together, but it could also be properly called a date.

The boy shows up for his date bearing a humble present: two oranges, presumably one for her and one for himself. Curiously, Soto does not mention any dialog passing between the two children, so readers do not know why

WHAT DO I READ NEXT?



- Many of Soto's works reflect his childhood in Fresno, California, the setting of this poem. In particular, readers can see the background of the boy who is presented here in *Living Up The Street*, a 1985 memoir that was reprinted in 1992 by Laurel Leaf.
- Soto's poem "That Girl," included in his 2002 collection *A Fire in My Hands: Revised and Expanded Edition*, describes a boy who has an infatuation with a girl. Both that poem and "Oranges" are autobiographical and readers can see the relationship developing between these two young people.
- David Hernandez, a Puerto Rican poet, uses images from childhood such as kites, crayons, and pop-up books to capture the feeling of love in his poem "Kid Love," available in his collection *The Urban Poems*, published by Fractal Edge Press in 2004.
- Richard Rodriguez is a Mexican American writer who, like Soto, grew up in a California agricultural town, Sacramento. His autobiography about his formative years, *Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*, is considered one of the best memoirs published in recent decades for the way that it interweaves his personal development with social issues relevant to Chicano lives. Originally published in 1982, a new edition was released by Dial Press in 2004.
- Sandra Cisneros is a Chicana writer whose works cover many of the same themes that Soto explores. Her 1983 novel *The House on Mango Street* follows a twelve-year-old girl, Esperanza Cordero, as she grows up in a Chicago neighborhood that is much more closed than the Fresno of Soto's poem.

their date follows the course that it does. Does he have the idea to go to the drugstore, or does she? Or was it the thing he suggested when he asked her out originally, the premise of their date? The



WHETHER THEIR ALOOFNESS IS DUE TO THEIR YOUTHFUL ANXIETY OR THE FINANCIAL EXCHANGE AT THE HEART OF THEIR RELATIONSHIP IS DEBATABLE, BUT ONE THING IS CLEAR: THE BOY AND THE GIRL ARE JOINED BY A CANDY BAR."

basic foundation of their relationship is left unexplored.

What readers are told is that, arriving at the drugstore, the boy gestures to the candy counter, offering the girl her choice of candies. This causes the poem's dramatic complication as the girl's choice is a candy bar that costs twice as much as he has with him. For a moment, humiliation looms, but the boy immediately fixes things by making a deal with the sales lerk without a word passing between them. He puts on the counter a nickel and an orange, and seeing before her a poor young man who is desperate to impress a girl, recognizing his discomfort, realizing that he would not do anything so strange unless he had to, the woman behind the counter chooses to play along and accept his offer without drawing attention to it.

As they walk off together, the girl remains blissfully ignorant of what has just transpired. She holds the boy's hand for a short while. The poem ends with the boy feeling a sense of power, as if, instead of an orange, he holds fire itself in his hand, warding off the December cold. It is as if he has tapped into one of the basic elements of life, of humanity itself.

In some sense, he really has touched upon one of life's building blocks because he has, over the course of this poem, learned a great deal about what makes the world go around. The oddity here is that many readers find this poem cute, seeing it as an insignificant story about an awkward young lover. There is a young couple in "Oranges," but their relationship is hardly romantic. Longing occurs and deals are struck, but what does not show up in the poem is love.

A young, inexperienced boy would know little about love, of course, no matter what he knows about wanting to love—this is what

inexperience is all about. His unfamiliarity with what he is doing may explain for readers why everything seems strange to him. Soto captures his uncertainty perfectly in the poem's removed, objective tone. "Oranges" tracks the events that transpire with focus and clarity, but it never dips below the surface to offer up what the boy thinks about anything, including what he thinks about the girl he is so desperate to impress. Of course he "likes" her—they would not be taking this walk otherwise. His liking her naturally means that he wants her to like him, too, but somewhere beyond the range of the poem, the boy's desire for the girl has passed a fork in the road. One path leads toward the selfless, shy love that so many readers see when they read this work, and the other leads toward a drive to possess the girl, which seems to be the direction that the boy has actually taken.

What makes the poem seem charming is the boy's apparent insecurity. He is so desperate for the girl's esteem that he jumps into a situation and quickly finds himself over his head. It is not prudent of him to offer the girl anything she wants from a candy display that holds items costing more than he can afford. There are innocent explanations available for such fecklessness. It may be that he comes from a life of such poverty that even such a small financial transaction is strange to him, and so he has no idea, when he makes his offer, that the nickel he is holding might not be sufficient. It might seem to him like such a grand amount that it can purchase anything. Or it may be that he assumes for some reason that the girl will understand that his offer of "anything" applies only to the less expensive items. If he operates under some civil code that makes him avoid embarrassing others, he may assume that she understands the same rules. Or it may be that he is so driven and wild in his need to impress her that the reality of his finances just does not cross his young mind.

Whatever it is that compels the boy to make an offer he cannot support, he finds himself suddenly, unexpectedly in the potentially catastrophic position of having to take back his offer, admit his poverty, and tell the girl that she can only have some less expensive candy, if such a thing exists. This would be catastrophic because of the shame he would have to bear, though, in a larger sense, it might be good for their budding romance to test the girl's patience. If she were to lose interest in the boy after finding out that his finances are limited, she might be someone he would be better off without.

This, after all, raises the seamy aspect of Soto's poem. The tender romance that it presents is, at its center, based on a successful financial transaction. The boy expects this, but then he is just a frightened and inexperienced child. More discomforting is the fact that the poem itself offers no hint that the boy is naïve in his understanding of relationships. The girl's affections never do prove any more substantial than the boy's purchasing power.

Instead of showing that the boy is childish in his nervous desire to be her financial supporter, the poem goes on to verify his expectations. After he provides the girl with her desired chocolate, the poem refers to her in line 47 as "my" girl; after that, the boy takes her hand, but their one affectionate moment is cut short so that she can get to her real interest, her candy. It is the transaction that holds them together, not an emotional connection.

Yet this is not a cynical poem; it is just cynical about romance. There is a true emotional exchange in the poem. The boy starts his walk with two oranges, one for himself and one as a gift for the person he cares about, and at the end of the poem the two people left with the oranges are the ones who have found an honest human connection.

Though readers may be inclined to focus their attentions on the relationship between the young boy and girl, it is the boy's silent arrangement with the grown woman that really provides this poem's moral center. Both "sales" and "lady" in the title that Soto gives the clerk serve to make her seem more alien, putting her at arm's length from the couple at the center of the poem. The poem sets her up as a bit player, a functionary, a prop who is no more important to the story than the used car lot or the tiered candy display, but she ends up providing the poem's one big surprise and its one big emotional moment.

In recognizing the boy's dilemma, this cashier stands in for all readers who sympathize with him, acting as readers would like to believe they would act to help out the poor, clueless, longing child. She joins into a conspiracy with him to hide his financial shortcoming. Their conspiracy is not a deal hammered out at the bargaining table, but is instead arranged spontaneously, with one silent glance. This boy's embarrassing

financial situation is a common one: the clerk recognizes it, and she then goes one step further by accepting an orange, a token gesture, for cash, absorbing a financial loss. It may be a small gesture, but it is a much greater tribute to their common humanity than anything that transpires between the boy and the girl. Whether their aloofness is due to their youthful anxiety or the financial exchange at the heart of their relationship is debatable, but one thing is clear: the boy and the girl are joined by a candy bar. The boy's exchange with the saleslady is based on the sort of recognition that holds the human race together.

It is natural that readers would want to focus their attention on the boy's discomfort in this poem, finding him endearing in his youthful attempt to impress the girl he desires. But the cuteness, unfortunately, just is not there. The poem shows no bond beyond the candy that the boy gives the girl to buy her affection. This is not the heartwarming tale that many readers want to project onto the events that are actually explained on the page. Even worse, though, is the fact that summarizing this as a "young romance" poem might cause some readers to miss the true wonder that Soto is revealing for them, which is the magical way in which humans of different generations and genders can see themselves in one another and are willing to reach out to help.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on "Oranges," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2009.

Tamra Orr

In the following excerpt, Orr discusses the autobiographical nature of Soto's poetry.

It is hard to pinpoint what one factor has made Gary Soto the popular author he is today. Is it because he is one of the first young adult writers to devote himself exclusively to detailing the Mexican American experience? Not only is he a Chicano, but everything he writes—stories, books, and poems—centers completely on Chicano characters. "I don't talk about ethnicity," he says. "I show ethnicity."

All of his writing centers on his own life or the lives of fictional people embodying and expressing their Mexican heritage. Much of Soto's work is autobiographical in that he writes a lot about growing up as a Mexican American. It is important to him to create and share new stories about his heritage. Soto says, "There are many different kinds of writers. Some people like to write things that are factual and historical. For me, the joy of being a writer is to take things I see and hear and then rearrange them. I like to tamper with reality and create new possibilities." When fellow Mexican American author Alejandro Morales asked Soto during a recorded interview if it is a burden being a Chicano writer, he replied, "No. It is a privilege."

Soto's work, which includes picture books for young children and novels for adults, almost always includes a glossary of Mexican words and phrases to help readers understand and learn the language that his various characters use. Although most of Soto's writing is peppered with Spanish words and expressions, his themes remain both very personal and entirely universal. This allows readers, regardless of their cultural backgrounds, to be able to relate to his stories.

One of the reasons that Soto is a respected author is that he experiments with various types of writing rather than sticking to any single form. Unlike many authors, Soto has dabbled in everything from fictional short stories to poems to plays. His autobiographical essays about his childhood and adult life are just as popular as his books of poetry. He writes adult fiction as entertainingly as he does children's picture books. Soto even wrote a libretto for his children's book *Nerdlandia* for the Los Angeles opera. In addition, he has produced, directed, and written three films: *The Bike, The Pool Party*, and *Novio Boy*.

Another reason that readers enjoy Soto's writing is the personal detail he adds to his work, reminding readers of themselves and their own life experiences. Whether he is writing about a young man dancing with a broom he pretends is a pretty girl or his own struggle to understand his father's death, Soto strikes a deep chord inside readers. Soto's writing leads readers to recall similar moments in their pasts, creating a bond between reader and author.

Soto's work is not always cheery and optimistic—sometimes it is raw, difficult, and painfully realistic. In a profile published in *Macmillan Profiles: Latino Americans*, Soto says, "I think even in sadness, there's a certain beauty and satisfaction." He adds, "Even though I write a lot about life in the barrio, I am really writing about the feelings and experiences of most American kids: having a pet, going to the park for a family

cookout, running through a sprinkler on a hot day, and getting a bee sting!"

In the end, readers may not know precisely why they enjoy Soto's writing, but they find it entertaining and enjoyable. According to *Macmillan Profiles*, Soto's works "evoke the small beauties of life that emerge from the background of daily struggles." Indeed, Soto's stories, essays, and poems remind people of all ages what is important in life, what is to be remembered, cherished, and most of all, appreciated. His work leaves people looking at their lives a little more closely and, perhaps, gaining a clearer idea of what makes them all so special.

Source: Tamra Orr, "Introduction," in *Gary Soto*, Rosen Publishing Group, 2005, pp. 7–10.



SOTO'S MESSAGE IS A SIMPLE ONE: AS ADULTS, WE HAVE TAKEN FOR GRANTED THOSE SIMPLE EVENTS OF CHILDHOOD THAT LEAD US TO OUR MATURITY, OUR GRACE, AND OUR SENSITIVITY. ALTHOUGH ALL PEOPLE MUST ENDURE PUBERTY, THE SEEMINGLY TRIVIAL OCCURRENCES MAKE ADOLESCENCE WORTH ENDURING."

Julianne White

In the following essay, White analyzes Soto's use of imagery and symbols in "Oranges."

When I was twelve years old, walking somewhere, anywhere (but especially to a store) with a boy was cause for giddy celebration. Such a walk was so important because it signalled the end of childhood and the beginning of the journey toward adulthood, which we could only perceive as a very good thing indeed. In Gary Soto's poem "Oranges," the narrator of the poem walks that walk with the girl of his dreams to the drugstore on a cold December morning. When she picks out candy that costs a dime, he places his one nickel and one of his two oranges on the counter. The saleslady, obviously sensitive and kind, accepts this unusual method of payment, choosing not to embarrass him. While they walked home eating their respective chocolate and remaining orange together, the boy finds a new sense of confidence and independence. Soto's poem does not suggest that the poem's persona looks back on his puberty as a painful, awkward, or traumatic period of his life; rather, he remembers this experience with all the warmth and regard of one for whom growing up was perhaps not so bad.

Soto makes effective use of poetic language in this poem. The narrative format and the absence of rhythm and rhyme make the poem read more like a short story. However, the relative short length of the lines, resulting in a visually lengthy poem, reflects the fleeting aspect of adolescence, the period that has passed since the incident in the poem occurred, and how adolescence seems drawn out while one is enduring it, but in reality, disappears all too soon.

Soto begins the narrative with a description of himself, the day, and his companion:

> The first time I walked
> With a girl, I was twelve,
> Cold, and weighted down
> With two oranges in my jacket.
> December. Frost cracking
> Beneath my steps [. . .]
> She came out pulling
> At her gloves, face bright
> With rouge. (1–6; 13–15)

The words "December," "frost," and "cracking" (5) in the first part of the poem emphasize the chill of the weather, mimicking the sound of walking on snow. Also, it reflects the chill between the boy and the girl in their awkwardness with each other. In addition, "face bright with rouge" (14–15) shows not only the cold weather (some of the color in her cheeks may actually have to do with the temperature), but also the girl's inexperience with applying makeup.

Inside the drugstore, the imagery continues. Even though the days of overstuffed five-and-dime stores are long gone, many young people today will recognize the cramped feel given by Soto's description:

> [. . .] We
> Entered, the tiny bell
> Bringing a saleslady
> Down a narrow aisle of goods.
> I turned to the candies
> Tiered like bleachers,
> And asked what she wanted—(21–27)

The "narrow" (24) aisles crammed with goods make the reader feel the cramped, uncomfortable tension between the boy and girl as they make their selections. "Candies tiered like bleachers" (25–26) echoes the familiar image of rows of children in school taking a class picture, sitting in assemblies, standing at pep rallies, or cheering at a football game. The narrative of the poem reaches its climax when the girl, taking her cue from her generous friend, picks out what she wants, rather than what she thinks the boy can afford. The tension then comes from the reader's uncertainties: Will the boy ask the girl to change her selection? Will the saleslady demand cash or no sale?

> [. . .] I fingered
> A nickel in my pocket,
> And when she lifted a chocolate
> That cost a dime,
> I didn't say anything.
> I took the nickel from
> My pocket, then an orange,
> And set them quietly on
> The counter. When I looked up,
> The lady's eyes met mine,
> And held them, knowing
> Very well what it was all
> About. (30–42)

The oranges and the candy are the major symbols of the poem. The candy represents a seemingly unreachable goal, or material goods out of the financial reach of children. The oranges give the narrator "weight" and importance, and then they become a medium of exchange used to buy the candy. In a moment of impressive decision-making, the boy takes a chance that the saleswoman will accept the orange without question; her lack of hesitation gives him the confidence to continue his special walk. Although his courage is impressive, the risk was also a safe and intelligent bet: If the saleslady had refused to honor his orange for payment, he would still have the two oranges to share with the girl on their way home. Either way, he proves himself and impresses the girl, which was the goal in the first place, and he is rewarded for his bravery by being allowed to hold her hand on the walk home.

His confidence appears in the warm glow from the remaining orange, which could be mistaken for fire from a distance:

> Outside
> A few cars hissing past,
> Fog hanging like old
> Coats between the trees.
> I took my girl's hand
> In mine for two blocks,
> Then released it to let
> Her unwrap the chocolate.
> I peeled my orange
> That was so bright against
> The gray of December
> That, from some distance,
> Someone might have thought
> I was making a fire in my hands. (43–56)

The warmth suggested by the color of the orange contrasts with the cold of December. The cars "hissing past" (44) and the fog hanging "between the trees" (46) remind the reader of the cold. The boy also confidently asserts his new-found manhood: the fact that he is the one who takes her hand, then "release[s]" it to "let" (49) her unwrap her candy bar, suggests that he feels a sense of control over the girl (who is now "*my* girl," 47, emphasis added), the situation, and his own life. The cold and the fog are now unimportant in light of the rite of passage that transpired inside the store.

In *The Wonder Years*, the late, great ABC situation comedy set in the late 1960s, Kevin Arnold tried on a weekly basis to find a way to communicate his feelings to Winnie Cooper. This television show demonstrated, with a great deal of humor and grace, the truth that simple things like walking home from school together take on monumental importance when one is twelve years old. Because of the poem's subject—the nearly universal experience of first love—and the author's deceptively skilled use of poetic devices, I believe that this poem will no doubt stand the test of time and become a classic of young adult literature. As a teacher of ninth-grade English, I would even use it in conjunction with a study of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, along with other classics that treat young love with dignity, without being patronizing or overly sentimental.

Soto's message is a simple one: as adults, we have taken for granted those simple events of childhood that lead us to our maturity, our grace, and our sensitivity. Although all people must endure puberty, the seemingly trivial occurrences make adolescence worth enduring. The poem's simplicity and lack of elaborate ornamentation create a gentle statement of the universality of human experience and allow us to

recall with fondness and warmth the quiet triumphs of our own childhoods, which all too often go unnoticed at the time and unremembered later.

Source: Julianne White, "Soto's 'Oranges,'" in *Explicator*, Vol. 63, No. 2, Winter 2005, pp. 121–25.

Rudolf Erben and Ute Erben

In the following excerpt, Erben and Erben address the conflict between Soto's childhood desire to emulate the white, middle-class families he saw on television and his reality as a Chicano boy growing up in California, noting in particular his ambivalence about material possessions, which figures prominently in "Oranges."

Chicano writers have identified as the Chicanos' central dilemma their dual consciousness, their being products of both Mexican and American cultures. Gary Soto's recent collections of prose reminiscences, *Living Up the Street* and *Small Faces*, go a step further. They attribute the Chicanos' cultural schizophrenia to the pervasive impact of the dominant group's popular culture. In his autobiographical accounts of growing up in Northern California in the 1950s and 1960s, Soto names as his main socializing forces the mass media (TV, comics) as well as popular icons and rituals (fashion, cars, sports).

Critics have focused on the strong sense of ethnicity, poverty, and class-consciousness in *Living Up the Street* and *Small Faces*. In addition, both books exemplify how popular culture, mass-mediated or other, triumphs over the Chicanos' own cultural expression. Mass-mediated popular culture in particular expresses the concept of cultural hegemony. On the one hand, the media entertain, inform, and reaffirm values of the dominant white middle-class culture. On the other hand, they cannot simply impose popularity, but must also "relate to the concerns of the audience" (Walsh 4). Thus, members of minority groups can either accept the dominant culture's messages or they can reject them. Or they can appropriate cultural symbols of the dominant group and merge them with elements of their own culture, thus turning them into their own culture. *Living Up the Street* and *Small Faces* reflect these complex dynamics of popular culture's production and reception, as they recount Soto's struggle to mediate between two unequal cultures.

Living Up the Street and *Small Faces* testify to the omnipresence of television in the lives of Gary Soto, his relatives, and his peers. Soto's family buys its first television set when Gary is five years old. Soto describes his and his siblings' first viewing experience as awe-inspiring: "The three of us sat transfixed in front of the gray light of the family's first TV. We sat on the couch with a bowl of grapes, and when the program ended the bowl was still in Rick's lap, untouched. TV was that powerful" (*Street* 7). After this initiation, the television becomes a focal point in the lives of the Soto family, and viewing a regular ritual that strongly affects family life.

"EVEN THOUGH IT STARTED AT A VERY EARLY AGE, FOR SOTO, THE PROCESS OF ACCULTURATION IS NOT YET FINISHED."

Soto's recollections affirm television's displacement and content effects. According to Joyce Cramond, displacement effects relate to the "reorganization of activities" caused by the introduction of television. Some activities "may be cut down and others abandoned entirely to make time for viewing." Content effects refer to the "influence of particular types of broadcast material usually on attitudes, values, thinking, knowledge, and behavior" (267). Accordingly, the Soto family frequently schedules daily activities so as not to coincide with favorite shows, and the content of selected programs serves as a model for daily activities.

The Soto children, in particular, suffer from television's displacement effects. Watching television is not only their favorite pastime, but it determines their day, especially during vacation periods. In the summer, Gary is torn between going to summer school or "watching TV, flipping the channels from exercise programs to soap operas to game shows until something looked right" (*Street* 67). His siblings, Rick and Debra, spend the summer watching shows "neither of them cared for" (*Street* 25). And Gary himself finds nothing wrong with turning on the television, just waiting "for the week to pass" (*Street* 48) His obvious addiction to television even leads him to skip his baseball practices, so he can watch "Superman bend iron bars" (*Street* 59). As a recent survey shows, Gary's viewing

habits correspond to those of his peers, who watch approximately six hours of television daily (Greenberg et al. 186).

Television controls the adults' lives, especially the men's, as well. During their leisure time, the fathers neither participate in family life, nor do they engage in any other form of social, physical, or mental activity. Soto describes their after-work activities:

> They came home to open the refrigerator for a beer and then to plop in front of the TV. They didn't even have the energy to laugh when something was funny. Rick and I saw this in our stepfather. While we might have opened up with laughter at a situation comedy, he just stared at the pictures flashing before him—unmoved, eyes straight ahead. (*Street* 55)

And yet, Soto refuses to criticize them for watching so much television. His images denounce the socio-economic system that drains working people dry to the point of complete exhaustion, that turns them into "robots of flesh with unblinking eyes" too worn out to take control of their lives (*Faces* 101). These men, "beaten with work that made little money" (*Faces* 101), rely on television as a way of life in order to put some order into their existence (Marsden 120).

Soto elaborates on various of television's content effects. For most of his childhood, Gary looks upon television programs as an important source of information and emulation. They provide ideas for games and, more important, present the acceptable American lifestyle.

War movies and other violent programs captivate five-year-old Gary. A program on fire prevention, for example, leads him and Rick to play with fire in their house, and they almost burn it down. War movies inspire the children's fantasy and induce them to play violent games. Soto recollects how he and Rick "sat in a rocker-turned-fighter plane, and machine-gunned everyone to death, both the good and the bad" (*Street* 22). The "good guys" become Gary's role models. John Wayne, as the archetypal American male, particularly stimulates Gary's fantasy:

> I watched the morning movie in which John Wayne, injured in an attack on an aircraft carrier, had lost the ability to walk, but later, through courage and fortitude, he pulled himself out of bed, walked a few stiff steps, and collapsed just as the doctor and his girl friend entered the room to witness his miracle comeback. I saw myself as John Wayne. Nearly blinded by a mean brother, I overcame my illness to become a fighter pilot who saves the world from the Japanese. (*Street* 24)

Domestic comedies about middle-class life sharpen Gary's awareness of class differences. These shows enlighten him about lifestyles more enticing than his family's own. Because he has seen middle-class styles of dress on the shows, Gary recognizes a playmate's father as a member of that class: "I took it all in: His polished shoes, creased pants, the shirt, and his watch that glinted as he turned the page of his newspaper. I had seen fathers like him before on the *Donna Reed Show* or *Father Knows Best"* (*Street* 20).

While Gary bases his identification of this particular man on outer appearance only, he is also a keen observer of people's behavior and manners. Both reinforce his desire to live like the fictional families of domestic comedies. Thus, Gary yearns to imitate the family in *Father Knows Best*, simply because it appears "so uncomplicated in its routine" (*Street* 31). The family life in *Leave it to Beaver* impresses him even more:

> This was the summer when I spent the mornings in front of the television that showed the comfortable lives of white kids. There were no beatings, no rifts in the family. They wore bright clothes; toys tumbled from their closets. They hopped into bed with kisses and woke to glasses of fresh orange juice, and to a father sitting before his morning coffee while the mother buttered his toast. They hurried through the day making friends and gobs of money, returning home to a warmly lit living room, and then dinner. *Leave It to Beaver* was the program I replayed in my mind. (*Street* 34)

Thus, when he watches the show, Gary weighs the reality of his own family against the idealization of the Cleaver family.

As might be expected, the two families contrast sharply. Gary's parents are overworked, poor, and live on a diet consisting mainly of tortillas and beans. The Cleaver family, by contrast, combines obvious material wealth with harmony among the family members. But most of all, its polite manners and conversation appeal to Gary. As a result, he tries to convince his siblings to wear shoes for dinner and to dress up, and he urges his mother to cook dishes such as turtle soup instead of the routine beans and tortillas. At nine, Gary is too young to understand that the Cleaver family represents an idealized version of the American family. And since Gary has only limited experience with real

middle-class families, the Cleavers represent what he believes to be white middle-class America.

Gary wishes to emulate television's Anglo middle-class families for two reasons: he wants to live a less deprived, more comfortable life, and he longs to be accepted by white middle-class America. He is convinced that if he and his family only "improved the way we looked we might get along better in life. White people would like us more." Later on, he reasons, Anglo-Americans might even invite him and his family to "their homes or front yards" (*Street* 35). Since television initiates him into a lifestyle generally accepted by mainstream America, Gary naively believes that through emulation he can at once assimilate into the mainstream and tear down racial barriers.

From an early age, Soto internalizes subtle messages of oppression. By exposing him to widely accepted fictional lifestyles, television reinforces Gary's already existing feelings of inferiority and, subsequently, arouses his desire to copy such lifestyles. As Gary matures, television loses its power over him. Again, Gary's development parallels that of his peers, whose viewing also decreases with age, according to Aimée Dorr (104). Gary now sees through the unrealistic images of life that television presents, and he understands the manipulative power of those images.

Gary's reaction to this realization alternates between amusement and cynicism. Instead of maintaining his futile desire to emulate the lives of television middle-class families, he learns to accept the realities of his own life: "I knew I could give away the life the television asked me to believe in" (*Faces* 58). He schedules his days according to his plans even if it means staying home on Saturdays. Mainly because "the television said we should go places," he decides otherwise (*Faces* 101). Symbolic of his new-found understanding is Soto's description of a picnic scene from *Leave it to Beaver*. He tells how he first associated the Cleaver family's white clothes with television's unrealistic portrayal of white middle-class families. He even reacts with amusement to his former susceptibility to television, which once prompted him to fall in love:

> I was primed to fall in love because of the afternoon movies I watched on television, most of which were stories about women and men coming together, parting with harsh feelings, and embracing in the end to marry and drive big cars. (*Street* 69)

. . . Soto feels as ambivalent about material possessions, such as clothes and cars, as he does about sports. Soto's clothes consciousness originates very early in his life. Again, it is the mass media that first teach him about fashion and its power to signal socio-economic status. Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen state: "Americans were expected to dress in a certain way, and the avalanche of commercial imagery that accompanied the postwar boom—magazines; film; advertisements; and the new 'Information Bomb,' television—supplied constant reminders" (236). Clothes gain importance during Soto's adolescence when they become a means to express personal identity and status among peers. All in all, Gary's response to fashion is quite complex. He makes fun of fellow students from more affluent backgrounds because they devotedly follow every fashion. At the same time, he longs to be able to afford exactly the same clothes in order not to appear poorer. Finally, he longs for clothes worn by subculture groups, whose existence on the fringes of society mirrors his own.

Gary's dedication to current fashion expresses his desire to change his social class. Like many Americans of Mexican descent, he works as a grape picker in the summer, so he can afford fashionable clothes. While picking, he dreams of his future possessions:

> If I worked eight hours, I might make four dollars. I'd take this, even gladly, and walk downtown to look into store windows on the mall and long for the bright madras shirts from Waiter Smith or Coffee's but settling for two imitation ones from Penneys. (*Street* 103)

After his summer job is over, Gary goes and buys "a pair of pants, two shirts, and a maroon T-shirt, the kind that was in style" (*Street* 103). He very carefully combines old and new clothes, using a complicated system designed to hide that he can only afford a few new things: "I worked like a magician, blinding my classmates, who were all clothes conscious and small-time social climbers, by arranging my wardrobe to make it seem larger than it really was" (*Street* 105).

Again, Gary's fashion preferences express more than his acceptance of societal norms; they also give voice to his rebellion against rules. As he approaches adolescence, Gary prefers clothes typically worn by marginal groups such as bikers. He elaborates on his embarrassment over a jacket "the color of day-old guacamole" that his mother buys him as a fifth grader. He has desired a biker jacket made of "black

leather and silver studs with enough belts to hold down a small town" (*Faces* 40). Mainly because he fears his peers' ridicule, he hates to wear his new jacket: "Everybody saw me. Although they didn't say out loud, 'Man, that's ugly,' I heard the buzz-buzz of gossip and even laughter that I knew was meant for me" (*Faces* 42). The incident clearly shows Gary's dependence on acceptance through his classmates, white or nonwhite. As teenagers, they engage in the same rebellion and create their own subculture.

Fashion remains important to Soto as he grows up. For the maturing Gary, clothes stop symbolizing rebellion. They again become synonymous with a better life, a life not on the fringes of American society but within the mainstream. Due to his poverty, however, Gary still can only dream of such a life. With his friend Jackie, he likes to stroll through shopping malls, "occasionally stopping to gaze in store windows, especially at clothing stores where we grew dreamy as incense looking at shirts, pants, belts, loafers—those wonderful things that were as far from us as Europe" (*Street* 81). As a successful writer, Soto can finally afford to and does waste money on expensive designer clothes with "labels that can't be seen without getting intimate" (*Faces* 21).

Just like clothes, cars have a symbolic meaning for Soto, as they do for society at large. An American icon, the car represents the "national obsession with mobility and change" (Patton 12). While this holds true predominantly for the dominant society, minority groups have also appropriated certain models as manifestation of their own cultural assertion. Young Hispanics, for example, desire and value certain cars for low-riding—the "'56, '57, '63, and '64 Chevrolets" (Plascencia 143)—and thus modify an icon of the dominant culture for their own needs.

References to cars in *Living Up the Street* and *Small Faces* bear further witness to Soto's cultural ambivalence, expressed in the car's dual symbolism. On the one hand, Soto echoes a common Chicano belief in calling an Anglo friend's '57 Chevrolet "a car only a Mexican or a redneck looks good in" (*Street* 124). On the other hand, Soto adapts mainstream America's esteem of the car as symbolic of social mobility. His car-buying habits reflect his participation in both cultures. He starts with cheap, old models, such as a '49 Plymouth. Later he jumps back and forth between run-down cars and models more in accordance with his gradually improving socio-economic status. Soto reminisces:

> If I look back I think of how we moved from car to car, most of which were no better than a faceful of smoke. My Buick Roadmaster limped up the street like a hurt rhino; my $85 Rambler was ugly and died of ugliness on the way to the junk yard. My wife and I sold a perfectly good Volkswagen for a perfectly useless sports car that gleamed in glossy photographs, beckoning us to be the happy couple leaning against it. It smoked badly, made noises, leaked puddles of oil in the driveway. The engine was so bad that bicycles passed us up. Then there was another Volkswagen, then an Audi, then a Volkswagen convertible, we still weep for that we traded for an Oldsmobile, which I gave my inlaws after three years. I turned around and bought a 1966 Chevy that could pull your hair back, if not tears from your eyes, on a black stretch of highway. We moved from car to car. (*Faces* 30)

For Soto, as for many others, the car has become what Phil Patton calls an extension of one's "self-image, of individual style, of clothing" (15). His unfulfilled desire for the right car even leads him to test drive various models without intending to buy one. He goes from first test driving a BMW to trying out a Pontiac Grand Prix. In the end, he snaps out of his trance and asks himself what made him want "to buy a new car? What brain cell said 'Pontiac'?" (*Faces* 74). One possible answer is his cultural ambivalence, his growing up materially deprived in a society that judges people almost exclusively by their material wealth.

For Soto, the problem of being Mexican in the United States has as much to do with socio-economic issues as with questions of cultural identity. Into adulthood Soto remains ambiguous about mainstream America. Critical distance and rejection of middle-class culture and materialism alternate with his simultaneous desire to belong. One of the few passages in which Soto openly discusses his inner conflicts concerns educated and acculturated Chicanos:

> That night we talked about educated Chicanos, those graduating from universities but falling for the "new car" and the "tract home on the Northside." The adults were playing "Disneyland for the kids, Reno for us." It was a simple game like Rummy or checkers, and those who were intelligent, somewhat ambitious but not aggressive, and not terribly bad to look at, could play it. For them, it was a thrill to flip open a check book at a fashionable clothing store and produce a driver's licence and two

> credit cards. Though we talked and made some sense, we didn't say out loud that we were tired of this poor life and, if we had the chance, we too would grab the good jobs and go water skiing on the weekend. (*Faces* 114)

The conversation with his friends shows two contradictions. First, for Soto and his friends, being educated and falling for the lures of American materialism are incompatible. And yet, they would like to live a materially comfortable life. Second, they realize that in order to succeed in American society, they must not threaten the dominant culture. As Soto puts it, Chicanos may be "somewhat ambitious" but never "aggressive." Soto rejects Chicanos who submit to these unwritten rules, yet would make the same concessions in order to get ahead.

These apparent contradictions demonstrate that Soto still searches for his place in American society. Having learned that the dominant culture grants him only limited participation in its lifestyle, he remains undecided about his own position toward the dominant culture. From early childhood on, television and other socializing forces inundated him with images of mainstream America. He grew up in a multicultural environment, participated in both Anglo and Chicano culture, and seems to be able to move in and out of the two, to blend and blur them with relative ease. But the conversation with his friends ultimately proves the persistence of his inner conflicts and ambivalent feelings. Even though it started at a very early age, for Soto, the process of acculturation is not yet finished.

Source: Rudolf Erben and Ute Erben, "Popular Culture, Mass Media, and Chicano Identity in Gary Soto's *Living Up the Street* and *Small Faces*," in *MELUS*, Vol. 17, No. 3, Autumn 1991–1992, pp. 43–52.

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> This collection includes the work of more than fifty poets from Fresno, such as Luis Omar Salinas, Juan Felipe Herrera, and Dixie Salazar. Six poems by Soto are also included.

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> McPhee is one of the great researchers of modern times, writing about subjects with clarity and intensity. His study of the history of oranges, their cultivation and their marketing, may sound like it is limited in scope, but like a

good poet, his writing style uses this one small topic to open up a world of understanding.

Tatum, Charles M., *Chicano and Chicano Literature: Otra Voz del Pueblo*, University of Arizona Press, 2006.

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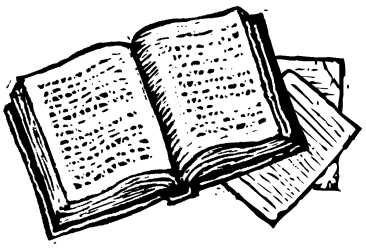
White's piece looks at the imagery and the shape of the poem, and how Soto uses the poetic elements to reify the basic concept of young love.

The Peace of Wild Things

WENDELL BERRY

1968

"The Peace of Wild Things" is a poem by American poet, novelist, essayist, farmer, and environmentalist Wendell Berry. It was first published in *Openings: Poems* (1968), one of Berry's early collections of poetry, and was reprinted in 1985 in Berry's *Collected Poems, 1957–1982*. Written in the first-person, "The Peace of Wild Things" describes how the speaker finds a solution to the anxieties he feels during a sleepless night by going outside to a quiet, peaceful place in nature, near a body of water. In the presence of wildlife, water, and stars, he feels restored to equanimity, his troubles dissolving in the great peace he experiences in nature. "The Peace of Wild Things" is typical of Berry's work as a whole in that it attempts to find a balance between humans and nature; it shows how the natural world can play a vital role in healing the troubled human spirit. The poem belongs in the great tradition of nature writing in American literature, as embodied in the work of such classic authors as Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and John Muir, and modern writers such as Annie Dillard, Mary Oliver, Edward Abbey, Loren Eiseley, and many others.



AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Wendell Berry was born on August 5, 1934, in Henry County, Kentucky, the eldest son of John and Virginia Berry. His father was a tobacco



Wendell Berry speaks in Frankfort, Kentucky, on February 14, 2006 (AP Images)

farmer, and both sides of the family had lived and farmed in Henry County for over a hundred years.

Berry attended the University of Kentucky at Lexington, graduating with a bachelor of arts degree in English in 1956 and a master of arts in English in 1957. He married Tanya Amyx that same year. Berry then studied at Stanford University's creative writing program on a Wallace Stegner fellowship, and in 1960 published his first novel, *Nathan Coulter: A Novel*. It was set, like almost all of his later fiction, in the fictional Kentucky town of Port William.

A Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship enabled Berry to travel to Italy and France in 1961, and in 1962 he taught English at New York University's University College in the Bronx. In 1964, he began teaching creative writing at the University of Kentucky.

It was during the 1960s that Berry first made his mark as a poet, with his collections *The Broken Ground* (1964) and *Openings: Poems* (1968). The latter contained the poem "The Peace of Wild Things." He also wrote his first book of essays, *The Long-Legged House*, in 1969.

In 1964, Berry and his wife purchased a farm in Henry County, Kentucky, and a year later became farmers of tobacco, corn, and small grains. Berry remained a member of the faculty at the University of Kentucky until 1977, when he resigned so that he could spend more time on his farm.

He continued to publish poetry at a steady rate, his books including *Farming: A Handbook* (1970), *The Country of Marriage* (1973), *Clearing* (1977), *A Part* (1980), and *The Wheel* (1982). Many of these poems deal with the natural world and the place of humans in it, often touching on spiritual matters. Berry's *Collected Poems, 1957–1982* was published in 1985. His essay collections from this period include *A Continuous Harmony: Essays Cultural and Agricultural* (1972) and *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (1977).

In 1987, Berry returned to teaching at the University of Kentucky, continuing until 1993, when once more he retired to his farm.

His later publications include *Life Is a Miracle: An Essay against Modern Superstition* (2000), *That Distant Land: The Collected Stories of Wendell Berry* (2002), *The Art of the Commonplace: Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry* (2002), *The Way of Ignorance* (2005), the novels *Hannah Coulter* (2004) and *Andy Catlett: Early Travels* (2006), and two collections of poetry, *Given: New Poems* (2005) and *Window Poems* (2007).

As of 2008, Berry has written twenty-nine books or chapbooks of poems, twenty-seven nonfiction works, mostly essay collections, and fourteen works of fiction, including novels and short stories. He has received numerous awards, especially for his poetry. These include *Poetry* magazine's Vachel Lindsay Prize in 1962 and its Bess Hokin Prize in 1967, the Aiken-Taylor Award for Poetry from the *Sewanee Review* in 1994, and the T. S. Eliot Award from the Ingersoll Foundation in 1994.

MEDIA ADAPTATIONS



- Some of Berry's poems were set to music by David Ashley White and published as *The Peace of Wild Things: For Voice and Piano* by ECS Publishing in 2004.
- Contemporary composer Andy Vores set "The Peace of Wild Things" to music for voice and piano in his song cycle titled *The Rainy Summer*. First performed in 1990 by Richard Morrison and Patricia Thom and self-published in Brookline, Massachusetts, it is available from Andy Vores, 202 Fuller Street #6, Brookline, MA 02446, andvor@aol.com.

POEM TEXT

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives
may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great
heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

POEM SUMMARY

Lines 1–5

"The Peace of Wild Things" begins with the poet, writing in first person, describing what he likes to do when his mind becomes agitated and he needs to calm down. He presents himself as a man who is concerned about the state of the world. He appears to have no hope that the condition of the world will improve, although he offers no details about his worries. Perhaps he has in mind war, poverty, and injustice, all the things that plague humanity and seem to continue despite the best efforts of well-intentioned people to end them. In line 2, the poet makes it clear how deep this worry in his mind is, since he will wake up at night if there is even the slightest of sounds and the worry will start again. In line 3 it becomes apparent that he fears for the future, not only for himself but also for his children. Perhaps he harbors the fear that there may be some cataclysm or other devastating event that would radically change human society for the worse. He feels a father's care for the future welfare of his children. But he does not merely lie in bed awake, worrying. He has a solution, not for the world's problems, but for his own peace of mind. As he explains in line 4, he gets out of bed in the dead of night and goes outside and heads for a tranquil place in nature, no doubt nearby and a place he has visited many times before. It must be a lake or a pond, and he is familiar with the bird life he finds there, such as the wood drake (a male wood duck) and the great heron, a wading bird. The poet lies down near the water and seems to identify with the wild life he is now close to; he is deeply conscious of the beauty of nature.

Lines 6–11

In these lines the poet explains about how getting out into the natural world cures him of the agitation and worry that he had been experiencing as he lay awake at home. He feels at peace now, and this is because he is able to sense and share in the way animals and birds live. There is

peacefulness in nature because the animal and bird kingdoms do not, unlike humans, have the capacity to worry about the future. An animal or bird is incapable of feeling the agitation that the poet felt in the opening lines of the poem, because it has no concept of the future; it cannot worry that the future might bring something bad, unlike humans, for whom such thoughts come all too easily. Animals and birds therefore do not experience life as a burden. In line 8, the poet comments on the tranquility of the scene; the water in the lake or pond is still. It is as if he has suddenly stepped into another world that is altogether more peaceful than the human world.

In the final three lines, the poet widens the scene. In the previous lines, he has appreciated the presence of the birds and of the water. Now he becomes aware of the stars shining above him. He does not say that he looks up at them; rather, he feels their presence too. He thinks of the fact that the stars are not visible during the day; they show themselves to humans only at night, so it is as if throughout the day they are waiting to show their light. He concludes with an observation about how he now feels. Although he knows the feeling is only temporary, he feels at peace and at rest, and this gives him a sense of freedom.

THEMES

The Human World versus the Natural World

The poem contrasts the turbulence of the human world, and the workings of the human mind, with the peace of the natural world. Human life is chaotic and dangerous. People are unable to live at peace with one another, and the news always seems to be bad. The poem was published in 1968 when the Vietnam conflict was at its height, and in the United States, Senator Robert Kennedy and the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. were assassinated. It is perhaps not surprising that someone writing during those turbulent times should sink into despair regarding the human condition. The poet cannot separate himself from the larger fate of the world, which he fears may eventually touch him and his children personally. It is notable that he seems most worried about something that has not yet happened but may happen in the future, and this is why he cannot sleep at night, or is frequently awakened and immediately starts to worry. In this capacity to envision and worry about the future, something that does not in fact exist, human beings separate themselves from the natural world of which they remain a part, since no other living creature has the capacity to imagine the future, let alone worry about it.

The poet is deeply aware of this dichotomy between the human and the natural world, and when he is besieged by his own human capacity for worry, foreboding, and despair, he knows what the solution is, albeit a temporary one. He must allow nature to work on him, to fill him with its own kind of peace as an antidote to the restlessness that has come to dominate his mind. In other words, although humans can separate themselves from nature due to the ceaseless activity of their minds, they also have the capacity to

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY



- Go to a local park or other place where you can be alone in nature. Take note of how you feel. Do you feel different from when you are at home or with others? In what sense? What sort of a change have you undergone by being in nature? Why do you think this happens? Write a short essay in which you describe the natural scene and then reflect on how it affects your thoughts and feelings.
- Read the poems "Come Into Animal Presence" by Denise Levertov and "Sleeping in the Forest" by Mary Oliver. Write an essay in which you compare and contrast these poems with "The Peace of Wild Things."
- Write a purely descriptive paper in which you describe an animal you are observing in nature. It could be a bird, a squirrel, a deer, or other animal. What does it look like? How does it move? What is its purpose, as you watch it?
- For many years Berry has written about environmental issues, protesting against the misuse of nature. Select an environmental issue in your own locality that has relevance for how humans are using, or abusing, nature. Give a class presentation in which you describe both sides of the issue and make some suggestions about how it might be resolved.



Great blue heron with a fish in Florida (© Jan Baks | Alamy)

be one with it; they can allow nature, which is always present in the moment, to pour out a balm on the troubles that they invent for themselves concerning an imagined future (or, although this is not a feature of this poem, a regretted past that, like the future, does not exist). The movement of the poem is therefore from fear and agitation—characteristics of the human world—to the peace that exists in the natural world. The presence of the water, the birds, and the stars, to name only the three things explicitly mentioned in the poem, is enough to restore the poet to himself, to his right mind, at peace with the world in which he lives, free from the thoughts that otherwise trouble him.

The Paradox of Human Complexity

At the heart of the poem lies a paradox: the human mind, for all its intelligence and sophistication, and human civilization, for all its ingenuity and vast achievements, have not led human beings to self-mastery; they have not enabled humans to acquire the peace and contentment that would allow them to live without fear. The pursuit of happiness may lie behind a great deal of human endeavors, but the desired happiness is rarely attained for long, if at all. For example, in "The Peace of Wild Things" the poet's mind is so much on tenterhooks that the slightest thing awakens him from sleep and leaves him awash in a sea of worry. In contrast to this, the wild things in the poem—wild in the sense of growing and living uncultivated, in their natural state, outside the reach of human civilization—live in peace, driven only by instinct, which can never lead them to feel at odds with their environment or with the innate conditions of their being. The paradox is that humans, who have so much more capacity to control their world and that of other living creatures than do the animal, bird, or plant kingdoms, often end up feeling more powerless, more at the mercy of circumstances than those other, simpler creatures who have no power to argue with the laws that govern their existence. The poem uses this paradox to present its theme of the complex (human) world finding what it needs in the simple world (uncultivated nature).

STYLE

Allusion

An allusion in a work of literature is a reference to another literary work. It can be a reference to a person, an event, or simply a phrase that occurs in another work. When the poet writes in line 8 about his awareness of the body of water that is nearby, he uses words that echo a well-known phrase in the Bible, from Psalm 23: "He leads me beside still waters." The pronoun "he" refers to God. The psalm presents God as a shepherd who "makes me lie down in green pastures," which is echoed in "The Peace of Wild Things," as the poet also lies down in nature. Allusions may simply give a wider frame of reference to the work in which they occur, or they may serve a more complex, ironic function, serving to contrast or otherwise distinguish between the way the common words or phrases are used in the two works. In "The Peace of Wild Things," although the Biblical allusion in the poem is clear, there is also a marked contrast. In the poem there is no benevolent God leading the poet on and giving him comfort and peace. The poet himself takes the initiative to go into the presence of nature, and it is nature itself, not an external God, that provides the feeling of peace.

Free Verse

The poem is written in free verse, an open form of poetry that does not rely on traditional elements of rhyme and meter. Line lengths and patterns of stress are irregular. In this poem, the line breaks are largely determined by the syntax, the arrangement of the words in a sentence. The poem consists of five sentences of varying length. The first sentence takes up the first five lines and after that the sentences become progressively shorter and simpler, in keeping with the thematic movement from a complex to a more simple state of mind on the part of the poet. The varying positions of the periods that end each sentence create some variety in the spoken rhythm. The poem makes no use of rhyme except for the fact that the end of the first line rhymes with the end of the last line, which creates a sense of completion, rather like a piece of music that returns to the home key at the end.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Social Upheaval and War in the 1960s

It is not difficult to understand why someone writing in the late 1960s might express despair about the state of the world. For Americans, this period was fraught with social upheaval and the horror of war. In April 1968, the civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee, where he had been campaigning on behalf of striking sanitation workers. In June of the same year, Senator Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated in Los Angeles after winning the California primary for the Democratic Party presidential nomination. In Vietnam, the Viet Cong, the forces of the communist North Vietnamese, launched the Tet Offensive in February 1968, attacking the South Vietnamese capital, Saigon, and other South Vietnamese cities. Although the Viet Cong suffered heavy casualties, the Tet Offensive showed that the United States, despite having nearly half a million troops in Vietnam, was not even close to winning the war. It was in the same year, 1968, that the My Lai massacre occurred, in which U.S. soldiers killed hundreds of Vietnamese civilians. The massacre was not reported until November 1969. In February 1968, Berry gave a speech to the Kentucky Conference on the War and the Draft at the University of Kentucky in which he stated his opposition to the Vietnam War, "I see it as a symptom of a deadly illness of mankind—the illness of selfishness and pride and greed which, empowered by modern weapons and technology, now threatens to destroy the world" ("A Statement Against the War in Vietnam," in *The Long-Legged House*).

Elsewhere during these turbulent years, the Six-Day War was fought in 1967 in the Middle East, in which Israel defeated a coalition of Arab nations, and the Soviet Union, along with several Eastern European countries, invaded Czechoslovakia to crush the Prague Spring, an attempt by the Czech government to liberalize its communist society.

The Environmental Movement of the 1960s and 1970s

"The Peace of Wild Things" suggests the importance of living in harmony with nature. As a farmer and poet, Berry felt a deep connection to the land, and he also shared the concerns that were beginning to emerge during the 1960s about the degradation of the environment. The

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **1960s:** American nature writing flourishes. Edward Abbey (1927–89) writes *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness* (1968) about the landscapes of southern Utah. Poet Mary Oliver publishes her first book of poetry, *No Voyage, and Other Poems* (1963). Denise Levertov (1932–97) publishes several volumes of poetry, including *O Taste and See: New Poems* (1964) and *The Sorrow Dance* (1967).

  Today: Prominent nature writers include essayist and novelist Barry Lopez, who publishes a collection of short stories, *Resistance*, in 2004; Native American poet and fiction writer Linda Hogan, who publishes *The Sweet Breathing of Plants: Women and the Green World* (2000) and *Rounding the Human Corners: Poems* (2008); and Rick Bass, who publishes his short story collection, *The Lives of Rocks* in 2007.

- **1960s:** In the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962, the two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, come close to starting a nuclear war.

  Today: Although the cold war between the United States and the Soviet Union is over, the threat of nuclear proliferation remains. There is international concern over the possible development of nuclear weapons by nations such as Iran, a development widely seen as a threat to world peace.

- **1960s:** The modern environmental movement begins, and the federal government passes significant environmental legislation. The Wilderness Act of 1964 aims to protect nine million acres of federal land from development. The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 aims to establish policies that enable humans and nature to live in harmony. The Act requires the federal government to produce an environmental impact study before taking any major action that affects the environment.

  Today: The focus of much environmental activism is global warming. In 2005, the Kyoto Protocol, negotiated in 1997, comes into effect. In adopting this measure, countries commit to reducing the emissions—especially carbon dioxide—that contribute to global warming. As of 2008, 178 nations have ratified the Kyoto Protocol, not including the United States or China.

modern environmental movement is often traced to the publication in 1962 of *Silent Spring*, a best-selling book by Rachel Carson. Carson alerted readers to the dangers associated with the widespread use of pesticides. On his farm in Kentucky, Berry decided to practice organic farming, shunning the use of pesticides. In 1972, the U.S. government banned the use of the toxic chemical DDT, which had been widely used as an agricultural pesticide.

Elsewhere in Berry's home state, as well as in West Virginia, the seeds of new environmental problems were beginning to occur. In the late 1960s the coal mining industry began a practice known as mountaintop removal. The tops of mountains were blasted by explosives in order to gain access to the coal that was near the surface. This was cheaper than tunneling into the mountain to reach the coal, but it had negative environmental consequences. The dirt and rock removed was pushed down the mountain, filling streams and valleys, adversely affecting the habitats of a number of species. Berry was alert to all the damaging effects of this form of strip mining, and he published a fierce essay "The Landscaping of Hell: Strip-Mine Morality in East Kentucky," in *The Long-Legged House*, in which he condemned the practice, commenting,

> The land destroyed by strip mining is destroyed forever; it will never again be what it was.... Such destruction . . . makes man a parasite upon the source of his life; it implicates him in the death of the earth, the destruction of his meanings.

Berry called for the banning of strip mining by state and federal governments. It was not until 1977 that Congress passed the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act (SMCRA) regulating the environmental effects of such coal mining, although environmentalists claimed that the law was ineffective.

The first national Earth Day was held in 1970, bringing environmental concerns to the attention of millions of people. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was founded in the same year, and in 1973, Congress passed the Endangered Species Act to protect species and the ecosystems on which they depend.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

When Berry's 1968 collection of poems, *Openings*, in which "The Peace of Wild Things" appeared, was reprinted in paperback in 1981, Tom Simmons reviewed the book for the *Christian Science Monitor*. He comments, "While Berry's poems are neither intellectually scintillating nor complexly allusive, they shine with the gentle wisdom of a craftsman who has thought deeply about the paradoxical strangeness and wonder of his life." Although he does not mention "The Peace of Wild Things" by name, the following comment by Simmons might well apply to that poem: "The book includes meditations on the natural world which are essentially devotional in their ardent simplicity—yet which harbor no religious posing or affectation."

The publication of Berry's *Collected Poems, 1957–1982* in 1985, in which "The Peace of Wild Things" reappeared, produced more comment from reviewers. In *Library Journal*, Thom Tammaro states, "The interplay of the natural world and the human spirit is the informing principle in Berry's work," and Tammaro describes Berry as "a poet of rare compassion and grace, clarity and precision, reverence and lyricism." Writing for the *New York Times Book Review*, David Ray comments,

> [Berry's] straightforward search for a life connected to the soil, for marriage as sacrament and family life, affirms a style that is resonant with the authentic. The lyricism is not forced, but clearly grows out of a deep bond with the earth and its generosity, with all of nature. He . . . can be said to have returned American poetry to a Wordsworthian clarity of purpose.

Among later scholars, Henry Taylor in *Southern Cultures*, although appreciative of Berry's overall achievement, states that there are

> . . . occasional lines and sentences in Berry's poems that seem too ponderously overt with their messages, as if the poet had fallen into the momentary belief that assertively artistic use of language is, in some contexts, an irresponsible frivolity.

With this comment Taylor has "The Peace of Wild Things" in mind, and he identifies this poem as one of the less successful of Berry's poems. Taylor writes that "the plainness of the style has been taken so far in the direction of prose that the decision where to end lines is based on almost purely syntactical factors."

Such scholarly reservations aside, "The Peace of Wild Things" has proved to be one of Berry's most popular and widely read poems, appearing in anthologies and on numerous Web sites, posted there by ordinary readers who have enjoyed the poem and wish to share it.

CRITICISM

Bryan Aubrey

Aubrey has a Ph.D. in English. In this essay, he examines how "The Peace of Wild Things" embodies what poet Robert Bly has called "twofold consciousness."

In 1980, Robert Bly, a leading American poet, compiled an unusual poetry anthology titled *News of the Universe: Poems of Twofold Consciousness*. It is a substantial book comprising over one hundred and fifty poems, ranging from the eighteenth century to the present day and over a number of different cultural traditions. One of the poems Bly selected was Wendell Berry's "The Peace of Wild Things." The premise of the anthology is that there had been a development in poetry over the previous two hundred years that reflected a profound change in how people viewed nature and their relationship to it. In what Bly calls the "Old Position," which was well established in European culture in the eighteenth century, human reason was held to be the highest quality, and humans believed that because they possessed reason and nature did not, they were therefore superior to everything else in nature. They were of the view that "nature is defective because it lacks reason." Bly points out that when seventeenth-

WHAT DO I READ NEXT?



- In addition to being a major poet, Berry is a prolific essayist. *Standing on Earth: Selected Essays* (1991), with an introduction by Brian Keble, is a representative collection of thirteen of Berry's essays from four of his earlier collections. The essays cover many topics, from poetry to farming and ecology.
- Poet Gary Snyder is often linked to Berry because of their common subject matter. *The Gary Snyder Reader: Prose, Poetry, and Translations* (2000) is a compilation, by Snyder himself, of his work, covering a period of forty-six years. The book includes not only Snyder's poetry but also his prose on topics such as the environment and Buddhism.
- Mary Oliver is a major contemporary poet whose work is characterized by close observation of the natural world and reflection on the relationship between humans and nature. Her *New and Selected Poems, Volume One* (2005) contains a representative sample of her work.
- In his meditative writings about nature, Berry is sometimes regarded as a modern Henry David Thoreau, the great American naturalist and transcendentalist writer. Thoreau's *Walden, or Life in the Woods*, first published in 1854, is his record of the years from 1845 to 1847, when he lived in a hut on the edge of Walden Pond, near Concord, Massachusetts. A modern edition was published by Beacon Press in 2004.
- *The Sacred Place: Witnessing the Holy in the Physical World* (1996), edited by W. Scott Olsen and Scott Cairns, is an anthology of poetry, fiction, and essays in which new and well-established writers present their encounters with the natural world and their reflections on the sense of the sacred in nature.



MAN'S ARROGANCE, HIS BELIEF THAT HE IS SEPARATE FROM AND SUPERIOR TO NATURE, HAS COME TO AN END AS HE LEARNS TO ABSORB THE SPIRIT THAT LIVES WITHIN NATURE, WHICH GIVES TO HIS LIFE A GRACE, A DEPTH, AND A SERENITY THAT IT OTHERWISE LACKS."

and eighteenth-century poets such as John Dryden and Alexander Pope described nature they did it in general terms that were often vague and inaccurate and suggested that they had hardly bothered to look at the object they were describing.

According to Bly, the Old Position created a split between self and world, subject and object; consciousness was held to reside only in humans, and the relationship between man and nature was one of domination and subjugation. This rigid separation began to break down in German, French, and English literature of the romantic period, from about the 1790s to the early 1830s. In German poets such as Novalis and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Bly writes, "The ancient union of the day intelligence of the human being and the night intelligence of nature become audible, palpable again."

When Bly examines poetry written since the end of World War II, he sees more instances of poems of "twofold consciousness"—poems that acknowledge nature as an equal of man, and see nature as possessing a consciousness that interacts with human consciousness as a kind of partner, creating a mysterious sense of wholeness and union that transcends human reason and even makes reason seem irrelevant. However, Bly still regards these kinds of poems as outside the poetic mainstream of the time, exceptions rather than the rule. He contrasts poems of "twofold consciousness" with the work of the so-called confessional poets of the 1960s and 1970s such as John Berryman, Anne Sexton, and others who were concerned with intimate self-revelation—their subjects were themselves and the frequently agonized workings of their minds and emotions; they had little interest in the human interaction with nature.

One of Bly's poems of "twofold consciousness" is "The Peace of Wild Things," and in the anthology it is grouped with other work by poets such as Gary Snyder, William Everson, Mary Oliver, Denise Levertov, and Galway Kinnell. This grouping gives an interesting perspective on where Berry belongs in contemporary poetry. He is sometimes linked to a long list of other poets, including, in the opinion of Andrew Angyal in his book *Wendell Berry*, the Agrarians, also known as the Southern Fugitives, of the 1930s, such as John Crowe Ransom, Allan Tate, and Robert Penn Warren. Angyal also finds in Berry's work stylistic echoes of Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, and William Butler Yeats, as well as Snyder. Bly's grouping extends the list of Berry's kindred spirits, poetically speaking.

Angyal also observes that thematically, "Berry's poems are noted for their quiet attentiveness to the surroundings, almost as though the speaker tried to make himself part of his habitat," a description that is close to what Bly means by "twofold consciousness." In "The Peace of Wild Things," the poet is closely attuned to what Bly refers to as the "night intelligence" in nature, which has its own validity, its own consciousness that reaches out, embraces, and soothes the poet who is tormented, not enlightened, by his human reason (the quality that supposedly, in the "Old Position," lifts humans above nature). It is the poet's restless mind that during the night gives him all kinds of things to worry about, as it projects into the future and envisions possible disasters.

Bly's choice of "The Peace of Wild Things" as the sole poem by Berry to be included in *News of the Universe* was a good one. This poem is typical of Berry's poetic enterprise, so much of which is concerned with finding the right relationship between man and nature, with rooting himself in the great rhythms of the natural world, with seeking out and being receptive to that indefinable spiritual connection between humans and nature that alone can make a person feel whole.

Other poems in *Openings*, the 1968 collection in which "The Peace of Wild Things" first appeared, reflect a similar perspective. In "The Want of Peace," significantly placed immediately before "The Peace of Wild Things," the poet reflects on his own turbulent mind and longs to be part of nature's life, the life of the earth, which is unself-conscious in its simplicity—a desire that is amply fulfilled in the poem that follows. "The Peace of Wild Things" is also an answering poem to "To My Children, Fearing for Them," in which the poet explains how he thinks with fear of the troubles to come on earth because of the way humans have abused it. In "Grace," the poet creates a picture of the perfection, the flawlessness of the woods on one particular morning when he observes them. The woods have arrived at this moment in their being at a perfectly measured pace, neither too hurried nor too slow, and in that lies a message for humans, if they are able to hear it. In "The Sycamore," the poet again finds a kind of perfection in nature, in this case in the form of an old sycamore tree, and he meditates on the fact that he and the sycamore come from the same earth. He sees the great tree guided by the same orderly life force that he, the poet, wishes to recognize and submit to.

Berry's essay "A Native Hill," written during the same period as "The Peace of Wild Things" and published in his collection of essays *The Long-Legged House* in 1969, also reveals a remarkably similar perspective on man and nature as that which informs the poem. The hill Berry is referring to is a ridge near his home in Henry County, Kentucky, and the essay records his thoughts and feelings as he walks in the vicinity. As in the poem, he describes in "A Native Hill" how, when troubled by his thoughts about the long disaster of human history, and "this human present that is such a bitterness and a trial," he goes to the woods, and this transforms him:

> I enter an order that does not exist outside, in the human spaces. I feel my life take its place among the lives—the trees, the annual plants, the animals and birds, the living of all these and the dead—that go and have gone to make the life of the earth.

He continues, in almost a paraphrase of what happens to the speaker in "The Peace of Wild Things," "My mind loses its urgings, senses its nature, and is free." He takes note of the "peacefulness in a flock of wood ducks perched above the water in the branches of a fallen beech"; he intuits the joy of a great blue heron as it does "a backward turn in the air, a loop-the-loop." The scene is almost like a prose commentary on the poem, and in a passage that suggests in a nutshell what Bly tries to convey about the necessity of acquiring a twofold consciousness, Berry writes, "One has come into the presence of mystery.

After all the trouble one has taken to be a modern man, one has come back under the spell of a primitive awe, wordless and humble."

It can therefore be seen that "The Peace of Wild Things," together with the whole body of Berry's work in poetry as well as in essays such as "A Native Hill," is a vision of right relations restored between humans and nature. Man's arrogance, his belief that he is separate from and superior to nature, has come to an end as he learns to absorb the spirit that lives within nature, which gives to his life a grace, a depth, and a serenity that it otherwise lacks.

Source: Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on "The Peace of Wild Things," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2009.

Holly M. Brockman

In the following interview with Brockman, Berry shares his thoughts on the importance of sustainable agriculture and environmental stewardship, values which influence such poems as "The Peace of Wild Things."

If you profess to embrace family values and you shop at Wal-Mart, think again. The global economy, powered by big corporations such as Wal-Mart, destroys families with low prices made possible by low wages.

Such are the teachings of Wendell Berry, 71, a lifelong advocate of family values, sustainable agriculture and environmental stewardship. Berry's writings promote local economies as a healthier, more eco-friendly way of life. He has authored more than 40 books and is among 35 Kentucky writers whose work is featured in a new anthology on the devastation that mountaintop removal mining has wrought in Southern Appalachia.

Berry lives, writes and farms at Lane's Landing near Port Royal, Ky.

Holly M. Brockman: I've heard you use the term "useful" in some of your talks, and it certainly permeates all your essays and other writing. What does usefulness mean? Who is somebody who is useful and why?

Wendell Berry: There's a kind of language that obscures its subject. Such language makes it harder to see and to think. By the word usefulness I mean language or work that enables seeing, makes clarity. Wes Jackson's work and language have been wonderfully useful to me in that way. Harry Caudill too, by his books and his conversation, helped me to see and think and make the radical criticism. Gary Snyder and I agree on a lot of things, but his point of view is different from mine and it has been immensely useful to me. Some differences make for binocular vision.

"THERE'S A KIND OF LANGUAGE THAT OBSCURES ITS SUBJECT. SUCH LANGUAGE MAKES IT HARDER TO SEE AND TO THINK. BY THE WORD USEFULNESS I MEAN LANGUAGE OR WORK THAT ENABLES SEEING, MAKES CLARITY."

HB: And what does it mean in the context of human daily living and beyond? Let's say into the corporate world?

WB: Usefulness stands in opposition to the frivolous. John Synge wrote about the Aran Islands where the people were poor and yet all the useful things in their life were beautiful. The issue of usefulness has a kind of cleansing force. If you ask, "Is it useful?" probably you're going to have fewer things you don't need. You are useful to your family if you're bringing home the things they need. Beyond that, maybe you are useful to other people by your work. The corporate world is much inclined to obscure this usefulness by making and selling a lot of things that people don't need. For instance, a lively and important question is how much light we use at night and what we use it for and need it for. I'm old enough to remember when the whole countryside was dark at night except for the lights inside the houses, and now the countryside at night is just strewn with these so-called security lights. How much of this do we need? How much of it is useful? We have a marketplace that is full of useless or unnecessary commodities. I don't want to be too much of a crank, but there are many things that people own to no real benefit, such as computer games and sometimes even computers.

HB: How does your notion of usefulness differ from the old Protestant work ethic?

WB: The Protestant work ethic has never been very discriminating about kinds or qualities of work or even the usefulness of work. To raise

the issue of usefulness is to call for some means or standard of discrimination. The Protestant work ethic doesn't worry about the possibility of doing harmful work or useless work.

HB: In order to be better stewards of our own lives and therefore those resources around us—land, soil, each other—how do we work toward a more sustainable, community-oriented life?

WB: I think you have to begin with an honest assessment of the value or the possibility of personal independence. What is the limit of individualism or personal autonomy? Once you confess to yourself that you need other people, then you're in a position to look around your neighborhood and see how neighborly it is, starting with how neighborly you are yourself. The question of stewardship naturally follows. How careful is your neighborhood of the natural gifts such as the topsoil on which it depends.

HB: Large chunks of what used to be taken care of by family members—caring for children, the elderly and education—has been outsourced to corporations in the form of daycare, preschool and corporate sponsorship of education initiatives. You've written extensively about this and that these are signs of familial breakdown. Why is it a breakdown and what impact does it have on a family?

WB: The issue here is the extent to which a family is like a community in its need to live at the center of its own attention. A family necessarily begins to come apart if it gives its children entirely to the care of the school or the police, and its old people entirely to the care of the health industry. Nobody can deny the value of good care even away from home to people who have become helplessly ill or crippled, or, in our present circumstances, the value of good daytime care for the children of single parents who have to work. Nevertheless, it is the purpose of the family to stay together. And like a community, a family doesn't stay together just out of sentiment. It is certainly more pat to stay together if the various members need one another or are in some practical way dependent on one another. It's probably worth the risk to say that families need to have useful work for their children and old people, little jobs that the other members are glad to have done.

HB: What are some things we can do—small things, perhaps—until we actually make a commitment on a broader scale, to initiate husbandry (whose trajectory will be felt globally) to ourselves, our families and our communities?

WB: I think this starts with an attempt at criticism of one's own economy, which may be the same thing as good accounting. What are the things that one buys? How necessary or useful are they? What is their quality? Are they well grown or well made? What is their real cost to their producers and to the ecosystems in which they were produced? Almost inevitably when one asks these questions, one discovers that they are extremely difficult and sometimes impossible to answer. That frequently is because the things we buy have been produced so far away as to make impossible any stewardly interest on the part of the consumer. And this recognition leads to an even better question: How can these mysterious products brought here from so far away be replaced by products that have been produced near home? And that question, of course, leads to all manner of thoughts and questions about the possibility of a better, more self-sufficient local economy. What can we neighbors do for one another and for our place? What can our place do for us without damage to us or to it?

HB: Is it possible to reshape our thinking in baby steps or must we make sweeping changes?

WB: Oh, let's be against sweeping changes and in favor of doing things in small steps. Let's not discourage ourselves by trying for too much or subject ourselves to the tyranny of somebody else's big idea.

HB: If everything is left to the individual and the community, how can each avoid being so overburdened that no one has much time for activism and intellectual pursuit?

WB: In other words, how can you have a livable life and do everything? Everything ought not to be left to individuals and communities. Government exists to do for people what they can't do for themselves. Farmers individually or in their communities, for instance, can't enact effective programs for price supports with production control so a government can do that, and at one time our federal government did do that. Maybe I'd better say at this point that I am an unabashed admirer of the tobacco programs of The New Deal.

HB: Many progressives live transitive lives (you included having spent time in New York, California and abroad) having fled small towns for the more intellectually stimulating environment of a college town. How do we close that gap and encourage progressives and intellectuals to find safety and comfort outside an academic setting?

WB: The geographer Carl Sauer said, "If I should move to the center of the mass I should feel that the germinal potential was out there on the periphery." I think there should always be some kind of conversation between the center and the periphery. So you need people in the periphery who can talk back to the people in the center.

HB: What encouraged you to settle back in your hometown of Port Royal, Ky., after finding rewarding intellectual and academic success?

WB: It was clear I'd be thinking about this place (Port Royal) the rest of my life, and so you could argue that I might as well have come back so as to know it. But that's only a supposition. The reason I came back was because I wanted to. Tanya and I wanted to. We hadn't been homesick but when we started down the New Jersey turnpike with the New York skyline behind us, it was exhilarating.

HB: How do we encourage progressives to settle down and where should they stay? Would you see possibility in them forming communities among themselves or would you see them successful in joining already established rural communities where they might not feel initially welcomed?

WB: Well, people do form intentional communities. I have visited a few that seemed pleasant enough. But I've never lived in one, and so I don't really know about them. I'm not willing to say, as general advice, that urban people should move to the country. I've never advised anybody to give up a well-paying city job and try to farm for a living.

HB: Rural, community-based living has the thinking, stereotyped perhaps, that there is an innate distrust of outsiders. Do you see truth in this thinking? What can be done to re-shape this thinking?

WB: There's truth in it, but it's also true that distrust is a major disease of our time, wherever you live. I don't have any idea what can be done about that. The only way to stop somebody from distrusting you is to be trustworthy and to prove it over a longish period of time.

HB: Do you believe community-based living has historically bred conservative rather than progressive ideas?

WB: That depends entirely on the community you're in. Communities of coal miners have supported the union movement. Small farmers have in this part of the country supported the tobacco program. On the other hand, I suppose that if you live in a community that is thriving, providing good work for its members and unthreatened by internal violence, you would probably try to conserve it. I suppose that Amish communities have tried to be conservative that way. If you live in an enclave of wealth and privilege, probably you tend to be conservative in a more familiar way. And, in my opinion, that is the wrong kind of conservatism.

HB: Many people grow up in small towns and find great comfort in their natural and familial surroundings, but their thinking and ambitions aren't rewarded there either by lack of jobs or lack of embracement of ideas—certainly, a misuse of the community's resources. How can youngsters and young adults be encouraged to stay home and still be fulfilled?

WB: This question depends on what you mean by intellectual stimulation and whether or not you can get it from the available resources. It's perfectly possible to live happily in a rural community with people who aren't intellectual at all (as we use the term). It is possible to subscribe to newspapers and magazines that are intellectually challenging, to read books, to correspond with like-minded people in other places, to visit and be visited by people you admire for their intellectual and artistic attainments. It's possible to be married to a spouse whose thoughts interest you. It's possible to have intellectually stimulating conversations with your children. But I've had in my own life a lot of friends who were not literary or intellectual at all who were nevertheless intelligent, mentally alive and alert, full of wonderful stories, and whose company and conversation have been indispensable to me. I've spent many days in tobacco barns where I did not yearn for the conversation of the college faculty.

HB: Farmers markets and coops where people buy a share of a farmer's harvest and pick it up weekly or bi-weekly have gained in popularity. So have weekly, predictable roadside stands. Why is this so important to a community?

WB: Well, the obvious reason is that a good local economy feeds the local community. But markets of the right kind and scale also fulfill an important social function. They are places where neighbors, producers and consumers meet and talk. People come to the farmer's market to shop and might stand around and talk half a day. Country stores have fulfilled the same

functions. People feel free to sit up at the Hawkins Farm Center in Port Royal. It's a great generosity on the part of the Hawkins family, and a great blessing to the community.

HB: Why is providing food to a local community so important in sustaining it?

WB: Because the most secure, freshest and the best-tasting food supply is local food produced by local farmers who like their work, like their products and like having them appreciated by people they know. A local food system, moreover, is [not] subject to . . . the dangers and vulnerabilities of a large, high-centralized, highly chemicalized, industrialized food system held together by long distance transportation. A locally adapted local food economy is the most secure against forms of political violence, epidemics and other threats.

Source: Holly M. Brockman, "How Can a Family 'Live at the Center of Its Own Attention?': Wendell Berry's Thoughts on the Good Life," in *New Southerner*, January–February 2006.

Henry Taylor

In the following excerpt, Taylor addresses the simplicity of Berry's diction in his poems, including "The Peace of Wild Things."

The name of Wendell Berry first came to my attention about forty years ago. I was then a student at the University of Virginia and a part-time employee of Noonday Book Shop, where a book called *November Twenty-Six Nineteen Hundred Sixty-Three* enjoyed a brisk sale for several weeks. The text was a single poem by Wendell Berry; it had appeared in *The Nation* shortly after the assassination and funeral of President Kennedy. The artist Ben Shahn had seen it, and obtained permission to present it in his highly characteristic calligraphy, along with several original images invoked by the poem.

By implication, this is not a poem that Berry cares to have reread, since he omitted it from his *Collected Poems 1977–1982* (1985). I therefore feel somewhat apologetic about bringing it briefly into the light again, but I do not do so in order to comment on the wisdom of Berry's decision. It is certainly not an embarrassingly bad poem—far from it—though it is not hard to sympathize with the view that it lacks the monumental durability the occasion would seem to require. What that collaborative book did, however, was to place before a significant readership several of the



IN HIS LATER WORK, BERRY EVOKES HIS FATHER'S VOICE AND WORDS AS REMINDERS THAT DEEP SIMPLICITY CAN ALSO BE DEEPLY REWARDING MYSTERY, WHICH CAN LEAD TO ENLIGHTENMENT."

qualities that have marked much of Berry's poetry ever since.

A close look at the poem reveals what some of these qualities are. The poem opens,

> We know the winter earth upon the body of the young
> President, and the early dark falling;
>
> We know the veins grown quiet in his temples and
> wrists, and his hands and eyes grown quiet;

The diction is somewhat formal, yet unpretentious and precise; the verse form is reminiscent of Walt Whitman, but this indebtedness does not adulterate Berry's particular voice. The initial repetition of "we know," which holds for the remaining nine long lines, reminds us that Berry is notably a poet of community. Because he is speaking for his people as well as for himself, the poet occasionally adopts a phrase that we would be surprised to hear in ordinary conversation. When a southerner takes up the language in one hand and holds it against his chest as if it were a harp, we know that when the other hand touches the strings, we will hear something other than informal chat. Among these effects are an elevated tone, arising sometimes from phrasings that might be almost Biblical; swift flashes of precision that hover between consolation and heartbreak; and slightly self-conscious enjoyment of the way an unusual word can find a place that makes it sound exactly right, as, for example, "nightlong" below. The poem touches movingly, because it does so without melodrama, on the passage of individual persons from the earth as the human race persists:

> we know the nightlong coming of faces into the candle
> light before his coffin, and their passing;

Very lightly, the poem grazes the subject of human damage to the earth, the theme that

readers most readily associate with Berry's work. Here is the ending:

> we know ourselves, the bearers of the light of the earth
> he is given to, and of the light of all his lost days;
>
> we know the long approach of summers toward the
> healed ground where he will be waiting, no longer the
> keeper of what he was.

Finally, in certain other lines, we can hear the insistence on the message that sometimes asserts itself in Berry's poems:

> we know the children who begin the youth of loss
> greater than they can dream now.

A few years ago, in connection with the choice of Wendell Berry as the winner of the 1994 Aiken Taylor Poetry Prize administered by the *Sewanee Review*, I had the exhilarating and deeply inspiring experience of rereading most of his poetry, mostly in chronological order of publication. There are many fine poems in *Collected Poems*, which gathers the poems Berry wished to preserve from his first eight collections. More recently, *Sabbaths* (1987) and its fuller incarnation, *A Timbered Choir* (1998), and *Entries* (1994) bear out my suspicion that sometime after he published his fourth collection, Berry entered vigorously into a process of regularly readjusting the balance in his poetry between thematic content and more mysterious and more needful materials, those aspects of diction, sound, and form that move the poem away from mostly saying toward the realm of mostly doing. He has been a splendid poet for a long time, but his most recent work is his best.

Berry's technical resources have since the appearance of his first book been impressive in their depth and variety. Nevertheless, he comes from a landscape, a region, and maybe a family tradition that would engender small patience with a literary work that is patently much more about itself than anything else. About forty miles northeast of Louisville, several streams, or "runs," make their way between modest hills to the Kentucky River, which meanders northward to the Ohio. The land they drain is mostly good; it responds deeply to knowledgeable care. In such a place it doesn't take too much decoration to seem too fancy, and it doesn't take much frivolity to make a pursuit seem worthless. In his later work, Berry evokes his father's voice and words as reminders that deep simplicity can also be deeply rewarding mystery, which can lead to enlightenment. Poems differ widely in the openness with which they admit to being about themselves or about the art of poetry. When the poem's topic is immediately obvious, and the speaker's stance toward it is clear and urgent, it takes craft on the order of greatness to maintain the poem as poem, rather than as editorial or sermon. This is not at all to require the self-conscious surface effects that characterize many poems by such extravagant stylists as Gerard Manley Hopkins, Wallace Stevens, or Dylan Thomas, for example; nor is it to require that a poem avoid addressing large themes directly and assertively.

Let me take a small instance from the previous century, before returning to the work of Wendell Berry. Robert Frost, I have heard, used to enjoy reciting this poem by Coventry Patmore and asking his hearers to guess who wrote it. The last four lines, at the very least, have the grand authoritative sound of some more familiar Victorian British poet. The title is "Magna Est Veritas," meaning "Truth Is Great"—a clause with more than a whiff of the didactic. The poem follows,

> Here, in this little Bay,
> Full of tumultuous life and great repose,
> Where, twice a day,
> The purposeless, glad ocean comes and goes,
> Under high cliffs, and far from the huge town,
> I sit me down.
> For want of me the world's course will not fail;
> When all its work is done, the lie shall rot;
> The truth is great, and shall prevail,
> When none cares whether it prevail or not.

How the reader takes the poem's central proposition may be a matter of temperament; certainly it is not an activist call to the barricades to say, "For want of me the world's course will not fail." Nor is it an insistence on any particular truth to suggest that general truth is whatever shall prevail, "When none cares whether it prevail or not." "The truth is great," however, is a statement in Basic English, and expresses deep faith. But that is only one of the things here that convince me that this is a splendid poem, not just an immediately recognizable statement of a central article of faith.

Among the important matters of craft here is the delicate but definite shift between the first six lines and the last four, a turn much like that in a Petrarchan sonnet. It occurs not only because the focus shifts from the immediate surroundings to the general proposition, but also because the meter becomes much more nearly predictable in the last four lines. More delicately, there is a series of small tensions in the first six lines, in such adjective-noun combinations as "purposeless, glad ocean," "great repose," "little Bay," and "huge town," and in the phrase "under high cliffs." This yoking of opposites and near-opposites causes rapid shifts of perspective that culminate in the short line "I sit me down," which says both "I am small, here in the shortest line of the poem," and "I am here, and have brought me along to take up this entire line as well as the main clause at the end of this sentence." The only adjective in the last four lines is great.

Berry, too, has effectively used frequent juxtaposition of opposites in lines and sentences that are in other ways apparently very straightforward. The unobtrusive use of this device greatly enlivens "Window Poems," for example, a sequence of twenty-seven brief free-verse poems first collected in *Openings* (1968).

The fact remains that Modernism and its aftermaths seem to have made it harder to come right out and say, in a poem, something like "The truth is great" or, to return to Berry's poems, "I know that freedom can only be given, / and is the gift to the giver / from the one who receives," from "My Great-Grandfather's Slaves."

There may be many approaches to doing this in the face of critical resistance. Ordinary Philistinism, manifest in dismissals of certain kinds of poetry and criticism as bloodless intellectual trivializing of things that matter to ordinary people, is not the approach Berry takes. Another approach, which might be Berry's, arises from a typical poetic strategy that is simply to try hard to do well what one has been told cannot be done. It is either fun or deeply depressing to think what might happen in a usual graduate poetry workshop to "The Want of Peace," first collected in *Openings:*

> All goes back to the earth,
> and so I do not desire
> pride of excess or power,
> but the contentments made
> by men who have had little:
> the fisherman's silence
> receiving the river's grace,
> the gardener's musing on rows.
>
> I lack the peace of simple things.
> I am never wholly in place.
> I find no peace or grace.
> We sell the world to buy fire,
> our way lighted by burning men,
> and that has bent my mind
> and made me think of darkness
> and wish for the dumb life of roots.

A piece of conventional wisdom about poetry is that it should not invite disagreement. This notion appears to have gained its deepest foothold during the Romantic movement, but in any case it is a matter of taste. One of the pleasures this poem affords is that of responding to it, saying something like this to the first stanza: "All goes back to the earth; nevertheless, I find it hard to quell my desire for pride of excess or power. I have not yet learned truly to desire the contentments made by men who have had little, though now that you mention that fisherman and that gardener, I recall enjoying a few fleeting instances of what you're talking about." Engaged thus in conversation with the poem, I come to the second stanza and am suddenly plunged into respectful silence, feeling permanently in possession of the idea that our way is lighted by burning men, to which I came through a memorable alternation of the words peace, place, peace, and grace in three lines rather than four.

Even in celebration, however, I admit finding occasional lines and sentences in Berry's poems that seem too ponderously overt with their messages, as if the poet had fallen into the momentary belief that assertively artistic use of language is, in some contexts, an irresponsible frivolity. After all, the subject is the fate of the human race and of the earth's ability to sustain life. This matters more than the techniques of verbal repetition or internal rhyme, or the delicate tension between understated opposites. "The Peace of Wild Things," which immediately follows "The Want of Peace" in *Collected Poems*, begins with a five-line sentence similar in tone to the beginning of the previous poem, but does not arouse in me the same interest in conversing with it:

> When despair for the world grows in me
> and I wake in the night at the least sound
> in fear of what my life and my children's
> lives may be,
> I go and lie down where the wood drake

rests in his beauty on the water, and the
great heron feeds.

Here, the plainness of the style has been taken so far in the direction of prose that the decision where to end lines is based on almost purely syntactical factors. Even in such prosaic contexts, though, a way of putting something will be often fresh and new, and a sentence will inspire the feeling I get when a pheasant comes out of a familiar roadside and crosses in front of me to vanish on the other side.

There are many such moments in *Farming: A Handbook* (1970), maybe because the urgency with which Berry feels the land's peril is so much nearer the surface in that collection. "Air and Fire" begins with a slightly periphrastic account of getting on a plane and traveling, being attracted to flight attendants and a new life:

Having risen up from my native land,
I find myself smiled at by beautiful women . . . .

Exactly in the middle of the poem, there is this sentence of almost flat directness, yet admirable precision and aptness:

And all over the country I find myself
falling in love with houses, woods, and farms
that I will never set foot in.

It is nearly impossible to say how this differs in effectiveness from the beginning of "The Peace of Wild Things"; the two sentences are unequal in length, but in their use of syntax and familiar language they are very similar. In this poem, however, the notion has been prepared for, whereas "The Peace of Wild Things" launches immediately into a situation we must take on faith and is a touch humorless in its portrayal of a man lying down among birds. "Air and Fire" shows a sly awareness of its own extravagance:

My eyes go wandering through America,
two wayfaring brothers, resting in silence
against the forbidden gates. O what if
an angel came to me, and said,
"Go free of what you have done. Take
what you want." The atoms of blood
and brain and bone strain apart
at the thought.

Farming: A Handbook is also the collection in which "The Mad Farmer" makes his first appearance. He subsists upon the same kind of ambiguous tonalities, as his ruminations and outbursts range from subtle self-deprecation to loud and sometimes hilarious polemic. He is a complex and reliable emissary from one outing county in the poet's state of being, and he is among us still, having made his most recent appearance in *Entries* (1994). His usefulness to us is that he makes a place for some of Berry's more rapscallious ways to wisdom; it may be that Berry finds him useful in the same way. Some of us need characters to say what we have a hard time saying in our own voices. It is not that what the poems say runs counter to our central beliefs or our temperament, but that certain sides of a question may get a more detailed hearing from a purified version of one of our usual states of mind. A friend of mine said to me recently, "Sometimes I wake up on the redneck side of the bed."

Through his first four collections, Berry worked primarily in a traditionalist kind of free verse: honest sentences with line breaks where grammar or satisfying enjambment might reasonably call for them. Once in a while, there is something more nearly metrical, or a poem in rhyme, but these are scarce in his earlier poetry. With *The Country of Marriage* (1973), Berry began to use traditional form much more often than he had. This turns out to have a usefulness similar to that of fictional speakers. A man talking to himself, alone in his car, for example, will feel much more intelligent and engaging than he feels when he says the same things among other people. It is good to be alone where the words might tumble out freely, but it is also good to be where they will bounce against the possibility of skepticism or outright disbelief.

Wendell Berry has never been anything but a very careful worker; you will scan his oeuvre in vain for unchecked outpourings. But as the years go by and the books pile up, a familiar way of working can become treacherous by way of its very familiarity. Terrible things have happened to men who let themselves forget, just for a moment, that their workhorses are living beings with individual characteristics. Berry has had teams of Belgians, and he continues hale among us. He must have begun to sense the rewards of writing against some sort of obstacle, putting his words where they had to get past some hard place. In traditional verse, the words must get so far past it that the backward glance cannot make it out . . . .

Source: Henry Taylor, "'All Goes Back to the Earth': The Poetry of Wendell Berry," in *Southern Cultures*, Vol. 7, No. 3, Fall 2001, p. 31.

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Slam, Dunk, & Hook

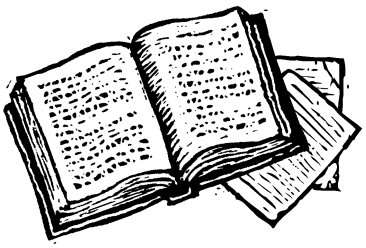
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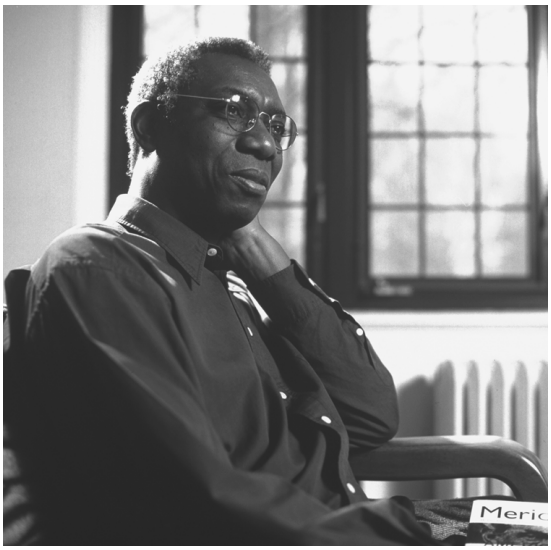
1991

Yusef Komunyakaa is considered one of the most gifted poets of his generation, and critics acclaim the way his work transcends barriers of race and gender. At the same time, however, in the poems of *Magic City*, Komunyakaa draws heavily on his own experiences as a young black child and adolescent growing up in Bogalusa, Louisiana, in the 1950s—a time when the town was segregated under Jim Crow laws, and the Ku Klux Klan dominated local culture. In "Slam, Dunk, & Hook," Komunyakaa depicts a group of African American youth engaged in a street basketball game, with undercurrents of anger, grief, danger, and the almost mystical beauty of movement.

"Slam, Dunk, & Hook" was first published in the Summer 1991 issue of the journal *Callaloo*. The poem was later included in Komunyakaa's 1992 collection, *Magic City*, and again in the 2001 collection, *Pleasure Dome: New and Collected Poems*.

In an essay in *Blue Notes* (2000), Komunyakaa writes, "Poetry is the primary medium I have chosen because of the conciseness, the precision, the imagery, and the music in the lines. I think of language as our first music." The poem "Slam, Dunk, & Hook" illustrates these qualities. In a poem based on the rhythms of jazz and the basketball court, Komunyakaa compactly addresses the thorny issues of race, grief, and power.





Yusef Komunyakaa *(James Keyser | Time and Life Pictures | Getty Images)*

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Yusef Komunyakaa was born in Bogalusa, Louisiana, on April 29, 1947, the oldest of six children. Bogalusa was a paper mill town where Jim Crow laws segregated the African American residents from the white, and the Ku Klux Klan maintained a stronghold. Komunyakaa began writing during high school, composing a long poem in rhymed quatrains for his graduation, although he reports that his shyness prevented him from reading it to anyone. During these years he listened to jazz and the blues, music that deeply influenced his writing.

After graduating from high school, Komunyakaa enlisted in the United States Army. His duty included a tour of Vietnam during the height of the war, where he served as a correspondent for and editor of *Southern Cross*, a military magazine. He earned a Bronze Star for his service in Vietnam.

After his return to the United States, he attended the University of Colorado, earning a bachelor of arts in 1975. His verse began appearing in small journals during this period, and he published his first chapbook, *Dedications and Other Darkhorses*, in 1977, and his second collection, *Lost in the Bonewheel Factory* in 1979. He continued his education at Colorado State University, receiving a master of arts degree in 1979, and at the University of California, Irvine, receiving an master of fine arts degree in 1980. Komunyakaa took a teaching position at the University of New Orleans in 1982, later moving to Bloomington, Indiana, to begin his tenure at Indiana University, a post he held until 1996.

Komunyakaa slowly gained critical attention during these years, receiving fellowships from the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts, and the National Endowment for the Arts. His first major collection, *Copacetic*, was published by Wesleyan University Press in 1984, and from this point on, he was a nationally recognized poet. Komunyakaa drew on his Vietnam experiences for some of the poems (and the title) of this volume, as he did in his subsequent book, *I Apologize for the Eyes in My Head*. It was not until his groundbreaking 1988 collection, *Dien Cai Dau*, however, that he fully mined the Vietnam War experience.

In the following years, Komunyakaa dug into the memories of his youth, publishing "Slam, Dunk, & Hook" in the journal *Callaloo* in 1991. The poem was included in a collection about growing up in Bogalusa called *Magic City* in 1992.

In 1994, Komunyakaa published the highly regarded *Neon Vernacular*, a volume that earned him a Pulitzer Prize, the Kingsley Tufts Award, and the William Faulkner Award from the University of Rennes in France. After leaving Indiana in 1996, he taught at a number of universities, including Princeton, where he served as the Humanities Professor of Creative Writing beginning in 1998. Later, Komunyakaa's career took him to the graduate creative writing program at New York University where, as of 2008, he holds the position of Distinguished Senior Poet.

A prolific and profound writer, Komunyakaa's poetry volumes include *Thieves of Paradise* (1998); *Talking Dirty to the Gods* (2000); *Pleasure Dome* (2001); *Taboo: The Wishbone Trilogy, Part I* (2004); and *Warhorses* (2008). In 2006, he also cowrote with Chad Gracia a verse play based on the Gilgamesh epic. With each passing year, Komunyakaa further establishes himself as one of the most important voices in American poetry.

POEM TEXT

Fast breaks. Lay ups. With Mercury's
Insignia on our sneakers,
We outmaneuvered to footwork

Of bad angels. Nothing but a hot
Swish of strings like silk
Ten feet out. In the roundhouse
Labyrinth our bodies
Created, we could almost
Last forever, poised in midair
Like storybook sea monsters.
A high note hung there
A long second. Off
The rim. We'd corkscrew
Up & dunk balls that exploded
The skullcap of hope & good
Intention. Lanky, all hands
& feet . . . sprung rhythm.
We were metaphysical when girls
Cheered on the sidelines.
Tangled up in a falling,
Muscles were a bright motor
Double-flashing to the metal hoop
Nailed to our oak.
When Sonny Boy's mama died
He played nonstop all day, so hard
Our backboard splintered.
Glistening with sweat,
We rolled the ball off
Our fingertips. Trouble
Was there slapping a blackjack
Against an open palm.
Dribble, drive to the inside,
& glide like a sparrow hawk.
Lay ups. Fast breaks.
We had moves we didn't know
We had. Our bodies spun
On swivels of bone & faith,
Through a lyric slipknot
Of joy, & we knew we were
Beautiful & dangerous.

POEM SUMMARY

"Slam, Dunk, & Hook" is a poem of forty short, unrhymed lines. The poem is overtly about a group of young African American men playing basketball in the Deep South during the 1950s or 1960s. The narrator is a member of the group and includes himself in the descriptions.

Lines 1–10

The poem opens with two two-word phrases describing basketball moves, before quickly moving to a classical allusion to the Roman god Mercury. Mercury (called Hermes by the Greeks) was the messenger of the gods and was known for his swiftness. He wore wings on his shoes, designating speed. The word *mercurial* comes from Mercury and signifies quick, unpredictable, and changing movement. Thus, when Komunyakaa refers to the young men wearing Mercury's symbol on their shoes, he is suggesting that the players move quickly and unexpectedly. In addition, because of the wings on their feet, they are able to outwit and outmove evil people who would trip them up. His reference in line 4 suggests that these people may be members of the Ku Klux Klan. In lines 4 through 6, he describes a basketball going easily through a basketball net from a distance.

In line 7, Komunyakaa makes a second classical allusion when he mentions a labyrinth, or maze. In Greek mythology, King Minos ordered the builder Daedalus to construct a large maze that would contain the ferocious monster, the Minotaur, at its heart. A maze is a place that confuses those who enter, and causes them to lose their bearings. Thus, Komunyakaa is suggesting that the players, with their swift and unpredictable moves, are creating a confusing scene for not only the opposing players but also for the white establishment as well. These lines also suggest that the players themselves are nearly mythological, performing moves and feats only possible by young gods.

Lines 11–20

In lines 11 through 17, Komunyakaa uses a series of musical terms and images, including a treble tone that lingers and the sharp rap of a drum, to further describe the players and their basketball shots. The scene is one of high energy and movement, the players twisting and turning in the air. He also references a skullcap, a particular type of headgear, often called a kufi, worn by African Americans; in the poem, the skullcap symbolically disintegrates under the sheer force of the game. In line 17, Komunyakaa references a poetic form developed in the nineteenth century by English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, who connected the rhythm to the cadences of normal speech as well as early English poetry. Komunyakaa forms a pun in this line as he depicts the players springing toward the net, and a second pun on poetic metrical feet and the appendages of the young men. (A pun is a play on words that are identical or similar in sound but have different meanings.) In line 18, the narrator suggests that the players transcend their physical bodies in response to the encouragement of the young women who watch them play. Again, in the next sentence, Komunyakaa turns to sharp descriptions of action.

Lines 21–30

The sentence, however, ends on a religious image. The basketball net is attached to a large tree with a nail. This image suggests that the young men may view the hoop as a holy object; just as Christ was nailed to a piece of wood, so is the hoop. On the other hand, the image is also troubling because of instances in which young black men in the South were lynched from trees, or in extreme cases, nailed to them.

The poem shifts suddenly in line 24, when the narrator tells the reader that one of their members has lost his mother. On the day that she expired, the young man continuously engaged in shooting baskets for a full day, finally breaking the wood behind the net. This moment, while important to the overall poem, is inserted quickly before the narrator turns once again to describing the present action. Line 29 is also troubling. In its original publication in the journal *Callaloo* in 1991, line 29 is a two-word line. (Later publications of the poem move a word from the end of line 28 to the beginning of line 29.) Komunyakaa ends the sentence he has begun in line 28, describing the movement of the ball, mid-line in line 29. He thus completes a section on ball handling before abruptly turning to a new image, sentence, and thought mid-line. The second word of line 29, as the first word of a sentence, is capitalized. In addition, it starts with a hard "t" sound, drawing attention to the sudden insertion of evil into the poem. Although unnamed, it is likely that Komunyakaa is referring to a white policeman watching the boys play ball as he smacks a weapon in his hand. This action is described in line 30, reminding the young men of the power structure of their community.

Lines 31–40

Komunyakaa completes the image of the white policeman in line 31. Then the poem once again turns to a description of the players' movements as they fake out each other with tricky maneuvers. The narrator suggests that the players are transported beyond themselves, finding that they can move intuitively and instinctively, in ways they did not even know that they knew. In line 38, Komunyakaa asserts that the young men slip through a knot. The image is troubling because it brings to mind the lynchings of young black men. Here, however, the young men experience joy in their jumping. The poem ends as the players reach the knowledge that they are lovely to behold, but have powerful destructive potential as well.

THEMES

Power

Although "Slam, Dunk, & Hook" appears to be a poem about a group of young men playing basketball, it is also a poem about power, both physical and cultural power. The young men described in this poem are at the peak of their physical prowess. The narrator describes difficult maneuvers that the young men accomplish easily. Indeed, they seem to exist on some higher plane than the rest of humanity in this poem, accomplishing remarkable feats of physical grace while shooting hoops. Their strength is in their muscles, sinews, and bones.

Cultural power in this poem is not named but referenced obliquely. In line 29, Komunyakaa inserts the image of someone wielding a hand weapon. The weapon Komunyakaa refers to, sometimes called a truncheon, nightstick, or slap, is a rubber baton with a handle grip, weighted at one end. This weapon is often used by police to break up fights, riots, or other incidents in which they do not use guns. (In a particularly gruesome and difficult example, contemporary readers might recall the 1991 images of Rodney King, an African American man, being beaten with batons by four members of the Los Angeles Police Department. The beating was caught on videotape by a bystander.) The choice of the baton as a weapon is particularly potent, within the context of the poem. During the 1950s and early 1960s, young black men were routinely harassed by white policeman wielding batons or nightsticks. The baton itself became a symbol of police brutality and misuse of power. In "Slam, Dunk, & Hook," therefore, the image of a policeman watching the basketball game, smacking one hand with a baton held in another hand, is a reminder of the unequal balance of power between the races. It also serves to suggest that the white power structures fear the grace and physical prowess of the African American youth playing basketball.

The final lines of the poem allude to yet another manifestation of power. The young men playing basketball are not merely physically powerful, they are also beginning to understand the importance of teamwork to achieve goals

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY



- With a small group of classmates, prepare a multimedia presentation for your class on the topic of Jim Crow laws. Be sure to include a history of the laws that created a segregated society in the South. Use photos, music, poetry, essays, and historical statements in your presentation.
- Working with your classmates, organize a public reading of sports poems, written by both male and female writers, ranging from the 1950s to the present. Prepare introductory remarks for each poem, describing why you have selected it for inclusion in the reading.
- Komunyakaa is often compared to poet Robert Hayden. Research this poet, gathering biographical details as well as samples of his poetry. Then read some of the other poems in *Magic City*. Write an essay comparing and contrasting some of Komunyakaa's poems from *Magic City* with those of Hayden.
- Research the characteristics of jazz, and then listen to recordings by Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk, and Charlie Parker. How does Komunyakaa's poetry reflect the rhythms of jazz? Select another poem from *Magic City* and write an essay analyzing it from the perspective of rhythm and sound. Use specific examples from the poem to illustrate and support your assertions.

other than baskets. Just as in basketball they use strength and strategy to win the game, the coming fight for civil rights in the United States for all people will require courage, strength, wit, subterfuge, and strategy. The white establishment in this poem is right to consider the young men deadly; their anger over their ongoing mistreatment and oppression, percolating under the surface, will soon erupt in protests and riots across the nation. Komunyakaa, writing in 1991, has the wisdom of hindsight to impart to "Slam, Dunk, & Hook." He knows what the near future will hold for these young men. Thus, the expression of the last line of "Slam, Dunk, & Hook," asserting that the players are not only lovely to behold but also powerfully intent on achieving their goals and powerfully poised to overthrow their oppressors, rings as a prophecy.

Grief and Anger

In lines 24 through 26, Komunyakaa inserts the image of a young black man called Sonny Boy who has just lost his mother. Sonny Boy's response to his mother's death is to play basketball continuously. His play is so hard and pounding that his shots end up shattering the wooden board behind the net. Although this image extends for only two short lines, it is a striking expression of both grief and anger. As a young black man in the 1950s South, Sonny Boy is rendered powerless by legal and social strictures of the day. His outlet is the basketball court, where, in the fast-paced movement of feet, hands, muscle, and sinew, he finds a language to express his rage and his grief.

These brief lines also serve to demonstrate the way Komunyakaa evokes strong emotion in his poems without ever naming the emotion or referring to it directly. It is left up to the reader to connect the force of Sonny Boy's play with the emotional force that drives him, and it is up to the reader to name just what that emotion is. Indeed, by leaving so much unspoken in "Slam, Dunk, & Hook," Komunyakaa encourages the reader to feel the grief and anger inside his or her muscles and bones, not merely read the words on the page.

STYLE

Motif

In poetry, when critics speak of a motif, they mean a recurring image, subject, symbol, or detail that unifies a creative work. Readers at times confuse theme and motif, although the two can be distinguished easily if one remembers that the theme of an artistic work is not the same as the subject. That is, the theme is an abstract statement about the subject. A motif, on the other hand, is the device that a writer uses to develop his thematic concerns. In the case of "Slam, Dunk, & Hook," Komunyakaa uses the motif of basketball. Readers can easily identify



Basketball player (© moodboard / Alamy)

that this poem is, on the surface, about basketball. In addition, readers can bring to the poem everything that they know about basketball; for example, anyone who has watched a basketball game knows that it is a fast, powerful, highly competitive game in which players attempt to disguise their movements toward the basket. At the same time, basketball, while the ostensible subject of the poem, serves to help Komunyakaa develop and reinforce his thematic concerns of anger, grief, oppression, and power. The sensory details of the players's movements as they dodge, feint, and shoot the ball unifies the poem and allows Komunyakaa to make concrete the abstract notion of injustice.

Sprung Rhythm

In 1877, English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins developed a poetic meter known as sprung rhythm. While he acknowledged himself as a practitioner of the form, he never credited himself as its inventor. Rather, he believed that the form not only reflected the cadences of spoken English, it also hearkened back to the earliest Old English verse and continued into the time of William Shakespeare. Contemporary critics also see sprung rhythm reemerging in the free verse forms of the modernists.

Typically in poetry, meter is discussed in terms of accented and unaccented syllables, organized into "feet," or groups. For example, an unaccented syllable followed by an accented syllable is called an iamb. When there are five such feet in a line, it is called iambic pentameter, the meter used by Shakespeare in his sonnets and soliloquies, and John Milton in *Paradise Lost*. Regular meter requires feet that observe the organizational structure of the line; thus, iambic pentameter requires that each line have five unaccented syllables paired with five accented syllables. For example, the following is a sentence written in iambic pentameter: "The time has come for us to go away."

Hopkins, however, through sprung rhythm, breaks free of the jurisdiction of the line, spreading feet across the ends of lines into the next line. Quite simply, then, sprung rhythm utilizes irregular feet comprised of one accented syllable alone, or one accent syllable followed by an unspecified number of unaccented syllables (generally fewer than four, however).

In "Slam, Dunk, & Hook," Komunyakaa adapts Hopkins' sprung rhythm to his characteristically short lines, carrying feet from one line to the next. Each line has two or three accented syllables, followed by one to four unaccented syllables. The result is a poem that mimics the irregular, but marked, rhythms of jazz and the basketball court. The evidence that Komunyakaa intends to use sprung rhythm is manifold: first, in the strong stresses he places on individual syllables; second, in the way that he avoids the end stop and chooses instead to carry meaning and meter across lines; and third, by a direct reference in line 17, where he uses the term to describe the movement of the players' appendages.

First-Person Plural Point of View

The narrator of a poem or story is the voice that "speaks" the poem or the story. The point of view describes the relationship of the narrator to the events he or she narrates. For example, a first-person narrator will use the pronoun "I" and tell the events of the poem from the limited perspective of a single person. A third-person narrator may not be identifiable as a character

or a voice but rather seem to be the voice of the author, who knows all. Such a point of view is often referred to as third-person omniscient.

A less common point of view is the first-person plural, told from a collective "we" point of view. Readers may have experienced this point of view in the short story by Mississippi writer William Faulkner, "A Rose for Emily." Like Faulkner, Komunyakaa chooses the first-person plural point of view for "Slam, Dunk, & Hook." By so doing, he places the narrator within a community of shared values and beliefs. The narrator, in effect, becomes the representative voice of that community. In the case of "Slam, Dunk, & Hook," the narrator is one of the group of basketball players. He shares their experiences, their frustrations, their fears, their joys, and their physical prowess.

At the same time, however, the narrator is also an observer of the community. The poem is written in past tense, a small vignette from the narrator's past that has assumed significance in the years that followed. Thus, the narrator speaks to readers of the poem from a double consciousness: he is at once a basketball player, jumping for shots, and an older voice, probably of someone who has left the community, who recalls those hot summer days when trouble was just around the corner.

While the poems of *Magic City* are based on Komunyakaa's memories of growing up in Bogalusa, Louisiana, it would be a mistake to necessarily identify the narrator with Komunyakaa himself. The basketball game he describes might have been one he participated in or not; there is no way to tell. However, it is possible for Komunyakaa to draw deeply from the shared sense of community and create a first-person plural narrator who can speak for the group, a narrator who can provide a voice for a people who were voiceless.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Jim Crow

Jim Crow was originally a character in a nineteenth-century minstrel show, played by a white man performing a caricature of a black man, dancing and singing silly songs. The character became standard during that century, and came to represent a stereotypical image of black inferiority. Ultimately, the term became connected to racist laws that not only deprived African Americans of their rights but also defined them as a subordinate and inferior group of people.

In 1896, the Supreme Court of the United States, in a landmark decision called *Plessy v. Ferguson*, upheld the concept of "separate but equal." That is, the decision stated that states could segregate facilities by race so long as both African Americans and whites had equal facilities. In reality, while facilities were indeed separated, they were scarcely equal, with African Americans forced to attend inferior schools with few resources, to use restroom facilities that were substandard or nearly non-existent, and to ride in train cars and bus seats in undesirable locations, separated from whites.

Plessy v. Ferguson heralded an era in which states passed laws that impinged on every part of African American life. African Americans could not sit with white people in a theater, they could not work with white people, their children could not swim in public swimming pools with white people, nor could they eat in white-only restaurants. States even outlawed marriage between whites and African Americans. Through what were known as miscegenation laws, many states continued to ban interracial marriage until these laws were overturned by the Supreme Court in 1967.

Sports teams were also segregated, with African Americans banned from playing professional sports with white players. It was not until 1947 that Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier by becoming the first African American to play major league baseball. Likewise, Nat Clifton in 1951 became the first African American to play in the National Basketball League. Although the sports teams were slowly integrated, the laws dictating where team members could sleep and eat in the South were not changed immediately.

Likewise, Jim Crow laws prevented African Americans from participating in American democracy. When an African American showed up at a polling place to cast a vote, the person was often met by laws that required the person to pay a poll tax, or pass a literacy test, before being allowed to vote. As a result, few African Americans were able to make their voices heard.

As if the Jim Crow laws were not bad enough, many states did not have anti-lynching statutes on their books. As a result, young African American men in particular lived dangerous lives. Any

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **1950s:** So-called Jim Crow laws continue to limit the civil rights of African American citizens throughout the South, including the right to vote, hold property, and use public facilities on an equal basis with white citizens.

  1990s: The Civil Rights Act of 1964, guaranteeing that all persons are entitled to full and equal civil rights under the law, without segregation or discrimination, regardless of race, color, religion, or national origin, remains the law of the land. In 1991, due to a series of court decisions limiting the rights of workers, the United States Congress passes the Civil Rights Act of 1991, the first major civil rights legislation since 1964. The Civil Rights Act of 1991 ensures the right to a jury for persons pursuing a discrimination claim against an employer.

  Today: In January 2008, Senator Edward Kennedy (Democrat from Massachusetts) and Congressman John Lewis (Democrat from Georgia), along with a number of additional senators, introduce the Civil Rights Act of 2008. The promise of the Act is to provide clear remedy for those who have been discriminated against, thus holding employers and school officials accountable for the treatment of minorities under their jurisdiction.

- **1950s:** African American poet Gwendolyn Brooks breaks a literary color barrier by winning the 1950 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for her book *Annie Allen*.

  1990s: African American writers are finding a wide and receptive audience for their work. In 1994, Komunyakaa wins a Pulitzer Prize in Poetry for *Neon Vernacular*. Novelist Toni Morrison becomes the first African American woman to win the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993, and Rita Dove becomes the first African American poet laureate of the United States in the same year.

  Today: African American writers are among the best-selling and most esteemed writers in the United States today, regularly winning nominations for the National Book Award, the Pulitzer Prize, and the Ruth Lilly Poetry Award, among many others.

- **1950s:** Schools throughout the South are segregated, with African American children prohibited from attending schools with white students. In the North, de facto segregation (segregation as a matter of fact and not law) also exists, with most African Americans attending largely black schools. Universities likewise are segregated, and few African American professors teach in the United States except at historically black universities and colleges such as Howard, Stillman, and Tuskeegee. In 1954, the landmark Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* calls for an end to segregation in public schools. Many school systems and communities publicly resist integration or are slow to comply with the court's mandate.

  1990s: While public school systems have ended legal segregation, some de facto segregation still exists. Pressure is placed on historically black colleges and universities to integrate, based on the 1992 Supreme Court ruling *U.S. v. Fordice*. Universities and colleges with a majority white population often utilize affirmative action, sometimes called racial preferencing, in their admissions process, thereby increasing the number of minority students enrolled.

  Today: A racial divide in many cities persists. However, African American and white students attend classes together and on an equal basis. Likewise, some of the leading professors at universities across the United States are African American. Affirmative action in college admissions has been outlawed in states such as California and Michigan, leading to a decline of minority students at some universities.

violation of the strictly enforced code of racial etiquette could be met with a beating, tarring and feathering, or at worst, a lynching. As a result, many African Americans survived by pretending to be subservient and nonconfrontational, hiding their true thoughts and intentions.

The 1954 Supreme Court Case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* overturned *Plessy v. Ferguson* in regard to schools; ultimately, the decision undermined and struck down all Jim Crow laws, but not without a long and difficult struggle on the part of African Americans. On Tuesday, July 29, 2008, The House of Representatives of the United States passed a resolution apologizing to African Americans for slavery and for the Jim Crow era.

The Ku Klux Klan

The Ku Klux Klan began in the nineteenth century as a secret society of white men, who, through vigilantism and terror, attempted to control the African American population of the South by burning churches and schools and murdering those who did not adhere to strict racial etiquette designed to maintain the superior position of white people. Although the federal government broke up the Klan in the 1870s, it reemerged, according to Richard Wormser in *The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow*, in 1915, and by the 1920s, had become a nationwide, powerful force. Many politicians were associated with the Klan during this era. In the South, police and local government officials by day were often white-robed, hooded Klan vigilantes by night.

According to Angela M. Salas, in an article appearing in *College Literature*, Komunyakaa's home town of Bogalusa "had an active, intimidating Klan presence" during Komunyakaa's youth and adolescence. The young basketball players in the poem "Slam, Dunk, & Hook" could be targets for Klan violence, particularly as the early civil rights movement began in the mid-1950s. Tellingly, as Salas asserts, Bogalusa "was also the birthplace of the Deacons for Defense and Justice, a group of African American men who exercised armed resistance to white racist oppression." The tension that inheres in "Slam, Dunk, & Hook" between beauty and danger, then, has at its roots racial confrontation, the basketball players representing a new breed of young African Americans who refuse to be oppressed any longer.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

Komunyakaa's work has been widely lauded by critics. Angela M. Salas, writing in *College Literature* in 2003 suggests that this is due to "readers' and critics' sense that his is an 'authentic' voice, the voice of a man who has been to the places and experienced the things of which he writes." Certainly, in the poems of *Magic City*, the collection including "Slam, Dunk, & Hook," there is a sense that Komunyakaa is examining his own life through a poetic lens.

Just as critics found much to praise in Komunyakaa's earlier volumes, *Magic City* elicited strong positive reviews. Jennifer Richter, writing in *Callaloo* in 1994, asserts that "for its keen eye, its rich language, and for the honest answers it offers . . . *Magic City* ranks as Komunyakaa's best book to date."

The theme of racism runs through many of the best poems, and critics are quick to note this. Susan Conley, writing in the Spring 1997 issue of *Ploughshares*, asserts,

> In *Magic City* . . . Komunyakaa turned back to his youth, revisiting it with an unflinching eye. The result is poetry that refuses to offer a simple reprieve for our history of racism, poetry that insists we pay witness to life in all its contradictions.

Likewise, Richter sees in the collection "the almost overwhelming issues of race."

Other critics focus on the craft and sophistication of Komunyakaa's poems, noting in particular his wide knowledge and use of classical, Shakespearian, musical, and popular culture allusions. David Wojahn, for example, writing in the December 2001 issue of *Poetry*, notes,

> There's a synthesizing erudition at work in Komunyakaa's poems that makes for some surprising linkages. . . . It's as though the associational play at work in Komunyakaa's metaphors . . . can also be found in the way he makes use of literary and musical allusions.

Likewise, other critics have asserted that Komunyakaa draws on the work of other writers, musicians, and historical figures in his work. Michel Fabre, in a speech printed in the *Southern Quarterly* in 1996, notes that Komunyakaa's poetry, "like that of [poet Ezra] Pound, makes much use of intertextuality." Salas argues in her book *Flashback through the Heart: The Poetry of Yusef Komunyakaa* that Komunyakaa uses allusion as a way of compacting meaning: "Allusion,

in *Magic City*, is used . . . as a technical device to achieve compression of meaning rather than a tool to intimidate readers."

Not all reviews of *Magic City* have been completely positive. Calvin Bedient, in a review of *Magic City* appearing in the June 1993 issue of *Poetry*, writes, "The poems tend to stick so close to imaginatively colored grounds that they lack vistas, just as they lack marked development. . . . *Magic City* lacks the ferocious concentration necessary to convert memory into revelation." Bedient, however, is nearly alone in his analysis. Far more typical is the critical response of Kirkland C. Jones, who states in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, "Yusef Komunyakaa has come of age, not only as a Southern-American or African-American bard, but as a world class poet."



KOMUNYAKAA'S DEFT HANDLING OF JAZZ RHYTHMS, BASKETBALL IMAGERY AND SOUNDS, AND METRICAL FEET PARALLELS THE MAGICAL MOVEMENT OF THE YOUNG BASKETBALL STARS, WHO PLAY NOT ONLY FOR A WIN BUT FOR THEIR VERY LIVES."

CRITICISM

Diane Andrews Henningfeld

Henningfeld is a college professor and literary critic who writes widely on contemporary literature. In this essay, she closely examines Komunyakaa's prosody, demonstrating how the rhythms of jazz and the basketball court figure in both the structure and meaning of "Slam, Dunk, & Hook."

The poems of Komunyakaa's *Magic City* are often discussed in relationship to the poet's life and to the historical context of the 1950s and 1960s. Angela M. Salas, for example, argues in an article in *College Literature*, "In *Magic City* Komunyakaa makes an imaginative return to his childhood home of Bogalusa, Louisiana." She adds that the volume is "marked by the time and place Komunyakaa reflects upon: the pre-Civil Rights, Jim Crow South." Salas also locates Komunyakaa's themes within this framework, calling the collection "an extended meditation upon race, class, and gender, and how these things mark, indeed, vex, the lives of those with whom Komunyakaa grew up."

There is little doubt that the poems of *Magic City*, including "Slam, Dunk, & Hook," can be read in just such a manner. At the same time, however, it is possible to overlook Komunyakaa's supreme artistry by concentrating solely on historical and autobiographical details. He is a master craftsman, a poet who uses the devices of poetry so deftly that the brilliance can go unnoticed in the sheer power of the poem. Therefore, while "Slam, Dunk, & Hook" is surely a poem about rage, grief, fear, pride, danger, and beauty, set in an historic period in the South, it is also a poem that can be fruitfully discussed in terms of technique. In other words, studying *how* the poem means can be an important aspect of determining *what* the poems means.

Perhaps the most noticeable device employed by Komunyakaa in "Slam, Dunk, & Hook" is his prosody, the metrical and rhythmic quality of the work. As David Wojahn remarks in a review of *Pleasure Dome* in *Poetry*:

> [Komunyakaa has] found a prosody so characteristic that it's hard to mistake one of his stanzas for anyone else's. When these qualities come together at their frequent best, the writing has an implosive quality that makes even his shortest lyrics quite powerful.

In other words, although Komunyakaa does not write in regular meter, the overall rhythmical quality of his work is not only structural but essential to the meaning of the poem itself. As Wojahn continues, "[Komunyakaa] favors short lines, few of them longer than three-beats, and surprising enjambments. . . . His writing has a jittery and hyper-kinetic quality."

In "Slam, Dunk, & Hook" there are two strong influences on Komunyakaa's prosody: jazz and the sounds of a basketball game. Fran Gordon, introducing an interview with the poet in *Poets & Writers* magazine, notes that "Komunyakaa was raised on the blues and jazz of his birthplace." Indeed, Komunyakaa makes frequent reference to the influence of jazz on his work in interviews, speeches, and essays.

More than melody, more than lyrics, it is rhythm that makes jazz jazz. Specifically, musicians

WHAT DO I READ NEXT?



- In 2006, Komunyakaa teamed up with playwright Chad Gracia to create an adaptation of the Sumerian Gilgamesh epic for the stage. *Gilgamesh: A Verse Play* (published by Wesleyan) demonstrates the wide range of Komunyakaa's interests and talent.
- Komunyakaa's *Dien Cai Dau* (1988) contains highly respected poems that reflect Komunyakaa's experience in the Vietnam War.
- Ann Moody's 1992 *Coming of Age in Mississippi* is a memoir of a young African American woman, growing up in Mississippi during the 1940s and 1950s.
- *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, a novel written by Mildred D. Taylor in 1976, remains one of the most acclaimed young adult novels about an African American girl growing in the South.
- *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader* (1999) is a collection of the essays and poetry of this seminal African American writer.

use syncopation, the unexpected accenting of a note, to delight and surprise listeners. Four-four time, also called common time because of its prevalence in the music of Western culture, is a musical meter that has four beats to each measure of music. Listeners expect to hear the rhythmic stresses in four-four time on each of four beats to the measure, with the strongest stress on the first beat. This is regardless of the number of notes in the measure. In a measure comprised of eighth notes in four-four time, for example, there would still be four beats in a measure, but there would be eight notes. In this case, a listener would expect an accented downbeat followed by an unaccented upbeat, for a total of four accented downbeats and four unaccented upbeats. In syncopated rhythms, however, the stress might fall on the upbeat, rather than the downbeat. Further, a musician might unexpectedly lengthen or shorten a note, forcing the stress to fall just off the beat. The overall effect is one of surprise. Indeed, ragtime music, the early precursor to jazz, was so called because of the "raggedy" rhythms it employed, with its accents in unexpected places.

The "jittery and hyper-kinetic" quality that Wojahn refers to in Komunyakaa's poetry is much like the use of syncopation in jazz. Komunyakaa increases this effect through his use of enjambment, a device through which a poet does not end a line with a grammatical resting place, punctuated with a period or a comma. That is, the syntactical unit, such as a sentence, clause, or phrase, is carried on to the next line rather than ending with the line. This forces the reader to continue to the next line to understand the meaning of the sentence, clause, or phrase. As a corollary, enjambment also often results in pauses or stops called "caesuras" in the middle of a line. Again, the unexpected flow of meaning across lines juxtaposed with a sudden caesura midline throws off the reader's expectations, in much the same way that jazz rhythms do, with sudden stops, starts, and unexpected accents.

Similarly, the noises of a basketball game are also rhythmic, although not regular. The dribbling of the ball down the court makes strong beats that speed up or slow down, depending on the play, the player, and the pace of the game. Thus, the downward motion of the ball hitting the floor or ground can be likened to the downbeat in a piece of music, with the upward motion of the ball to the player's hands similar to the upbeat. When a player speeds up play, the beats come faster, and at times, unexpectedly. It is important for players to shift their rhythms in order to mask their intentions. Otherwise, the opposing players will be able to read the play, and the player will not have a shot on the basket. Like jazz, and poetry, basketball depends on surprise, varying rhythms, speed, and the drive to the goal.

It is also possible to connect jazz, basketball, and poetry with a discussion of, oddly enough, feet. The jazz player must keep track of the beat in order to vary, disguise, and play with the rhythm; the player will often do so by tapping a foot. With his or her foot marking the regular beat, he or she is free to improvise and swing the rhythm. Likewise, in basketball, the player must keep close track of his or her feet, timing dribbles to his or her movement down the court in order

to avoid a double-dribble penalty. Fancy footwork is essential for basketball.

Unexpectedly, it is also possible to talk about poetry in terms of feet. In poetry, accented and unaccented syllables are grouped together in units called feet. Komunyakaa employs what is known as "sprung rhythm" in "Slam, Dunk, & Hook." Sprung rhythm is a form of irregular feet developed by the English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins in the nineteenth century. In sprung rhythm, an accented syllable is followed by an unspecified number of unaccented syllables, comprising a foot of poetry. In "Slam, Dunk, & Hook," for example, in line 1, there are three feet. The first foot has one accented syllable followed by an unaccented syllable. The second foot repeats this pattern. The third foot, however, has an accented syllable, followed by two unaccented syllables in line 1 and then a third unaccented syllable in line 2.

The carryover of feet between lines mirrors Komunyakaa's use of grammatical enjambment. Thus, not only does a syntactical unit such as a sentence, clause, or phrase become divided up in unexpected ways, so, too, do the metrical units of feet spill from one line to the next in surprising ways. The overall effect is to throw the reader off guard in every way. Readers must be alert to Komunyakaa's movement with words and rhythms in order to keep track of the poem itself.

Yet another device used by jazz musicians is counterpoint. In counterpoint, two melodic lines move against each other. In jazz, this is further complicated by the unexpected rhythms. Thus, in ragtime piano, for example, the left hand might follow one melodic line and rhythm while the right hand traces another. The two hands thus work apart, and together, in a complicated and complex manner.

In "Slam, Dunk, & Hook," Komunyakaa opposes what appears to be a local pickup basketball game with the larger picture of race relations in America. The undercurrents of rage move raggedly and unexpectedly against the regular slap of the policeman's baton. Just as the jazz musician and the basketball player hide their intentions until the surprising moment of revelation, Komunyakaa suggests that the young men playing ball also hide their intentions from the white power structures of their time. Their fancy footwork, feints, lunges and dives in the basketball game mirror not only the rhythms of the poem but also the dissembling they must do in order to survive in a country that has stacked power against them.

Komunyakaa's deft handling of jazz rhythms, basketball imagery and sounds, and metrical feet parallels the magical movement of the young basketball stars, who play not only for a win but for their very lives. He augments his meaning in the poem through his prosody, demonstrating his mastery of sound and sense, music and rhythm, image and allusion. "Slam, Dunk, & Hook" is a swing tune, a mourning dance, a demonstration of remarkable prosody, and a treatise on Jim Crow, all at the same time. The attentive reader, like the listener of jazz and the basketball aficionado, will discover something new with each reading of the poem.

Source: Diane Andrews Henningfeld, Critical Essay on "Slam, Dunk, & Hook," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2009.

Yusef Komunyakaa

In the following essay, Komunyakaa discusses the influence of growing up in Bogalusa, Louisiana, on his poetry.

I believe that each of us internalizes a landscape composite of myths and stories, and we carry that psychological terrain within us as we make our way through the world, whether we are facing that green divan that Anna Akhmatova slept on in St. Petersburg or gazing out at Stone Mountain in Georgia, an overlay by which the future is often colored and through which it is often perceived. However, like Lillian Smith—"Miss Lil"—some of us attempt to refashion that inherited landscape through consciousness. That is, we attempt to bring ourselves to an awareness of what has shaped us. Since landscape is both regional and emotional, I learned to meditate on everything around me, people and nature.

Like the word made flesh, the South has been woven through my bones. My collection of poetry, *Magic City* (1992), is an attempt to capture my early years of growing up in Bogalusa, Louisiana. Coming of age there, I was fully aware of both the natural beauty and the social terror surrounding me. The challenge became to acknowledge and resist this terror. My early emotional life grew into the kind of questions that lead men to ponder philosophy and psychology, eventually guiding me to poetry. I became aware of the troublesome contradictions in my town.

James Baldwin says a black boy can't survive if he doesn't know the score by fourteen. Of course, this is doubly true in the South I knew in the '50s. This was near the time Emmett Till was murdered in Mississippi.

But the South was also a mecca of language and images. I learned about the naming of things there. The wrong word could get a man killed. The South taught me how to look at things, to see into the shape and design of reality. I began to take things apart. My first ventures alone were into nature, then into my imagination, which allowed me to exit Bogalusa. I saw things when I didn't, when I wasn't supposed to.

I don't view myself primarily as a southern writer; however, what I depict in my poetry is connected to rural Louisiana. Even in my gazing into a viewfinder as a boy, trying to daydream myself away to Mexico or Japan, into the future, my eyes had been tutored by the green surety and sunlight of that place called home. I continue to pose questions based on my early experiences and observations. While I was briefly in Florida, my mind kept asking, Where is Rosewood? Where are the Seminoles? And, in retrospect, I realize that Bogalusa taught me almost everything I know about writing poetry. It showed me how to get up inside a question and shake it till the insides let go. But home also instructed me in ways to embrace mystery and beauty.

Source: Yusef Komunyakaa, "More Than a State of Mind," in *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, Vol. 35, No. 1, Spring 2002, pp. 163–67.

Marilyn Nelson Waniek

In the following excerpt, Waniek addresses poverty, racism, and the friendship of boys in the poems of Magic City*, including "Slam, Dunk, & Hook."*

. . . *Magic City*, Yusef Komunyakaa's eighth book of poems, is punctuated by dramatic encounters, most of them racial. The thrust of the book is clearly autobiographical, yet its subject remains for the most part a point of view, clear-eyed and loving, yet rarely differentiated from the communal "we." Partly a Bildungsroman and partly an album of snapshots by which a neighborhood can remember its history, the book is rooted in family, community, and place. In "Glory," Komunyakaa remembers baseball games played by

> . . . married teenagers
> Working knockout shifts daybreak
> To sunset six days a week—Already
> old men playing ball
> In a field between a row of shotgun houses
> & the Magazine Lumber Company.

He remembers the cheering children and wives, the daring, impossible catches, how "The old deacons & raconteurs/ Who umpired made an Out or Safe/ Into a song & dance routine." And he understands that "A stolen base or homerun/ Would help another man/Survive the new week."

In several such clearly realized poems the community comes to life and takes on meaning. In "Slam, Dunk, & Hook" a group of boys—"Bugeyed, lanky,/All hands & feet . . . sprung rhythm"—plays basketball:

> . . . Nothing but a hot
> Swish of strings like silk
> Ten feet out. In the roundhouse
> Labyrinth our bodies
> created, we could almost
> Last forever, poised in midair . . .
>
> They play because
>
> . . . Trouble
> Was there slapping a blackjack
> Against an open palm.
> Dribble, drive to the inside, feint,
> & glide like a sparrow hawk.

While retrospectively standing their poverty and the unspecified but palpable threat of racism with which they live, Komunyakaa at the same time fully enters the memory and the community of boys:

> Lay ups. Fast breaks.
> We had moves we didn't know

"THE POEMS IN WHICH THE YOUNG KOMUNYAKAA APPEARS AS A CHARACTER ARE QUIET AND INTROSPECTIVE, THEIR GRIEF CAUSED BY SOMETHING LARGER THAN POVERTY OR RACISM. THEY MOURN THE PASSAGE OF TIME, 'THE STRUGGLE UNDERNEATH,' INEXPLICABILITY, LOVE'S MYSTERY AND THAT OF SEX, THE PAIN WE INFLICT, DEATH."

We had. Our bodies spun
On swivels of bone & faith,
Through a lyric slipknot
Of joy, & we knew we were
Beautiful & dangerous.

The poems in which the young Komunyakaa appears as a character are quiet and introspective, their grief caused by something larger than poverty or racism. They mourn the passage of time, "the struggle underneath," inexplicability, love's mystery and that of sex, the pain we inflict, death. In "The Smokehouse" the child prowls through a smokehouse:

I was a wizard
In that hazy world,
& knew I could cut
Slivers of meat till my heart
Grew more human & flawed.

In "My Father's Love Letters" the boy writes weekly letters for his illiterate, father to his mother, who has run away from her husband's beatings:

Words rolled from under the pressure
Of my ballpoint: Love,
Baby, Honey, Please.

Komunyakaa confesses he

. . . sometimes wanted
to slip in a reminder, how Mary Lou
Williams' "Polka Dots & Moonbeams"
Never made the swelling go down.

But finally he stands humbled by his father's inarticulate love:

. . . This man,
Who stole roses & hyacinth
For his yard, would stand there
With eyes closed & fists balled,
Laboring over a simple word, almost
Redeemed by what he tried to say.

There is in Komunyakaa'ss work a tendency to let figurative language grow unpruned. This tendency flaws several poems with overwriting. In one poem a disemboweled pig carcass is described as "opened like love,/ From snout to tail." Excuse me, but "like love"? Another poem, "The Millpond," describes time's passing:

Till April oozed sap
Like a boy beside a girl

Squeezing honeycomb in his fists. But would honey squeeze out of a boy's fists any differently because he is "beside a girl"? Sometimes one simple sentence contains as many as three unrelated metaphors and one simile. Occasionally he resorts to the paint-box trick: thinking colors named "fulvous," "molybdate," and "titanous" more poetic than yellow, orange, and white, for example. I'm sorry to say that he often allows himself to be both coy and what Etheridge Knight used to call "fancy-schmancy." Several important stories—most painfully the one about the grandfather whose "true name" Komunyakaa has chosen to carry, are left in misty innuendo. About this grandfather we learn in a poem called "Mismatched Shoes" that "He wore a boy's shoe/ & a girl's shoe." There must be an interesting story there. Enquiring minds want to know.

Despite this criticism, I applaud the courage with which Komunyakaa has confronted his childhood and youth. With his sensitive evocations of the child's sense of the natural world, the driving curiosity of adolescent sexuality, and the slow transformation of the dreamer-child into the poet, he makes a great contribution to one of the newest genres in the canon: the black male epic of self . . . .

Source: Marilyn Nelson Waniek, Review of *Magic City*, in *Southern Review*, Vol. 29, No. 2, Spring 1993, pp. 405–20.

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The editors have collected in this book poems about swimming, climbing, running, basketball, football, baseball, and racquet sports, with work from such well-known poets as Donald Hall, Maxine Kumin, Don Welch, and Louise Erdrich.

Komunyakaa, Yusef, *Blue Notes: Essays, Interviews, and Commentaries*, edited by Radiclani Clytus, University of Michigan Press, 2000.

In this book, Komunyakaa examines several poets and musicians who have influenced him, followed by four poems that illustrate his points. The book also includes a number of interviews with the poet and concludes with some experimental writing.

———, *Pleasure Dome: New and Collected Poems*, Wesleyan University Press, 2001.

A large collection of Komunyakaa's poetry, this book includes poems from the poet's early chapbooks, which are no longer in print, as well as many previously uncollected poems. The book also includes significant representation from each of Komunyakaa's pre-2001 collections, including *Magic City*.

Packard, Jerrold M., *American Nightmare: The History of Jim Crow*, St. Martin's Griffin, 2003.

A very readable overview of the history of segregation in the United States, focusing on the legal statutes (the so-called Jim Crow laws) that both created and upheld institutional racism, including the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* case that established the separate-but-equal policies and customs in both the South and the North.

Sunstone

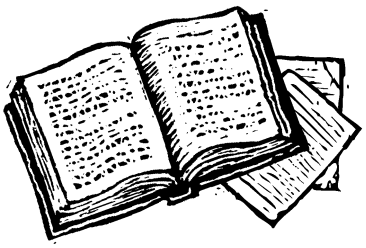
OCTAVIO PAZ

1957

Sunstone, an epic poem (or lengthy narrative poem) by Mexican writer Octavio Paz, is Paz's most famous poetic work. Inspired by the Aztec reverence for the planet Venus, Paz wrote *Sunstone* to be 584 lines long, a structure that reflects Venus's 584-day synodic orbit—the amount of time it takes for the celestial object to return to its original position relative to the sun. The title also evokes the famous Aztec sacrificial altar stone recovered in Mexico City in the eighteenth century.

In the poem, Paz writes about his loneliness, seeks understanding of human existence, and discovers solace and companionship in loving other people. The gods, distinctly Aztec in their bloodthirsty characterization, are omnipresent but, as the narrator of the poem learns, do not give human beings salvation. Humans must find salvation within each other, the poem concludes.

When Paz won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1990, the Swedish Academy declared *Sunstone* to be "one of the high points of Paz's poetry." Originally published as a standalone piece titled *Piedra de sol* in Spanish in 1957, *Sunstone* was first translated into English by the bilingual poet Muriel Rukeyser and published in 1962. An updated translation is available from Eliot Weinberger in *The Collected Poems of Octavio Paz, 1957–1987* (1987).





Octavio Paz (AP Images)

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Octavio Paz was born on March 31, 1914, in Mexico City, Mexico, to parents Octavio and Josefina. His father was an assistant to the revolutionary Emiliano Zapata, tying the Paz family to the political and cultural elite of Mexico; however, they were also impoverished during Paz's childhood by these radical associations. As a teenager, Paz began publishing his short stories and poems. His first book of poetry, *Luna silvestre* (Sylvan Moon), was published in 1933 when he was only nineteen years old.

Paz studied law at the National Autonomous University of Mexico from 1932 to 1937. He corresponded with Pablo Neruda, the famous Chilean poet and diplomat, who encouraged Paz as a writer and liberal thinker. Paz spent time fighting in Spain against the fascist dictator Francisco Franco, and after the war he earned money as a journalist and translator while working on his graduate degree. He married the writer Elena Garro in 1937; they divorced in 1959. In 1946, Paz took a diplomatic position with the Mexican government as cultural attaché to France, where he was exposed to surrealism. This job gave Paz the opportunity to write, and during the next two decades he published ten volumes of poetry as well as many other books and new editions.

Paz was an established literary figure by the 1950s, when many of his famous works were published. *El labertino de la soledad* (*The Labyrinth of Solitude*), a collection of essays about Mexico published in 1950, is Paz's most highly regarded book of nonfiction. *Piedra de sol* (*Sunstone*) was published in 1957 as a stand-alone piece and is considered to be Paz's finest poetic work.

Paz was posted to India in 1962, where he met Marie-José Tramini. They married in 1964 and had one daughter together. Paz quit his diplomatic position in 1968 to object to the Mexican government's repression of student protest in Mexico City. Paz was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1990, the first Mexican to receive this honor, in recognition of his tremendous contributions to world literature.

He continued to be an active literary and political voice, publishing volumes of verse and prose, until his death; at age eighty-four, Paz died from spinal cancer on April 19, 1998, in Mexico City.

POEM SUMMARY

Sunstone is an exploration of the meaning of existence. Humans are alone, lonely, but able to come together through love and community. Based on the Aztec reverence for the morning and evening star, the poem mimics the 584-day synodic cycle of Venus. A *synodic cycle* is the amount of time it takes for an object in the sky to return to the position it originally held relative to the sun. In the original Spanish, *Piedra de sol* comprises 584 eleven-syllable lines (with half-lines visually combining to make full eleven-syllable lines). The final six lines of the poem, which are not part of the 584-line count, repeat the first six lines to make a cyclical whole. Eliot Weinberger's English translation, *Sunstone*, is 586 lines long, including the six-line repetition at the end.

In Aztec mythology, the planet Venus is symbolized by two fiery serpents merging into a single being: duality and unity. Venus is also known to many cultures as the morning star and evening star because it spends half of its orbit visible at dawn and the other half visible at sunset. Venus always travels close to the sun, which made it very important to the sun-worshipping Aztecs. In *Sunstone*, Venus is loosely represented by a sensual and terrifying goddess. Like the planet, she waxes and wanes and has a profound effect on the world of humans.

Stanza 1

Sunstone opens with motion: water, trees, and wind. In lines 1 through 6, the poet speaks of circularity, opening into the rest of this epic-length poem with a colon at the end of line 6. The circularity of time and nature is underlined in lines 7 to 14, where the poet evokes celestial movement and the renewal of nature. This stanza is a crescendo of emotion and symbolism that leads the rest of the poem.

Stanza 2

Darkness is introduced in lines 15 through 20, a vague threat of interruption in the perfect circle of life—not death but cessation. In line 20, as in line 10, the poet writes of prophecy, or the ability to tell the future. Prophecy is generally considered to be a mysterious, esoteric art, one highly regarded by the Aztecs.

Stanza 3

Lines 21 to 31 introduce a new persona, one described with grand and figurative language, bringing to mind the substance of a deity, made of light, stone, and clouds. In lines 32 through 38, the poet returns to movement, this time applied to himself as he moves through a metaphysical world.

Stanza 4

In lines 39 to 48, the poet speaks of moving across the body of the goddess described earlier. His words are reverential and intimate, likening the parts of her body to a sunlit plaza, a church, and a city assaulted by the sea.

Stanza 5

The poet's journey across the topography of the goddess continues in lines 49 to 56. The descriptions in this stanza are more abstract and intense, speaking of tigers' dreams and burning hummingbirds.

Stanza 6

The goddess accepts the worship of the poet in lines 57 through 64. She finally touches him in return. The poet describes her touch as being like water, which roots in his chest.

Stanza 7

In lines 65 to 71, the poet is again traveling the body of his goddess, but she turns from him, shattering his shadow, which is a metaphor for his soul. Broken but not completely destroyed, the poet limps away. The poet cannot forever be companion to this goddess, who is not human and does not have human needs.

Stanza 8

In this stanza, the poet is alone again and turns to his memories. He reaches for warmth and companionship only to find emptiness and silent images.

Stanza 9

In lines 80 through 85, the poet searches for understanding of his life, lashed by nature's storms and darkness.

Stanza 10
The poet's search for the meaning of life is fruitless in lines 86 to 93. He falls into loneliness as he delves ever deeper into his shadow—his soul—for insight.

Stanza 11
In lines 94 through 103, the poet settles on an image of a sunny afternoon. He sees young women leaving their school, and one catches his eye. Her skin in the afternoon light is described as golden and transparent, reminiscent of the goddess in stanzas 3 to 7.

Stanza 12
This young woman has since blended, in lines 104 to 116, with the names and faces of other women and other goddesses the poet has known. Line 112 begins a list of metaphors that describe this girl-as-all-women: she is cloud, star, sword, ivy, and more.

Stanza 13
In lines 117 through 134, the list of metaphors continues, lush and naturalistic, grand and powerful. Lists of metaphors are a common feature of epic poetry, drawn from mnemonic (or memory-aiding) devices of the oral tradition. These metaphors describe the girl as a figure of life, death, and renewal—the small and large, the precious and mundane that make up the world.

Stanza 14
The poet dwells on faces in lines 135 to 145—a circular blending of individual faces into a single set of eyes.

Stanza 15
In lines 146 to 153, a moment remembered from a dream distracts the poet from his life, which, he feels, is being circumscribed by an unhappy reality: dull demands on his time and encroaching mortality.

Stanza 16
In lines 154 to 161, the poet is losing his grip on this world. He forgets the names of things and his body slows, aging.

Stanza 17
A moment this poet has captured swells to fill his world in lines 162 through 178, becoming so momentous that it attracts death's attention and takes over the poet's body, creating a microcosmic shadow world.

Stanza 18
In this short stanza, the poet misses the life he has lived and enjoyed but acknowledges that time flows by like water—both unheeding of where it has been and unceasing in its course.

Stanza 19
In lines 184 to 207, the next moment finally arrives, and it is an intense though figurative ritual awash with blood and fire, both sacred to the Aztec god of the morning star (the planet Venus), Quetzalcoatl. The poet feels abandoned by his girl, who is all women and representative of the goddess. This goddess has turned from lover to executioner, all stone and dust. Her axe is made of light from the sun—and is honed by words, those objects so sacred to a poet. By this she tries to destroy him.

Stanza 20
The poet is deeply wounded in lines 208 through 231, emptied of all sense of himself. He sees a girl, his goddess, whom he names Melusina (the name of a European mythic figure much like a mermaid, associated with fresh water), waken and fall to her demise. He is alone again, old and ill, with fragments of meaning, of memory.

Stanza 21
In lines 232 through 249, the poet returns to the image of eyes, describing relationships between mothers, sons, daughters, and fathers as they look to each other and see the past and future stretching in all directions. The poet wonders whether eyes are a conduit toward death or life and becomes ecstatic at the possibility of living another life. In lines 250 to 278, the poet's memories suddenly become very specific as he thinks back a decade, remembering Phyllis on Christopher Street, then Carmen on Paseo de la Reforma, women he has known. These vivid memories boil down to the essentials of names, streets, and generic images of people moving through their lives.

Stanza 22
In lines 279 to 299, the next memory goes back to 1937, in Spain, where a quiet residential street is blown apart by warfare. Amidst the turmoil, two people make love to preserve a sense of humanity and history. Lines 300

through 327 describe another scene of domesticity, this one gradually overtaken by the green of nature, of life, which becomes its own kind of timelessness. Lines 326 and 327 describe a tree of life, which the poet encourages everyone to eat and drink from. This tree, a prickly pear, symbolizes the water goddess Chalchiuhtlicue and grows in the middle of a river. Its fruit represents the human heart.

Stanza 23

The transformation described in lines 328 to 357 is the rebirth of the world as envisioned by an Aztec mythos. All the things that make up the world, good and bad, collapse. Unity is lost.

Stanza 24

In lines 358 through 387, the poet sees salvation for humanity in the love between two people. It begins with a kiss, and from this the rest of the world becomes more real, becomes solid again. He exhorts people toward carnal love, suggesting that matrimony be left behind in favor of the fulfillment of pure physical desires because sex is the way to avoid becoming a ghost and thus keep the rest of the world from fading away.

Stanza 25

The poet scrutinizes chastity as well in lines 388 through 400, describing it as a kind of marriage and a way to be closer to the source some would call God.

Stanza 26

The poet returns to the motif of movement in lines 401 through 427. He moves through time and space as he searches the streets for his goddess. She returns—as a river, a squirrel, a star. He anticipates that their lovemaking will change the world.

Stanza 27

In lines 428 to 462, the goddess is reserved, says nothing, does nothing. In the space of her eyes blinking, the evil of the world comes to the surface, evils the poet enumerates in this stanza. The world is aflame in lines 463 to 472, in a fire of change. The world is turning over from one era to the next. Following this fire is the silence of death and transition.

Stanza 28

The poet dwells on this momentous transition in lines 478 to 494, where he describes the fixed death of everything.

Stanza 29

In lines 495 through 517, the poet contemplates how life is not something people can own because it is shared between all, an inherent unity.

Stanza 30

He calls to his goddess in lines 518 to 549, naming her now after famous women of Western mythology and history. He wishes to see her face in order that he may awaken to be born. The poet writes of falling, just as Melusina fell earlier in lines 108 and 217. The fall is a kind of burial in which the poet finds peace and transformation. The goddess orchestrates the beginning of new life—for the world, for the poet, for all of humankind.

Stanza 31

The poet is ecstatic for this new world to begin in lines 550 to 557. Everything will be changed, and all people will be mingled, shuffled into new names and faces.

Stanza 32

In lines 558 through 566, the poet describes this transformation as the development and revelation of new faces. There is also a fountain where all faces can return to the source, dissolving in the presence of divinity. This is not only a new world but moreover a *renewed* world.

Stanza 33

In the final lines of *Sunstone*, the poet admits defeat—he cannot capture it all with mere words. He is torn apart by ecstatic, spiritual communion with the sun and returns to nature, awakening to the new world as the cycle of this epic returns to its beginning, to the movements of trees, water, and wind. Lines 581 through 586 in the English translation repeat the first six lines of the poem, creating a cyclical whole. The final punctuation of the last line is a colon, marking the beginning of the next age.

THEMES

Unity

Paz explores the unity and disunity of humankind in his long poem *Sunstone*. The narrator of the poem seeks meaning for his existence and finds it in the visceral connection he feels with the land as well as in relationships between people. The connection he speaks of experiencing with other people is romantic love with women—women who have blended together in his mind to form a single radiant goddess. Near the beginning of the poem, this goddess is first manifest to him as a spirit of the land, whom he traverses and comes to know intimately. Thereafter he seeks this goddess, seeks the union of soul, body, and earth that he once knew when he knew her, but she is elusive. He learns to find her in the faces of other women and through these women rediscovers the balm for his loneliness, the companionship of other people. He also learns that his goddess, the spirit of the land, which supports his life and the lives of his neighbors, is dual natured. She must be fed as well as loved, and so she sacrifices him in a rite of blood and fire. The experience changes the narrator, and he gradually comes to realize that deliverance from his mortality or from this existence is not possible. His mind is then opened to the greater realization of the unity among humankind: that all people are the same person, just with different visages from one lifetime to the next. The narrator understands then that people are inseparable from each other. To abandon one another is to abandon oneself.

Unity was an important theme to Paz throughout his life, in both his poetry and his nonfiction writing. He was a worldly man, working as a diplomat for the Mexican government in France, Spain, and India, but he also kept his roots in Mexico, writing extensively about Mexican history and anthropology. *Sunstone* is Paz's seminal work on this theme.

The Power of Nature

The natural world has its own voice in Paz's poem. It does not use words recognizable in Spanish or English but rather speaks through the movement of rivers, wind, trees, birds, and other elements of the natural world. The narrator of this poem sees and feels power in the determined, uninterrupted cycle of nature. It is the original cyclical calendar: spring, summer, fall, and winter—as well as birth, life, death, and incubation. These cycles drive and organize all life on earth. The Aztecs were deeply concerned with balance, maintaining their ritual calendar so that all gods were appeased in turn. Paz's poem is full of movement, echoing the actions of the natural world because nature is constantly moving, changing phases. As a part of the natural world, humans are also ever-changing and yet intrinsically remain the same—head, heart, and spirit.

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY



- Write a poem emulating Paz's style, with its rich imagery, surrealism, and references to history and mythology. Critique and edit your poems in small groups, and then present them to the class.
- Write a brief report about Venus, including a description of where Venus currently is in its sidereal—or star-relative—and synodic orbits. What would this current positioning mean to the Aztecs, who believed the planet Venus to be a manifestation of the feathered serpent god Quetzalcoatl?
- Paz was influenced by the French surrealists during his various stays in France from the 1940s through the 1960s. Research the history of French surrealism, choosing one or two authors to focus on. What characterizes surrealism? How has surrealism affected world literature? In what forms has surrealism survived to the present day? Assemble your research into a paper and include an argument either for or against Paz as a surrealist.
- Paz was frequently more popular with North American readers for his essays than for his poetry, with his most famous book of essays being *The Labyrinth of Solitude*. Divide the essays among your classmates. Read your assigned essay and prepare a short response paper based on your reactions. Do you like Paz's poetry or nonfiction better?

The planet Venus is Paz's main motif from nature. He structured his 584-line poem after Venus's 584-day synodic cycle. In lines 184 to 207, Paz's Venus is a passionate, bloodthirsty goddess reminiscent of the Aztec god associated with that planet, Quetzalcoatl; his Venus shows another face in lines 21 though 64, where she is a beautiful young maiden who inspires love and desire, like the classic Roman goddess Venus (whom the Greeks called Aphrodite). As a deity, she is always present because she is part of the air he breathes and the soil he walks on; however, she is not easily accessible. His ecstatic encounter, after all, was paired with being a sacrificial victim.

In *Sunstone*, Paz combines Aztec and Christian mythologies. For the Aztecs, nature is animist, or imbued with spirits who reside in all objects. Aztecs see their gods in the actions of nature—trees falling, storms raging, rivers roiling, and planets rising and setting. Christians do not see their god directly manifest in nature but rather see nature's beauty and complexity as evidence of God's power. These two perspectives on nature, sometimes conflicting, coexist within the beauty and turmoil of Paz's verse.

STYLE

Motif of Fire

A *motif* is a unifying idea representing a theme that appears repeatedly throughout a story or poem. Motif is similar to theme but distinct because motif is specifically tied to an image or idea. Paz generously employs nature imagery throughout *Sunstone*, which ties the natural world and its processes and elements (trees, fire, water) to Paz's themes of unity and isolation. One of Paz's prominent motifs in this poem is fire. Paz uses fire imagery sparingly but with purpose, with references concentrated near the beginning and end of the long poem. Fire is representative of the planet Venus and its associated god, Quetzalcoatl, who also appears as a feathered and fiery serpent in mythology. Fiery rain is the means of destruction of the third era, and fire is a medium of the god ruling the fifth age, the sun god Tonatiuh. In Christian creed, fire is associated with Lucifer and with Hell. Paz does not personify a demon like Lucifer in *Sunstone*, but the fear of pain, death, and change is present in a similar way. Fire is also a cleansing agent, consuming everything, including itself. What is known of Aztec rituals often involves blood, fire, and human sacrifice, as this was how they fed their gods to maintain the balance in nature that they perceived. The primary function of fire in *Sunstone* is transformation. It may be painful, ugly, deadly, but it is transformative and irrevocable. Fire, then, as a motif, represents the theme of transformation.

Hendecasyllable Lines

Paz composed *Sunstone* as 584 hendecasyllable, or eleven-syllable, lines. His use of hendecasyllable lines was a conscious, classical poetic choice. Hendecasyllable lines constitute a common meter in Italian and Spanish poetry and are often associated with sonnets, the preferred form for love poems. Hendecasyllable lines were popularized in Spanish poetry by the sixteenth-century poet and Renaissance man Garcilaso de la Vega, who wrote his sonnets with such lines. Paz's choice of the hendecasyllable line both grounds him in the tradition of his poetic predecessors and ties *Sunstone* to a theme of love.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Mexico in the 1950s

Mexico in the 1950s was under the rule of liberal presidents belonging to the Institutional Revolutionary Party. Miguel Alemán Valdés, president of Mexico from 1946 to 1952, formed strong alliances with big businesses and brought about the development of highways, railroads, schools, and farms. Alemán's administration, however, was known for its corruption. His successor, Adolfo Ruiz Contines, by contrast, is considered to have been one of Mexico's most honest presidents. He focused his attention while in office on stabilizing the economy and lowering the cost of living. He also gave women the right to vote in federal elections as well as the right to be elected to political office.

During this decade, Paz was traveling abroad as a diplomat for the Mexican government. His civic work took him to New Delhi, India; Tokyo, Japan; Geneva, Switzerland; and Paris, France. He returned to Mexico in 1954 when he wrote his epic poem *Sunstone*. It was during this period that Paz chose to deviate from the leftist political views of many of his colleagues, like the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda.

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **1950s:** Much of Latin America experiences an economic upturn and a resurgent interest in the arts. Popular authors of this decade include the Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges, the Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes, and the Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier.

  Today: Latin America is famous for the literary genre of magical realism, which peaked in the 1980s and 1990s. Popular contemporary authors who first became famous for magical realism include the Colombian novelist Gabriel García Márquez, the Chilean novelist Isabel Allende, and Fuentes.

- **1950s:** The United States, Soviet Union, and other industrialized nations rush to build nuclear weapons. It is the beginning of the "Atomic Age," when people first envision the possibility that human weapons could destroy life on earth. This potential destruction is not dissimilar to what the Aztecs envisioned happening at the end of an age.

  Today: Nuclear arms are controlled by the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. As of 2007, only four nations worldwide are not signatories: North Korea, Pakistan, India, and Israel. North Korea withdrew from the treaty in 2003 and tested a nuclear weapon in October 2006.

- **1950s:** "All Summer in a Day," by Ray Bradbury, is a famous short story published in 1954 about a colony on Venus with lush vegetation. In the colony, it rains constantly, and the sun only appears for one hour every seven years.

  Today: *Venus* (2000) is a novel by Ben Bova that avoids the midcentury popular fantasy of Venus as a tropical planet. Bova describes the planet with scientific accuracy in his tale of a mission to recover the body of a missing man.

Radical Communist leaders such as Joseph Stalin were seducing intellectuals with their utopian visions, but Paz morally disagreed with any form of totalitarianism. In the years before Stalin's crimes against humanity were revealed, Paz was abandoned by many of his friends and colleagues for his comparatively unusual views.

Aztec Calendar

Paz drew on his ancestral Aztec background in composing *Sunstone*. The Aztecs were very concerned with balance between their quarrelsome gods and kept a ritual calendar called the *tonalpohualli* to make sure all gods were appeased in their turn. The ritual calendar consists of a 260-day cycle made up of 20 weeks of 13 days each. There are 20 different day-signs, each associated with a different god. It thus takes 260 days to get through every combination of the 20 day-signs and the numbers 1 through 13. A second, solar calendar, named *xiuhpohualli*, is 365 days long and runs concurrent to the sacred calendar. The solar calendar tracks the agricultural seasons. It takes 52 years for both calendars to cycle through until they finish at the same time. This 52-year cycle is referred to as the calendar round.

On a grander scale are the ages of Aztec mythology. Each age is ruled by a different god and ends in a different destructive way. The first age was ruled by Tezcatlipoca, an ancient god of creation, and this world was destroyed by jaguars; the second age was ruled by the feathered serpent and morning star Quetzalcoatl and was destroyed by a hurricane; the third age was ruled by Tlaloc, god of rain and fertility, and was destroyed by fiery rain; and the fourth age was ruled by the water goddess (and Tlaloc's wife) Chalchihuitlicue and was destroyed in a flood. The current age, the fifth age, began in 3114 B.C.E. and is ruled by the sun god Tonatiuh. Modern calculations say that this age will end on December 21, 2012; the myths say that it will end with massive earthquakes and that there cannot be a sixth age unless humans examine



Aztec stone sun calendar (Macduff Everton | Iconica | Getty Images)

themselves and change bad behaviors to deserve renewal.

The Aztec Sun Stone is a circular slab of basalt measuring 12 feet in diameter and 3 feet thick. It was carved around 1479 C.E. and is dedicated to the sun god Tonatiuh. Found in Mexico City in 1790, the Sun Stone sculpture is housed at the National Museum of Anthropology. Although many people, perhaps including Paz, have considered the Sun Stone to be a visual representation of the Aztec ritual calendar, it is actually a sacrificial altar depicting the destruction of the four ages that have already passed. The face in the center is the sun god Tonatiuh, who rules the fifth age.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

Octavio Paz was an established and successful poet in the Spanish-speaking world by the time the first major English translation of his work was published in 1964. In a *New York Times Book Review* critique of the *Selected Poems of Octavio Paz*, the critic Dudley Fitts expresses elation that Paz's work has finally been made available to American audiences. Fitts writes, "It is important poetry, impassioned, wide-ranging, most handsomely and attentively constructed." In a 1971 *New York Times Book Review* examination of Paz's *Configurations*, Robert Bly admits to being put off by the idea that "romantic loving can solve a lot of things." Bly contends that "Paz is a puzzle, a man of great intelligence and feeling, who in a rich poetic tradition has become not deeper, but more shallow." Calvin Bedient, more favorably reviewing Paz's *Selected Poems* in a 1984 *New York Times Book Review* article, writes, "Mr. Paz does not hold back anything from language. . . . How unlike our own hesitant, flickering poets are these Latin Americans with their continual heroics of imagination." Thus, Bedient acknowledges the difference in expression that so offends Bly without decrying it as faulty or immature.

The Collected Poems of Octavio Paz, 1957–1987 was reviewed by Roberto González Echevarría

in 1988, also for the *New York Times Book Review*. In the article, Echevarría describes *Sunstone* as a "superb" and "powerful" poem, and he says of Paz, "This poet lives in and through the desire, the nostalgia sometimes, for sacredness, a sacredness briefly revealed in the ruins of ancient religions or in quivering bodies moved by always-present love." Echevarría also claims that Paz's long poems are the best ones, as well as the most difficult to translate. Helen Vendler, critiquing the same book for the *New Yorker*, finds many small faults with the accuracy of the translation but is enchanted with the breadth and depth of Paz's work. In another review of the *Collected Poems*, J. D. McClatchy, writing in *Poetry* magazine, confesses that he prefers Paz's essays to his poetry—not an uncommon occurrence among American reviewers. McClatchy nevertheless declares, "I finished this book convinced that Paz stands out like a ziggurat in the literary landscape of Mexico." Manuel Durán, a friend of Paz's and also a scholar of Paz's work, sums up the poet's impact in a 1991 article for *World Literature Today*: "Paz is a great Mexican poet whose poetry transcends the barriers of nationalism and can be effective even outside his language area, since it deals with feelings, intuitions, ideas, and sensations that can be called truly universal."

CRITICISM

Carol Ullmann

Ullmann is a freelance writer and editor. In the following essay, she examines the motif of transformation in Paz's epic poem Sunstone*, arguing that the motif is found not only in the message of the poem's content but also in the poem's structure, inspiration, and place in the canon of Paz's work.*

Octavio Paz's *Sunstone* is a poem concerned with transformation—a complete change in appearance or form. Transformation is a motif, or dominant idea, threaded throughout the epic poem, constituting part of the poem's cyclical structure, its inspiration from Aztec sources, its theme, its content, and its historical context. The writing of *Sunstone* also had a transformative effect on its author.

Sunstone is named after an intricately carved, highly symbolic Aztec sculpture dated to the fifteenth century. When the Sun Stone was rediscovered in the eighteenth century, it was believed to be an iconic representation of the Aztec ritual calendar. In the late twentieth century, scholars determined that the Sun Stone represents the destruction of the four ages past, with the hungry mouth of the sun god Tonatiuh, ruler of the fifth and current age, at the center. Thus it was deduced that the Sun Stone was a sacrificial altar. Although Paz would not have known this at the time *Sunstone* was written, the Sun Stone as altar is still fitting symbolism for his poem. The Sun Stone is also not completely unrelated to the Aztec calendar because the calendar's purpose is to mark the days to the end of the age and the beginning of the next. Paz's poem, like the meshed cogs of the Aztec calendar, is concerned with a cyclical, slowly developing movement through time, punctuated by the transformation of the world and its creatures as the calendar reaches the point at which it must start over. By modern calculations, an Aztec age takes 5,125 years to pass. The start of each age begins with the destruction of the previous world. In *Sunstone*, Paz represents this transformation of the world as both terrifying and majestic.

> **"THE NARRATOR FINDS IN OTHER PEOPLE HIS SALVATION AND THE ANSWER TO HIS QUESTION ABOUT THE MEANING OF LIFE, WHICH, HE CONCLUDES, IS LOVE."**

Inspired by the Aztec mythology of his Mexican heritage, Paz also made the sacred planet Venus one of his central motifs. *Sunstone* has a structure of 584 eleven-syllable lines in the original Spanish, to echo the 584-day synodic orbit of Venus. When it is closest to the Earth, Venus is the third-brightest object in the sky, after the sun and the moon. It is always seen close to the sun and thus is known as the morning and evening star. During its orbit, Venus undergoes a dramatic transformation that is thought by the Aztecs to represent the life, death, and resurrection of the feathered serpent god Quetzalcoatl. Starting off as a dim evening star—a human child—it grows brighter and brighter over the

WHAT DO I READ NEXT?



- *The Old Gringo* (1985; *Gringo viejo*), by Carlos Fuentes, was the first American best-seller by a Mexican author. Fuentes was a friend and colleague to Paz, but the two had a falling out in the late 1980s and never reconciled.
- *The Labyrinth of Solitude: Life and Thought in Mexico* (1962; *El laberinto de la soledad*) is one of Paz's most famous and beloved works. It is a nonfiction collection of essays about Mexican culture and identity, covering cross-curriculum topics from anthropology to history.
- *The Heights of Macchu Picchu* (1946; *Alturas de Macchu Picchu*), by the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, is an epic-length poem that examines human solidarity through the lens of Latin American history and mythology.
- *Nadja* (1928), by André Breton, is a French surrealist novel about a romantic relationship between the author/narrator and a young woman named Nadja. Breton was one of the founders of the surrealist movement, which significantly influenced Paz during his time in Paris.
- Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz was a seventeenth-century Mexican poet who was famous in her lifetime and continued to influence Mexican writers into the twentieth century. *Sor Juana's Love Poems* (1997) provides a sample of her exemplary verse.
- *Like Water for Chocolate* (1989; *Como agua para chocolate*), by Laura Esquivel, is a novel set in nineteenth-century Mexico. Esquivel's romantic themes and luxuriant imagery are characteristic of Latin American magical realism.

course of 263 days of its orbit until it suddenly disappears, or dies, at its brightest—the prime of his life. Venus is gone for eight days while it passes in front of the sun and cannot be seen from Earth, and then it suddenly reappears as an equally bright morning star. The reappearance is when Quetzalcoatl is resurrected as a god. During the next 263 days, Venus grows dimmer as its orbit takes it farther from Earth. Upon reaching its dimmest point to observers on Earth, Venus disappears behind the sun for fifty days, and at this time Quetzalcoatl returns to the womb. He repeats this cycle when the dim evening star reemerges and he is reborn. This measurable and distinct transformation fascinated many civilizations, including the Aztecs, who based their 260-day ritual calendar on Venus's orbital phases.

Sunstone opens with the same six lines that it closes with. The first word of the first line is not capitalized, giving the sense that the text has picked up in the middle. In composing *Sunstone*, Paz used every ordinary punctuation mark except a period, making the poem one long sentence that has no beginning (with no capital letter to indicate a new sentence) or ending. Exclamation points and question marks are read as interjections because there are no capital letters following them, and therefore there are no new sentences. The terminal punctuation of the entire poem is a colon, not a period, which transmits an idea of continuance and anticipation, rather than finality or closure. Like the Aztec calendar, and like the circular shape of the Sun Stone, Paz's poem is cyclical.

Sunstone is narrated by a writer who undergoes a personal transformation in addition to being witness and party to the transformation of his world at the hands of the gods. The narrator is seeking to understand his loneliness and thus the meaning of his existence. He consorts with a goddess but ultimately realizes that he will not find understanding from her, that she is not his to use. He is, instead, *her* tool. Her purpose is larger than he is, and she will destroy him—not out of spite or evil, but because she has a larger role to fulfill. Thus does the narrator learn to seek salvation and redemption in other people and not from the gods, who are mysterious, beautiful, terrifying, and incomprehensible.

The narrator then turns to other people, in whom he sees glimmers of his goddess. The idea that there is a part of the gods in all people is reminiscent of Quetzalcoatl, who is born a man, dies at the height of his life, and is resurrected as a god. All humans are gods waiting to be transformed. The narrator ponders whether or not

death is an end, whether it could be another birth, a transformation from one life to the next. He feels both the weight of finality death brings and the freedom it inspires. The cycle of human life is as closed as the calendar of the gods—one ends so the next may begin. Through this cycle, he sees that all people are one, as if trading places from one life to the next. Time is irrevocable as well as unending. The narrator finds all of this both startling and comforting. Thus does he realize he has nothing to fear about the transformation of his world, not even death, because death is only another portal, another opportunity at life, or possibly a means to becoming a deity. The narrator finds in other people his salvation and the answer to his question about the meaning of life, which, he concludes, is love.

The natural world is built on an infinite series of transformations. Some of these transformations involve seasons, catastrophes, maturation, and evolution. Some are more easily observed than others. Some transformations are cyclical, and some are irrevocable. Paz's narrator calls on the four elements of the natural world as agents of transformation: earth, air, water, and fire. Earth is the quiet tomb or womb to which the narrator retreats to await renewal. Air is the realm of the gods, touching everything, always present, always moving. Fire is the agent of violent change, evoking the power of the sun, which is the power of Tonatiuh, the ruling god of the fifth age. Water is the conduit of time, flowing, flowing, recycling, unceasing. These elements are recognized by the Aztecs as the underpinnings of the world's structure.

For human beings, transformations may occur in the mental and spiritual realms. *Sunstone*, in part, is about spiritual transformation for the narrator. At the end of the poem, he writes of the sun erupting from his head, which is symbolic of being touched by the gods, perhaps the almighty sun god Tonatiuh. This touch indicates that the narrator is now connected to the gods, as he declares himself free of his inferior existence. To reach this dramatic change, the narrator had to let go of his ego, his sense of himself.

Paz also invokes the transformative power of poetry itself in *Sunstone*. He sees the human condition as fundamentally isolated, lonely. With this poem, he hopes to bring people together. His message is one of love—brotherly love, romantic love, and sexual love. In *Sunstone*, he is shouting to the world: Embrace change! Love one another!

Source: Carol Ullmann, Critical Essay on *Sunstone*, in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2009.

Edward Hirsch

In the following excerpt, Hirsch examines Paz's search for the "eternal moment" in his poetry.

Octavio Paz practiced poetry like a secret religion. He dwelt in its mysteries, he invoked its sacraments, he read its entrails, he inscribed its revelations. Writing was for him a primordial act, and he stared down at the blank page like an abyss until it sent him reeling over the brink of language. The poems he brought back are filled with ancient wonder and strangeness, hermetic wisdom, a dizzying sense of the sacred. They are magically—sometimes violently—uprooted from silence. They are drawn from a deep well.

. . . Paz started writing poems as a teenager and never let up until the end of his life. Lyric poetry was for him a core activity, at the root of being, and for nearly seventy years he was driven by invisible demons to try to connect to himself and to others through the sensuality—the rhythmic fervor—of words. Inspiration was for him not a static entity, but a forward thrust, an aspiration, the act of "going beyond ourselves to the encounter of ourselves." Paz wrote poetry with a sharp awareness of being oneself and, simultaneously, someone or something else. He called this "the other voice." He experienced the merging of voices as a submersion, a type of flooding. "We still keep alive the sensation of some minutes so full they were time overflowing, a high tide that broke the dikes of temporal succession," he writes in *The Bow and the Lyre*, a sustained defense of poetry Shelley himself might have cherished. "For the poem is a means of access to pure time, an immersion in the original waters of existence." He also defined the poetic experience as "an opening up of the wellsprings of being. An instant and never. An instant and forever."

Paz was—and in his work he remains—a seeker, and the quest for a moment to abolish linear or successive time is one of the driving forces of his aesthetic, a defining feature of his pilgrimage. Poetry is a wayward siren song calling him to a perpetual present, to an erotic consecration of instants, and to a superabundance of time and being. "Poetry is in love with the instant and seeks to relive it in the poem, thus separating it from sequential time and turning it



THE FIXED PRESENT, THE ENDLESS INSTANT, THE ETERNAL MOMENT—THE EXPERIENCE IS FOR PAZ SOMETHING TO BE ATTAINED, LIKE REALITY, LIKE BEING ITSELF."

into a fixed present," he says in his Nobel lecture, "In Search of the Present."

The fixed present, the endless instant, the eternal moment—the experience is for Paz something to be attained, like reality, like being itself. "Door of being, dawn and wake me," he prays near the conclusion of his circular masterpiece *Sunstone*.

. . . If you can get to the present, there are presences, Paz suggests, and he trusts poetry's capacity to deliver those presences through images incarnated in words, through words flowing in rhythm. "The instant dissolves in the succession of other nameless instants. In order to *save it* we must *convert it* into a rhythm," he writes in *Alternating Current*, where he also defines rhythm as "the reincarnation of the instant." Rhythm serves the poet as a means of access—a reliable guide—to originary or pure time.

Paz needed lyric poetry as a primary mode of crossing, of rendering the self diaphanous, of becoming "a wind that stops / turns on itself and is gone" ("The Face and the Wind"). The words themselves become a way of seeking others that also links him back to the spaces opening up inside himself. "Between now and now, / between I am and you are, / the word *bridge,"* he declares in his short poem "The Bridge."

. . . Language becomes a form of practical magic as the word becomes a bridge, a juncture, a span of connection. "Everything is a door / everything a bridge," he proclaims in "Sleepless Night." Words are transfiguring and have a threshold power. They are portals to the other side. "Words are bridges," he writes in a refrain that reverberates through his poetic cantata, "Letter of Testimony." They are a form of a linkage, a way of reaching out, reaching across, that is also a means of reaching in:

> Let yourself be carried by these words
> toward yourself.
>
> ("Letter of Testimony")

The words become the only way for him of attaining himself, attaining a truer identity than social identity—a shadowy, psychic truth, a mode of being. "I'm not finished with myself yet," he declares in his prose poem "The Besieged." "I am the shadow my words cast," he concludes in "A Draft of Shadows." It's as if he doesn't have that real self, that hidden or shadow identity without the word, the syllable, the poetic act. The word *bridge*, the wordbridge, becomes the site of a poetic crossing into true being.

. . . I'm struck by how many of Paz's poems seem to unfold and take place in liminal spaces, in pauses and intervals, odd crossings, interrupted movements. He is poetically empowered not just by bridging, but also by moments when bridges go up, by disconnection. He finds a poetic space opening up in gaps and ruptures ("Poetry is the crack / the space / between one word and another," he announces in "Letter to León Felipe"), in the transitional realm of the betwixt and the between.

. . . Paz is trying to nail down the cleft and interstice, the fissure in temporal process, the brilliant weightlessness of what Wordsworth calls "those fleeting moods / Of shadowy exultation."

It seems crucial to Paz to keep affirming that the real self is achieved in such intervals, luminous moments, fluid states. These states are utterly essential: they are perceptions of reality, modes of transparency. Moreover, it's as if we all exist most fully in these spacious intervals, these widening gaps and eternal pauses, which are perceived as a true condition of the world itself. What seems like a struggle attained in bridging over the self in some lyrics becomes a canny reconnaissance about the world in others. Such a perception seems to inhere in the poem "Between Going and Staying."

. . . The lyric exploration is for Paz always epiphanic, always precarious. Such key or luminous moments (it is "Within a Moment: A Pulsation of the Artery," Blake writes, "When the Poets Work is Done") are by definition sudden, unexpected, revelatory, unconscious. They are dangerous breakthrough experiences. Such "Moments of Being" (the phrase is Virginia Woolf's) are also transitory and difficult to pin down. They usurp the social realm and create their own sense of eternity.

They also create ruptures in ordinary experience, pockets of emptiness, holes in time. They defy time-bound narratives. Think, for example, of the playful, paradoxical, quasi-philosophical way that Paz traces the struggle between temporal process and the atemporal instant in "Into the Matter":

> it's not time now
> now it's now
> now it's time to get rid of time
> now it's not time
> it's time and not now
> time eats the now

Paz structures and arranges his poems in such a way—in a non-narrative manner—to create disjunctions that deliver how epiphanies derange and rupture chronological time. I'm thinking of the spatial arrangements in his poems, the length of his lines and minimal use of punctuation, the associative drift of his surrealist attention, the sonorousness of his Spanish, his trust in circularities (*Sunstone*) and white spaces ("Blanco"), in presences that defy narrative closure. They are structured for immediacy, to approach and hold a moment. And they try to create a space in which "the present is motionless" ("Wind from all Compass Points"). Like Joseph Cornell boxes, they become "monuments to every moment" and "cages for infinity" ("Objects and Apparitions").

Paz was a restless innovator, and he was continually seeking forms that would create a house for being, consecrating a stillness. That stillness was something he desperately sought, something he spiritually needed, and as a result he was willing, even eager, to cross thresholds and risk an annihilation he could embody in poems. At times he seems cut off from the moment itself, lost in a dire, chaotic, threatening form of inner exile. His lyric access produces a kind of terror. I suspect that's why so many of his poems are filled with shadowy tunnels and traps, elemental passageways, vertiginous heights. They move through endless "corridors terraces stairways" ("A Wind from all Compass Points"). "I crossed through arches and over bridges," he writes at a key moment in "Coming and Going": "I was alive in search of life." But the restless search for life also becomes, paradoxically, a search for death. "The sun of the high plains eats my remains," he concludes: "I was alive and went in search of death." Life and death are held together in a single weightless moment beyond time.

Paz's poems are filled with moments of bewildering quest, with a lost searching. He could at times "engrave vertigo" ("Tomb"). He vacillates between isolation and connection, solitude and communion, doubt and rapture.

. . . What made Paz such a deep initiate of connection was the psychic truth that so much of his poetry was elaborated out of a radical sense of human estrangement and exile, a feeling of unreality. He considered the experience of being born "a wound that never heals"—it is "a fall into an alien land"—and he sought through poetry to reunite with others, a way back toward the maternal Other. "I am living / at the center / of a wound still fresh," he writes in "Dawn." Always he was seeking to heal a human cleft, an irreparable sense of division, a fissure in being. He universalized the experience ("The consciousness of being separate is a constant feature of our spiritual history," he said), but it was a generalization experienced on his pulse, in his own body, which is why it motivated, both consciously and unconsciously, so much of his poetic production.

The same lyric practice that gives us moments of annihilation also gives us moments of ecstatic union, fusion with the glorious Other. They salvage and deliver back to us the enormous moment when we glimpse "the unity that we lost" and recall "the forgotten astonishment of being alive" (*Sunstone*). Paz had a skeptical intelligence, but he was never really a cerebral poet, as has often been suggested. Rather, his poems are driven by a sometimes anguished, sometimes joyous eroticism. Most of his poems seem shadowed by the obscure absence or presence of the beloved. When the beloved is absent from the poem he feels acutely cut off from nature and from himself, delivered back to his own estranging desires, and to the linear flow of time. But when the beloved visits the poem he feels the overflowing circularity of time, the dance of being, the affirmation of an eternal moment. Poetry becomes a means of attainment, the reconciliation of opposites, a way of participating in an abundant universe. It becomes a form of creative love that moves beyond the duality of subject and object, annulling the temporal world, offering up the mysteries of carnation. Here the moment widens into eternity.

. . . I am moved by Paz's suggestion that love, like poetry, "is a victory over time, a glimpse of the other side, of the there that is

here, where nothing changes and everything that is, truly is."

Paz's poetry of attainment fulfills the Sufi or mystical maxim, "The Beloved and I are One." He defines—he defends—the creative moment when two people merge and thereby protect their share of the eternal, our ration of paradise.

To love:
to open the forbidden door,
the passageway
that takes us to the other side of time.
The moment:
the opposite of death,
our fragile eternity.

("Letter of Testimony")

"The poet endeavors to make the world sacred," Octavio Paz declared (*The Siren and the Seashell*), and in his restless search for the present, the contemporaneous, he never lost sight of poetry's irrational power and sacred mystery, its archaic roots, its spiritual audacity. "Poetry is knowledge, salvation, power, abandonment," he declares at the outset of *The Bow and the Lyre*. He treated lyric poetry as a revolutionary emotional activity, a spiritual exercise, a means of interior liberation, a quest for transfiguration. His poems inscribe a quest and an attainment as they hold together what he calls "life and death in a single instant of incandescence." Here is a poetry that seeks to return us—to restore us—to the totality of being. It is a living poetry that leaps over time and delivers inscriptions of timelessness, time without limit or measure, the emptiness and plenitude of a moment "forever arriving."

Source: Edward Hirsch, "Octavio Paz: In Search of a Moment," in *American Poetry Review*, Vol. 29, No. 2, March–April 2000, pp. 49–51.

José Quiroga

In the following excerpt, Quiroga explains his belief that "Sunstone" is Paz's best poem.

. . . After Paz's return to Mexico in 1954 he became an active figure in Mexican literary circles, collaborating in the *Revista Mexicana de Literatura*, directed by Carlos Fuentes and Emmanuel Carballo. But this was a difficult period for the reception of Paz's work. According to Pacheco, Paz's *Semillas para un himno* and *¿Aguila o sol?* were not well received by critics; as mentioned earlier, "surrealism" had become anathema to many Mexican intellectuals, a "dead" movement that had little to offer the nation's literary life. In fact, Paz was seen at the time as a kind of "boy wonder" who had been "corrupted" by his stay in Europe. *Sunstone*, Pacheco recalls, renewed faith in Octavio Paz. In Pacheco's own words, people thought that Paz had finally listened to a sensible inner voice and had renounced the incomprehensible and hermetic poetics of surrealism, in order to return to the mode and style of his early youth ("Descripción" 182). Paz published *Sunstone* in 1957, and has closed the poems of *Libertad bajo palabra* with that poem ever since its second edition. It is clear that he conceives this text as a kind of summing-up of his work up till then: in one of the notes added to the latter *Blanco* (1967) Paz states that *Sunstone* closes off the first period of his poetic oeuvre.



IT IS PERHAPS PAZ'S MOST ASTOUNDING PIECE, MIXING EROS AND HISTORY, PAIN, SOLITUDE, AND MELANCHOLY, OVER A BROKEN LANDSCAPE OF TIME WHOSE SENSE OF PLENITUDE IS AS DEEPLY FELT AS ONE LONG EPIPHANY CONVEYED IN A COSMIC DANCE."

Critics that read *Sunstone* at that time correctly perceived it as a kind of "return," while they corroborated Paz's later understanding that the poem was not merely a return but also a point of closure. From the beginning *Sunstone* was seen, then, as a liminal text: a text of beginnings and endings, a poem that was placed at a threshold. As with all thresholds, it is important to examine in what manner it concludes the previous "cycle" of Paz's career, and what is it that the text initiates. Pacheco has anticipated *Sunstone* back to a number of Paz's poems: "Arcos," "Elegía interrumpida," "Cuarto de hotel," "La vida sencilla," and "Máscaras del alba." Of these, "Arcos" which appears in *Libertad bajo palabra* under "Asueto" (1939–1944) is the clearest precursor, not only in terms of form (hendecasyllables) but also in terms of content. From its first lines "Arcos" traces a journey that takes the poet out of himself in order to propitiate a self-encounter: "¿Quién canta en las orillas del

papel? / Inclinado, de pechos sobre el río / de imágenes, me veo, lento y solo, de mi mismo alejarme." (Who sings in the margins of paper? / Inclined, chest over the river / of images, I see myself, slow and alone, distancing myself from myself.) It is clear that the poem bears little relation to the other texts from *La estación violenta*. Gone are the violent juxtapositions of "Himno entre ruinas" with its interplay of time and space in italics, or those of "Repaso nocturno," that can be traced back to *¿Aguila o Sol?* Perhaps only in "El río" or in "Mutra" might we find a suitable point of reference for the sense of flow that the reader experiences in *Sunstone*, but those two poems express an agony and despair that stands in marked contrast to the melancholic tone of *Sunstone*. "Mascaras del alba" might provide a suitable point of comparison, but only in terms of its use of hendecasyllables and, perhaps, in the idea of recurrent time displayed in the text. It is in the latter part of *The Bow and the Lyre*, as well as in some of the poems collected in *Poemas* under the section *Dias hábiles* (1958–1961) where we find a style that resembles the serene transparencies that flow in *Sunstone*.

What is clear in terms of the overall construction and elaboration of Paz's work is that *Sunstone* inaugurates an enormous revisionary process in the poet's work. *Sunstone*'s fascination with form, where the poem slowly moves as if enamoured of its own reflection, is one of the threads that joins it to the other great long poem of the Mexican tradition: José Gorostiza's *Muerte sin fin* (1929). Like Gorostiza, Paz's situates the reader not in Eliot's "unreal city" but in an unreal *climate* where nature transparently reflects upon itself. But the idea of endlessness, so prevalent in Paz's precursor, is transformed in *Sunstone* into a philosophical time of creative echoes where repetition entails the possibility of creation.

It is hard to do justice to a poem as impressive as *Sunstone* (1957). It is perhaps Paz's most astounding piece, mixing eros and history, pain, solitude, and melancholy, over a broken landscape of time whose sense of plenitude is as deeply felt as one long epiphany conveyed in a cosmic dance. Its memorable lines flow with the ease with which only ageless truths can be said; its most hidden references are touched by a rare illumination, as if this truly were the poem of a being possessed by an inner clarity, who reviews a life seen as moving panoramas, and writes his text in transparent ink over a pliable surface. Tomás Segovia has justly termed it a masterpiece in the classical sense of the word, stressing an obvious truth that nevertheless accounts for the poem's essential strangeness: modern poets rarely attempt to unveil their desires for a masterpiece in so open a fashion, and then succeed. And then, underlying the poetic construction, what seems like a profoundly classic attempt to fuse poetic writing with a hidden code that is nevertheless explained by the writer himself, with no attempt at hiding the writing under the veil of obscurity: *Sunstone*'s perfect 584 free verse hendecasyllabic lines correspond or repeat the revolution of the planet Venus. *Sunstone*, thus, is literally a poetic feat. If Paz during his years in Paris attempted to fuse poetics and politics, the singular life with that of his fellow human beings, in *Sunstone* the poetic revolution has come full circle: poetry repeats the movement of the planets and the stars; it is intrinsically related to the universe. This relation accounts for its apparent timelessness; the poem surprises precisely by its unreal landscape, as if it had been an archaeological form lost at some previous century and then unearthed in its full perfection.

Sunstone is a profoundly revolutionary poem, a profoundly modern poem, but its modernity is found not in its style or in its rhetoric. Its movement is like that of a trance meditation; the tone is one of melancholia, if not regret. The poetic voice manages to undo the effect of its own perfection, and its seamless construction is so inadvertent that the poem seems to have been written in what the Romantics called the language of ordinary passion, to the extent that the poetic voice never seems insincere. Paz's rigorous sense of form is subsumed to a particular content, and Venus is never named directly in the poem; rather its movement is presented as something that incarnates within the poem itself. To Emir Rodríguez Monegal and Roberto González Echevarría, Paz mentions that "pleasure" here is one of the axes of the poetic discourse (*PC* 24). He also states, in the same interview, that *Sunstone* is a linear poem that endlessly goes back over itself (21). He succinctly recounts not only the numerical structure upon which the text is based, but also what the text meant for him:

> The number of lines is exactly that of the number of days of the revolution of the planet Venus. The conjunction between Venus and the Sun is realized after a circular run of 584 days, and that of the poem with itself after 584

> lines. . . . What I mean to say is, that over the circular time of myth, the unrepeatable history of one man that belongs to one generation, to one country and one era is inserted . . . Time may be cyclical, and thus inmortal . . . But man is finite and unrepeatable. What is repeated is the experience of finitude: all men know they will die . . . These experiences are historical: they happen and they happen to us. At the same time, they are not historical: they are repeated.

I have quoted Paz's statements almost in their entirety as they are a succinct articulation of the poem's form. Indeed, to *Sunstone* Paz adds a long note that fundamentally explains what appears in the first paragraph of the previous quote, although in that note Paz underscored the particularly Mexican aspect of this operation, rendering both dates and times in their Aztec equivalents. Tomas Segovia, in his short but concise essay on *Sunstone*, implicitly clarifies what this form means for the author: it reveals the poem as the product of a will, while at the same time it also allows the poet to forfeit the very will responsible for its creation. In other words, authorial intention also resigns itself for the sake of a higher purpose, and the form of the poem—its 584 hendecasyllables—allows the author to withdraw his self for the benefit of the text. *Sunstone* can be seen, then, not only as a poem of control but also as one that entails a surrender to an inmutable principle.

In *The Bow and the Lyre* (published in 1956, preceding *Sunstone* by a year) and in "Los signos en rotación," Paz explains that modern man has lost the idea of the natural, and that the Aristotelian notion of mimesis needs to be reexamined in the modern word. In *Sunstone*, the mimetic act of the poem vis-à-vis Venus's revolution is part of an avant-garde gesture that denied mimesis and claimed that the poet did not have to imitate external reality, but rather operate like it. *Sunstone* does not imitate rotation or revolution; Venus is not named in the poem; the repetition at the beginning and at the end are meant to correspond to cyclical time. This repetition allows for a structural relation to be posited between Venus and *Sunstone*—a relationship apprehended by works of art such as the famous pre-Columbian *Sunstone* calendar in the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico that we now endow with archaeological value. Segovia, once again, implicitly allows for a point of comparison to Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés*, although Paz's homage to Mallarmé's great poem is to be explored to a fuller extent in Paz's *Blanco*. *Sunstone* is a throw of the dice, an immense risk for a poet to undertake. It is the precipitous act of a poet that hurls himself toward an abyss.

Paz's control of form and surrender to it is a surrealist gesture. But aside from the belief in love as a force of salvation, *Sunstone*'s much vaunted surrealism can be found in Paz's poetical attitude toward the universe. Paz opposes cyclical recurrence to the linear, unrepeatable history of a single individual. The poet and his particular discourse—his memories, his very sense of contingency—enter within the cyclical flow of time without altering or interrupting it, but giving themselves to it. The poem's sense of surrender has been commented upon by its myriad critics. What has not been sufficiently stressed is Paz's use of the descriptive term "machine" or the analogous "machinery" in order to describe it—concretely, the poem as historical and antihistorical machine. The poet, as contingent creature, enters the repetitive flow of time by virtue of the singularity of his experience. Once that singularity has been registered in writing, the act of reading the poem returns that same, singular experience into an act of reading eternally reproduced. By insisting on his very singularity, within a cycle, the poet opens up that circularity to eternal recurrence. It is in this sense that the poem becomes a machine, positing itself as a copy of the universe, in order to then turn back and deny itself as the copy that it pretended to be. In a latter essay on Marcel Duchamp's *Large Glass* Paz states:

> In the first stage of the process, he translated the mythical elements into mechanical terms, and therefore denies them; in the second, he transfers the mechanical elements into a mythical context, and denies them again. He uses the myth to deny the criticism and criticism to deny the myth. This double negation produces an affirmation which is never conclusive and which exists in perpetual equilibrium over the void.

Although these are later statements, they are an apt analogy to Paz's metaphysical ground in *Sunstone*, where the clarity of the universe is affirmed by its juxtaposition to the linear singularity of an individual life that is then returned to the realm of the circular by the act of reading.

Even if we did not have Paz's explanatory note linking the number of lines in the poem to Venus, *Sunstone* should still surprise us: lines seem to be there for the sheer fact of adding number, of counting, of filling up space—

"caminas como un árbol, como un río / caminas y me hablas como un río" ("you walk like a tree, you walk like a river, / and talk to me like the course of a river" or, for example, in the following section, where Woman's body turns into stone.

> . . . I search for water
> in your eyes there's no water, they're made of stone
> and your breasts, your belly, your hips are stone
> your mouth tastes of dust, you [*sic*] mouth tastes
> like a poisoned time, your body tastes
> like a well that's been sealed.

The poem's analogy to the Venusian revolution, in essence, turns the whole poem into an image of its own process of composition. It is, in this sense, pure discourse, absolute irreality: "tiempo total donde no pasa nada / sino su propio transcurrír dichoso" ("total time where nothing / happens but its own, easy crossing"). The equivalence of the poem's lines to the Venusian year turns the whole poem into a supplement; it empties the poem of meaning so that it becomes pure form. No line is excessive, because all lines are redundant.

Paz's note, like the one he writes for the latter *Blanco*, reveals an enigma: Does structure precede the text, or is the text an effect of its own structure? To what extent is the composition dependent upon the mutual relationship between structure and content? It is relatively well known that Paz's work in *Blanco* follows a structural system that forms an underlying layer on the text, and that Paz is interested in figures like the American composer John Cage, who used chance and the *I Ching* as a mode of surrendering the will of the poet to another, more impersonal will. Nevertheless, *Sunstone* does not seem to have been structured a priori, in order to conform its number of verses to the astronomical number: there are actually no references to the Aztec solar calendar within the poem. Venus, we should recall, is merely a cultural referent; the planet itself, regardless of its name, is a celestial fact. From the point of view of the observer, names reveal an underlying structural equivalence between myths, as Paz explains in *Claude Lévi-Strauss o el nuevo festín de Esopo* (1967). That Mexican—or, more properly, Aztec—cultural signifiers of the poem are found at the margins of the text (but also as their underlying sense of foundation) is also related to the displacement of the writer in the text; *Sunstone* speaks not only of the poet as a singular individual but also of the poet as an entity, as a principle that repeats itself over time.

Whether for the sake of making the poem fit with the Venusian revolution in the Aztec calendar, or for underscoring to what extent Man and Woman are singular but also universal principles, *Sunstone*'s major trope is that of repetition. The first lines of the poem display a number of elements that will be repeated at the end of the poem.

> a crystal willow, a poplar of water,
> a tall fountain the wind arches over,
> a tree deep-rooted yet dancing still,
> a course of a river that turns, moves on,
> doubles back, and comes full circle,
> forever arriving:

The poem insists on the singularity of these objects, it repeats "un" as if it were a mantra, one that has the virtue of emptying the objects of their very singularity while at the same time insisting upon it. The objects are, furthermore, unreal, subject to the particular deformation of language; the willow becomes a crystal willow; it is rooted on the ground although it moves with the wind; the river's route is circuitous.

Sunstone is an ecstatic poem, one that needs to be read at one sitting. Perhaps the best account of the poem is the one offered by José Emilio Pacheco in his "Descripción de Piedra de sol." That the poem invites description is interesting in itself; this belies the sense of transparency given in Paz's poetry.

For Pacheco, the first and last five lines of *Sunstone* introduce the very notion of mobility: there are no endpoints in the poem, but rather colons, semicolons and commas, underscoring the text's fluidity. Pacheco sees a first movement of the poem geared toward the future, an impersonal gesture broken up by the appearance of the second person singular *tú*, which is the woman addressed in the poem, almost immediately followed by the poet's "I," Woman and World become one body that is then traversed by this "I," who abandons himself in order to undertake a search or mythical quest. This searching "I" evokes a Mexican childhood—the past tense, as Pacheco points out, is here employed for the first time—and thus begins the poem's second movement. Here, the poem speaks in the mode of remembrance, as memory awakens thoughts of

love along with other historical events of the poet's life. Woman incarnates in at least five names, all of which are in turn cultural referents: Melusina, Laura, Isabel, Perséfona, María. María refers to the Catholic Virgin; Laura and Isabel are not only common names in Spanish, but may also be seen as refer[r]ing to the two great sources of Western poetry: Petrarch's Laura and Garcilaso de la Vega's Isabel. Melusine is a mythic name that refers back to hermetic lore; she is also alluded to in one of the sonnets in Nerval's *Les chimères*, from which *Sunstone*'s epigraph is taken. According to Pacheco, Melusyne is a naiad married to a mortal (Raymondin de Poitiers) who discovered her secret: Melusyne was condemned to turn into a serpent every Saturday, from her hips down to her feet, in penance for having jailed her father in a mountain. Finally, Persephone rules as the Queen of Hades. Pacheco brings out these names and others mentioned or at least alluded [to] in the text (Astarté, Istar, Venus herself as well as Quetzalcóatl, who is transfigured into Venus) in order to explore the mystical background of eros that underlies *Sunstone*.

If on the one hand, the poet's quest entails recuperating the past through love, this love can only redeem a history that is always lived as an interplay between the private and the col[l]ective. Paz mentions concrete experiences of his life, streets in New York and in Mexico; he returns to his experiences in republican Spain, when placid time is suddenly ruptured by sirens, screams, and bombs. The world is full of chimerical monsters, ruling society with an implacable grip out of which human beings' only defense is love. The experience of solitude and alienation that is part and parcel of modern man's expulsion from the garden of innocence leads to a sense of solidarity where historical figures are images, and singular men and women bond with each other in order to survive. The poet reads himself as he reads history, and finally invokes the doors of perception that will allow him to escape. But no escape is possible, and the poem ends with a sense of acquiescence or surrender. As all doors and walls are rent, the poet is hurled out of himself into the time of all beginnings, as the sun once again revives the poem's initial lines, the timeless landscape of memory, the labyrinthine meandering of the world and of individual conscience.

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The Taxi

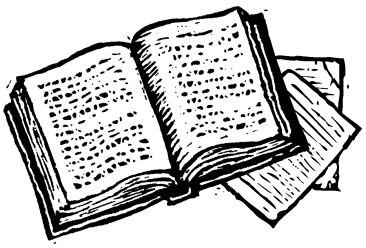
AMY LOWELL

1914

Amy Lowell's poem "The Taxi," which appeared in her collection *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed* (1914), is a short poem filled with vivid images that express the poet's passion. In twelve brief lines, readers are made to feel the anguish of the speaker of the poem as she leaves her lover's side. Though the taxi in the title is not mentioned directly in the poem, the image of a taxi pulling the speaker away is central to the poem's effect. Imagery in poetry was important to Lowell, who was heavily influenced by the imagist movement, which was developing in Europe during her early entry into the poetic world.

Aside from using powerful images in her poetry, Lowell also was fond of the free verse form. In "The Taxi," Lowell uses neither a rhyming scheme nor a strict, conventional meter. She was often criticized during her career for not using conventional poetic forms, as free verse was viewed as being more like prose than poetry.

"The Taxi" offers one image after another, pulling the reader deeper and deeper into the suffering that accompanies the speaker's departure. Though many critics at the time did not approve of the form of Lowell's poetry, many praised her for the ability to express her passion through poetry, as she does in this poem.



AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Born to affluent parents on February 9, 1874, in Brookline, Massachusetts, Amy Lowell led a



Amy Lowell (AP Images)

privileged but challenged life. Wealth and social status were assured for her at birth, as both sides of her family were part of the top echelon of Boston society. Her father, Augustus, was a prominent businessman, and her mother, Katherine, an accomplished musician and linguist. Lowell's grandfathers, John Amory Lowell and Abbott Lawrence, developed the cotton industry of Massachusetts. Lowell had five siblings. Her brother Percival, an astronomer, founded the Lowell Observatory in Arizona. Another brother, Abbott Lawrence, served as president of Harvard University. Her distant cousin Robert became a highly acclaimed poet of the confessional school, winning the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1947 for his collection *Lord Weary's Castle*. However, despite the advantages of wealth and a history of family accomplishments, Lowell would struggle with personal issues of weight (she was overweight due to a glandular problem), romantic love, and professional acceptance. The fact that both her parents died when she was in her early twenties added to her difficulties.

Lowell's education followed a typical path for a well-to-do female of her time. She was educated by a tutor at the family residence in Brookline until she was nine. Then she attended several private schools but never went to college. Instead, she became a voracious reader. Books were readily available to her from her father's enormous private library. Lowell herself would later become a book collector, and she helped to financially support several libraries.

Lowell was inspired to write her first poem by an actress, Eleonora Duse. The two of them met only briefly, but Lowell is said to have been struck by Duse's beauty and presence on stage. This was in 1902, a year that many of Lowell's biographers claim that her career as a poet began. It would not be until 1910, though, that her first poems, four sonnets, were published by the *Atlantic Monthly*. In 1912, Lowell published her first collection, *A Dome of Many-Colored Glass*, which received little attention from reviewers.

The next year, Lowell discovered poets who were writing in a new form, referred to as imagism. She traveled to Europe to meet with Ezra Pound, who was promoting the new style of poetry. In 1914, Lowell's collection *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed* (in which the poem "The Taxi" appears), demonstrated her own versions of imagist poems. From then on, Lowell published almost one book of poems a year until 1921.

Lowell is known not only for her poetry but also for her nonfiction writing. In particular, she is remembered for her 1925 biography of the English romantic poet, John Keats, which is often praised as one of the most insightful studies of the poet.

Though her poetry seldom won critical praise during her lifetime, Lowell did receive a Pulitzer Prize in 1926, for her *What's O' Clock*, published in 1925 after her death. Today, Lowell is much more appreciated and is studied for her imagist poems and her female point of view.

Lowell was involved in a relationship with Ada Dwyer Russell, a woman she met in 1909. Some scholars believe that the poem "The Taxi" was inspired by Russell. Lowell and Russell lived together until Lowell's death, on May 12, 1925, of a cerebral hemorrhage at her home in Brookline, Massachusetts.

POEM TEXT

When I go away from you
The world beats dead
Like a slackened drum.
I call out for you against the jutted stars
And shout into the ridges of the wind. 5

Streets coming fast,
One after the other,
Wedge you away from me,
And the lamps of the city prick my eyes
So that I can no longer see your face.
Why should I leave you,
To wound myself upon the sharp edges of the night?

POEM SUMMARY

Title

"The Taxi" is a poem that has nothing to do with a cab and yet everything to do with it. The word *taxi* is not once mentioned in the poem; rather, the reader experiences the speaker's thoughts and sights as the cab carries her away through the streets of an unidentified city. This is a poem about the pain of leaving; in abstraction, the taxi becomes the cause of the pain, pulling the speaker farther and farther away from the object of her love and passion. So although this poem never mentions a taxi, the title gives the taxi a significance that the speaker does not have to explain. The title is used to give the reader an image—a woman being driven away in a cab, looking out the rear window and watching the distance between herself and her lover increase.

Lines 1–4

The title literally provides the vehicle of this poem, whereas the first three lines provide the direction that the taxi is taking. The speaker uses the first person singular pronoun to tell the reader that she is the one in the cab. She is the one who is leaving. The speaker also uses the pronoun "you" to announce that not only is she traveling from one location to another but that she is leaving someone behind. The speaker is not focused on where she is or where she is going but on what she has been torn away from. She is longing for something she cannot take with her. This inability to take someone with her completely transforms the world around her. Whereas the world was very much alive, presumably, in the presence of this person she is leaving, the world now feels dead. There is no rhythm to the world where there once was a strong beat that stirred her passions. Life is now dull in comparison.

In the fourth line, the speaker begins to convey how much she misses the object of her affections. She uses unusual images of stars and wind that uniquely express her pain. Without directly describing how much pain she is suffering, she is able to express her agony through images of sharpness. Stars protrude from the night skies, reflecting back to the speaker her own voice as she cries out for her lover.

Lines 5–8

In the fifth line, the wind appears to swallow her cries in its folds or to snag them on its sharp edges as the speaker continues to cry out to the one she loves. She is longing for this unnamed person from whom she is being carried away. But the images of the stars, which are so far away, and the wind, which has no form, are not comforting. The stars and wind lack the ability to empathize with her needs.

Though she does not mention the cab she is riding in, she does mention, in the sixth line, the effect it is having on her. As she is being carried away in the cab she has the illusion that it is not her body that is moving through space but rather the streets of the city that are rushing up and quickly passing by her. This gives the impression that she is stationary while the earth moves under her. Not only does this line provide an image, it also offers an insight into what the speaker is feeling. She is distressed because she does not want to leave her lover, while for some unstated reason she is compelled to depart. In the eighth line the speaker emphasizes again how her lover is being torn away from her.

Lines 9–12

Lines 9 and 10 continue to describe the pain that the speaker experiences as she leaves her lover. On top of everything else that she is feeling, the city lights now hurt her eyes. This most likely is a way of expressing the tears that are blurring her eyes. The speaker's eyesight becomes so impaired that she can no longer see her lover. This could be a reflection of the speaker's inability to see her lover physically because of the distance that has come between them, or on the psychological level, the inability to recapture a vision of her lover because it pains her to do so.

In the last two lines of this poem, the speaker asks why she should leave her lover, when leaving causes so much anguish. Again, in the last line, the speaker uses a sharp image to emphasize the pain she suffers every time she leaves. She ascribes to the night jagged edges upon which she has been stabbed.

THEMES

Passion

Lowell is often praised for her skill in expressing her passion in her poems. "The Taxi" is a good example of how she instills passion in the poetic images she creates.

Passion defines this poem and drives it forward. The word *passion* means any deeply felt emotion. In the case of Lowell's poem, the passion is the love that the speaker has for the lover she is either leaving or imagining she is leaving. According to the poem, this passion is so strong that separation becomes torturous for the speaker. It is interesting to note that even though the main theme is the passionate love that the speaker feels, the speaker never mentions the word *love*. This is due in part to the form that an imagist poet such as Lowell practices in her writing. Imagist poetry does not use abstractions. Love, being an emotion, is an abstract concept; instead of talking about love, Lowell uses powerful images to express it. The speaker could have simply said that she missed her lover when she left, but when she writes that the world feels dead to her when she leaves her lover, she reveals the depth of her passion.

All the images that are used in this poem continue along the same path—they provide vivid images of how strongly the speaker feels about her lover. The speaker's passion rips through her as if something is being torn away from her. She feels lost and unable to stop the forces that are pulling her away. Every effort that she makes to stop the process not only is met with failure but wounds her ever more deeply.

One of the reasons Lowell's poems are praised for their expression of passion is the poet's skill in opening up her emotions without making the poem sentimental or maudlin. Lowell's passion runs deep. There is nothing frivolous or silly about the images she uses to express her passion. The speaker's reaction to the situation does not seem overly dramatic because of the depth and power of the imagery.

Suffering

Suffering is sometimes the consequence of passion. This is well demonstrated in Lowell's poem. Because she has such strong passion for her lover, she suffers when they are parted. She is blinded and wounded by the lights and by the darkness of the night. In other words, being away from her lover is like torture. It is through Lowell's expression of suffering that she defines her love and passion for this other person. The torture that she experiences is a demonstration of how deeply she loves. In that sense, the speaker might be saying that the suffering is worth the pain because the pleasure of love is so rewarding. On the other hand, she might also

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY



- Lowell uses many images in her poem to describe her emotions. Create a picture in any art medium depicting the stars, wind, or cityscape that you find in the poem. With your picture on display in your class, read Lowell's poem to your fellow students.
- Read several imagist poems, such as William Carlos Williams's "The Red Wheelbarrow," or Ezra Pound's "In a Station of a Metro," both of which can be found on the Internet and in many anthologies of American poetry. Then choose an object or scene to focus on and write an imagist poem about it. Read the poem to your class.
- Choose three of the images Lowell uses to describe her emotions in this poem. Then take a survey among at least thirty students at your school, asking them to associate an emotion with the image. Create a graph of your findings and present them to your class after they have read the poem. Be prepared to lead a discussion afterward.
- Whom do you imagine the speaker of this poem is addressing? What would this person say in response to the poem? Write a letter as if you were that person, and address it to the speaker of the poem. Would you be empathetic to the speaker's emotions? Would the speaker's leaving affect you in a similar way? Or would you reprimand the speaker for being so dependent on you?



New York yellow taxi cab *(© Motoring Picture Library | Alamy)*

be saying that the suffering is so great that she does not want ever to leave her lover again.

Separation

Separation is an underlying theme. Separation is what makes the passion and the suffering rise to the surface so that they become known, looked at, and felt. The taxi is the vehicle of separation. It is what causes the lovers to take leave of one another. This parting has taken place in the past and is being pondered or reflected on in the present. In some ways, it is through this past or imagined separation that the speaker declares her love. She does this in two ways. First, she states that when she has left in the past she has been miserable. She has realized how much passion she has because of the pain she has suffered while separated from her lover. Second, she uses the past separation as a statement of purpose. Why would she ever leave again, she might be asking, when it hurt so much in the past? She might also be reassuring her lover that the lover means so much to her that she promises never to leave again.

Passivity

One way of reading this poem is to observe the weakness and passivity of the speaker. The elements of passivity are exposed in the statements the speaker makes that insinuate that she is a victim of someone else's actions. For instance, there is the image of the taxi pulling the speaker away from her lover, placing an ever-growing number of streets between them. There is also the speaker's voice, which has been silenced by the stars and the wind, which take her shouts away from her lover's ears. The speaker is also wounded by the night and blinded, all of which are signs of increasing weakness and passivity. The speaker expresses her inability to live fully without her lover. She has become dependent on her lover to prop her up, to make her life whole. To correct this situation, the speaker does not work to actively make herself stronger but rather succumbs to her weaknesses and insinuates that she will not leave her lover again, thus passively giving in to her inability to stand on her own two feet when she is not in the presence of her lover.

STYLE

Free Verse

In her introduction to her collection *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed*, Lowell refers to the French term *vers libre* (which means "free verse") to describe the form in which she wrote some of her poems. Lowell often used her own term, *unrhymed cadence*, to refer to this type of poetry. Today, most poems in English that are written without adherence to a strict meter are referred to as free verse. Though free verse poems are not based on regular meter, they do have a cadence, or rhythm, created through phrases, punctuation, line breaks, and patterns. Rhyme can be used but rarely is in free verse.

Lowell further explained the form by stating that the poems are "built upon 'organic rhythm,' or the rhythm of the speaking voice with its necessity for breathing, rather than upon a strict metrical system." Lowell stated that the lines of poetry differ from prose and should not be confused with a system by which prose is merely chopped up and made to look like poetry on the page. "These poems, built upon cadence, are more subtle, but the laws they follow are not less fixed," Lowell wrote. She added that the poems are "constructed upon mathematical and absolute laws of balance and time." Lowell often referred to this type of writing as polyphonic prose, which is defined as a freely rhythmical prose employing characteristic devices of poetry such as alliteration, rhythm, and metaphor. The writing sounds like a poem, but there is no rhyme or strict rhythm.

Free verse, though it was not readily accepted in Lowell's time, has become a very popular form with American poets in recent decades. However, free verse has not been restricted only to the twentieth century. For example, the nineteenth-century American poet Walt Whitman often used free verse, especially in his collection *Leaves of Grass*.

Imagery

Poetic imagery is created through words or phrases that appeal to any sense or combination of senses. The image is something that the reader can visualize or can imagine smelling, hearing, touching, or tasting. Poets use images to pull the reader into the piece through common experience. For instance, in Lowell's poem, the image of a taxi, suggested by the title, is used to portray a sense of traveling as well as the process of being taken away, something readers, especially in an urban setting, could relate to.

Poetic imagery is sometimes referred to as word-pictures. Poets use images to express emotions. In the case of Lowell's poem, the image of streets rushing at the speaker represents her feelings of being taken away by some aggressive, external force. The emotion that is expressed through this image is not just the longing for the lover left behind but also the sense of desperation, as if the speaker were being taken away against her own wishes. The images of the lamps and the night assaulting the speaker graphically suggest her pain.

In its use of imagery, "The Taxi" is a typical imagist poem. The imagists believed the image was the central point around which a poem was formed. They focused on creating strong images upon which their poems would stand.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Imagism

Imagism refers to a movement in poetry that began in the early part of the twentieth century. The imagist movement was a reaction against the romantic and Victorian era, which stressed sentimental language, idealism, and (in the romantics) an interest in the supernatural. Imagism, in contrast, focused on simple and precise language, which provided accurate (as opposed to fantastic) representations of a poem's central subject. Sentimental language was rejected, as was the use of excessive wordage. The imagist movement was short-lived but influential and centered mostly on English and American poets.

The idea of imagist poetry was based on the thoughts of T. E. Hulme, an English philosopher who dabbled in poetry in the early part of the twentieth century. Hulme's ideas were further explored by Ezra Pound, an American poet who spent much of his life in Europe. Using Hulme's ideas of a poetry that used very simple and succinct language, Pound later defined the basic tenets of imagist poetry and promoted imagist poets. In 1912, Pound endorsed one of Hilda Doolittle's poems and described the poet as an imagist, thus officially launching the imagist movement.

Beside using visual images and precise language, imagist poets strove to remove any

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **1910s:** In demonstrations in the United States, women call for equal rights. One of their primary demands is the right to vote.

  Today: Though women still struggle for many equal rights, such as equal pay for jobs that still pay higher wages to men, women have made significant progress in achieving equality.

- **1910s:** The free verse form is popularized by the imagist poets despite the fact that this relatively new poetic form is not considered poetry by many literary critics.

  Today: Although the imagist movement in poetry has passed, free verse is still a popular form of poetry in the United States.

- **1910s:** Separated lovers rely on long-distance telephone calls and telegrams to communicate with each other. The primary means of transcontinental travel is by train, which takes several days. Trips across the ocean are made on ships.

  Today: Technology has greatly increased people's ability to stay in contact with loved ones who are far away. Mobile phones enable not only affordable long-distance conversations but also text messaging and emailing. Coast to coast air travel in the United States takes only five hours; flights to Europe take just a few hours more.

abstractions from their work. This was not a poetry of ideals but rather a poetry of what could be seen. The only abstraction in this type of poetry was the invocation of emotions, which was derived through visual images. Imagist poets were determined to use concrete details, which then could be further explored through metaphors. Another aspect of imagist poetry was the freedom to create a poem on any topic of the poet's choosing. Free verse was also encouraged, allowing the poet to work outside the confines of meter and rhyme.

Two years after the movement was defined, Pound moved on to other philosophies. Lowell then took over the leadership of the imagist movement and influenced and promoted other poets, especially American poets, who were writing imagist poetry. Pound later made it known that he disapproved of Lowell's influence and referred to the direction that the imagists took under Lowell's direction as Amygism.

Though the movement is usually listed as having ended around 1917, the imagists would greatly affect American poetry, especially through the popularization of free verse. Some poets who are considered imagists include Pound, Lowell, Doolittle, Marianne Moore, and William Carlos Williams.

Hilda Doolittle (H. D.)

It was the poetry of Hilda Doolittle, or H. D., that caught the attention of Lowell and brought Lowell to England. Lowell was impressed with Doolittle's poetic form and wanted to learn more about it.

Doolittle was born on September 10, 1886, in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. H. D., as she liked to be called, attended Bryn Mawr College where she met Marianne Moore and Ezra Pound, who greatly influenced her writing. Doolittle moved to England in 1911 and spent the rest of her adult life in Europe. While living in London, she married novelist Richard Aldington.

Doolittle's first poems were published in the magazine *Poetry* in 1913. Although known in Europe, Doolittle's work did not receive much attention in the United States until Lowell promoted Doolittle's poems there. Although known as one of the great imagist poets, Doolittle broke away from the movement after World War II. The years that followed were some of her most creative. She died from complications from a

stroke on September 21, 1961. In her lifetime, Doolittle published several collections of poetry and four novels.

Women's Rights in the Early Twentieth Century

The image of the genteel female who stayed home and raised children and had little if any civil rights was beginning to change at the turn of the twentieth century. More women's voices were being heard in literature and in politics. In 1903, women formed the National Women's Trade Union League, which advocated improved working conditions and wages. A decade later, the National Women's Party was formed to apply pressure on the U.S. Congress to give women the right to vote. During this time, World War I broke out and women assumed working positions that men who had joined the military had held. This provided women with a taste of what it was like to hold down a job outside the home and to earn a decent salary. This opportunity also demonstrated that women were capable workers. After the war ended, women won the right to vote with the passing of the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution in 1920.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

Lowell's writings were often disparaged in her lifetime. Her experiments with free verse, which contained neither rhyme nor meter, were largely misunderstood by many critics and therefore ridiculed for their supposed lack of form.

In a 2004 article for the *Washington Post*, Edward Hirsch suggests that Lowell's "poetry has been underestimated for most of the past 75 years." Hirsch adds that Lowell's work, for the most part, has also been "too easily dismissed, sometimes insulted, often ignored." Hirsch claims that Lowell's name is often mentioned merely as an anecdote or a footnote in essays devoted to the study of poetry and her work is not given the attention it deserves. Hirsch, unlike many of Lowell's contemporaries, commends Lowell for "her exuberant work in free verse." He then points out that of all her work, "Lowell is most moving as a poet of Eros," in other words, in her poems about love and passion.

William Lyon Phelps, writing for the *New York Times* during the time that the poet was still alive, also pointed out that many critics mocked Lowell's poetry. "For some years she was a mark for the shafts of humor, ridicule and parody," Phelps states in a 1921 review. Phelps, though he admits he does not appreciate all of Lowell's work, says he especially admires her more traditional poetry, which he refers to as "beautiful and original." Phelps goes on to describe Lowell as "a poet of imagination and passion, with a remarkable gift for melody, a sound technique, and an acute perception of the color and tone of words."

In a 1922 article for the *New York Times*, Norreya Jephson O'Conor notes that Lowell was endowed with family financial support and an extensive education, which allowed her the time and the knowledge to develop into a poet, but that this would not have done her any good had it not been for her natural talents. O'Conor writes that Lowell "also possessed a nature remarkably sensitive to impression, the true inheritance of a poet." O'Conor, like many of Lowell's contemporary critics, is not so enamored of Lowell's free verse poems, however. O'Conor does praise Lowell's collection *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed*, in which "The Taxi" was published, but the critic's positive review is based mostly on the more conventional poems in that collection. The critic concludes this review with a positive comment:

> Her [Lowell's] enthusiasm and courage in upholding her artistic beliefs have done much to win respect for the profession of poetry, and her influence upon individual poets, even upon those who have never adopted the innovations in form which she has made familiar, has been noteworthy.

Vindicated by time, Lowell's poetry is now widely celebrated and studied.

CRITICISM

Joyce Hart

Hart is a published author and freelance writer. In this essay, she examines the "organic rhythm" Lowell employs in "The Taxi."

Lowell was often criticized in her time for her free-flowing poetry, which went against the strict rules of traditional English poetic form. This form was based on regimented patterns of rhyme and cadence, or rhythm. Words at the ends of lines often rhymed with one another. Lines were written in uniform patterns of stressed

WHAT DO I READ NEXT?



- *Amy Lowell: Selected Poems* (2004) is a relatively new collection of Lowell's life work, offering the reader an overview of the poet's development. This collection was edited by Honor Moore.
- Another collection of Lowell's poems, selected by Peter Seymour, is *The Touch of You; Amy Lowell's Poems of Love and Beauty* (1972). Some critics have found these poems to be some of Lowell's best.
- E. Claire Healey and Keith Cushman edited a collection of correspondence between Lowell and English novelist D. H. Lawrence titled *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence and Amy Lowell, 1914–1925* (1985). This book offers an intimate glimpse into both the personal and professional sides of Lowell. Lawrence was both a supporter and a critic of Lowell's poetry, and these letters demonstrate how he played out both of these roles.
- Imagist poet Hilda Doolittle (1886–1961), who was better known as H. D., was a contemporary of Lowell's. Lowell greatly admired her work. H. D.'s poems can be found in *H. D.: Collected Poems, 1912–1944* (1983).
- Another well-known imagist poet was Richard Aldington (1892–1962). Aldington was born in England and was married to H. D. for a short period. He is remembered for his writing about his experiences in World War I. Aldington's *Images of War* (1919), a collection of poetry, and his novel *Death of a Hero* (1929) are two of his more well-known works.
- Ezra Pound (1885–1972) was an American poet who was greatly responsible for creating the imagist movement. Pound's most famous imagist poem is "In a Station of the Metro," which can be found in the collection *Modern American Poetry, An Anthology*, edited by Louis Untermeyer and reprinted in 2008.

and unstressed syllables. The rhythm of most traditional poetry was regular—could be heard like a systematic tapping of a pencil on the top of a table. Many poems were based on an iambic meter, in which one unstressed syllable was followed by one stressed syllable, over and over again. Most common was iambic pentameter, or five iambic feet (units that contain one unstressed syllable followed by one stressed syllable). The rhythm would sound something like the following: ta-*dum*, ta-*dum*, ta-*dum*, ta-*dum*, ta-*dum*. Such formal meters became so closely associated with poetry that any poem that did not follow such conventions was criticized for not being any different from regular prose. Unrhymed and loosely metered forms were definitely not poetry, according to these literary critics.

Lowell did not buy this assessment, and she was not alone. She was not the first to write poetry without rhyme and regular rhythm. In her introduction to her collection *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed*, in which her poem "The Taxi" was published, Lowell explains that she was influenced by French poets who came before her, including Charles Marie René Leconte de Lisle, Albert Samain, and Paul Fort. She states that despite the criticism she received, she believed herself to be a poet, a craftsman who studied poetry and invested much effort and discipline into her art. She understood the traditional poetic form, but she did not always feel that her sense of poetry fit into the confines of rhymed and strictly measured meter. So Lowell was attracted to a different (and more radical for her time) poetic form, what the French called *vers libre*, or free verse. Though rhyme and regular meter were not necessarily present in poems written in the form of vers libre, other poetic devices, such as images and metaphors, were.

Moreover, meter is often present in such poems; it is just irregular. The meter in free verse forms can be tapped out with a pencil, for example, but the beat might change from line to line, depending on the emotional content of the phrase the poem is focused on. In the preface to *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed*, Lowell refers to the meter of her poetry as unrhymed cadence. She explains that unrhymed cadence is not the same thing as the rhythm that might be present in a piece of prose, which is even more loose. She does, however, claim that the "organic rhythm" upon which she builds her poetry is drawn from the more natural rhythms of the

spoken word. In other words, the rhythm is based on the words chosen, the meaning of the words, and the emotions behind them. Pauses, as signified by punctuation and breaks in the poem's lines, also help to create the rhythm and are similar to the pauses the speaker would make to take a breath. These pauses also add drama to the poem, as the emotion builds, the poet states, "until it burns white-hot."

If the cadence of Lowell's poem "The Taxi" were counted out, readers would see that the range of beats, or syllables, per line varies from four to thirteen. Some of these beats follow the unstressed/stressed pattern, but not consistently. For instance, the first line begins with two unstressed syllables before it gets into the unstressed/stressed rhythm. The same happens in lines 3 and 4. Line 2 changes this pattern.

Line 2 has four beats and an iambic rhythm that sounds like ta-*dum*, ta-*dum*. This ever-so-slight change in rhythm between the second line and its other three companions makes the second line stand out. The second line is not only the shortest line of the first four, it is also the most dramatic. Its brevity and its subtle change in rhythm also provide the first hint of emotion. This beat that the speaker refers to is akin to the beat of the heart, a suggestion reinforced by the iambic rhythm of this line, which mimics the rhythm of a heartbeat. Without this beat, the world appears dead. Though the change in cadence is subtle in the second line, the poet has purposefully composed it to be different from what comes before and after it. The break from iambic meter in line 3 suggests the end of the heartbeat. The pause at the end of line 2 is also purposeful. By pausing there, the last word of the second line receives more attention. The world appears dead. The speaker feels dead. Lowell wants to make sure that the reader not only understands this but also feels this. So she uses both rhythm and pause to grab the reader's attention.

Lines 6 and 7 provide another example of how Lowell uses organic rhythm. Line 6 could be read with an emphasis on the first syllable, followed by two unstressed syllables and ending with a stressed syllable. So the rhythm is *dum*, ta-ta *dum*. The rhythm in line 7 is related to the rhythm in line 6, but it also differs slightly. In line seven, the rhythm could be read as *dum*, ta-ta-ta *dum*-ta. Note that both of these lines are very short, with four beats in line 6 and six in line 7. These short lines imply speed. The quickness of the beats reflects the tempo that the speaker feels as the taxi races down the streets, pulling her away from her lover. As the speed of the beat increases, so too does the intensity of the speaker's emotions. The distance between the speaker and her lover increases and builds a more powerful wedge between them. There is a sense that things are happening so quickly that the speaker has no power to stop them.

Also note that the poet has used only three words in line 6. She could have used the article "the" to start off the line and the verb "are," thus creating a complete sentence: "The streets are coming fast." One reason the poet might have chosen not to do this is that by paring down the sentence, she changes the rhythm. By using only the three words, the line begins with a stressed sound. This increases the sense of urgency. If she had used the complete sentence, with the extra article and verb, the rhythm would have been the more monotonous, less emotional iambic rhythm.

The last line offers another example of how the poet uses organic rhythm. The line begins with an unstressed syllable and continues in a rocking motion of iambic meter until it comes to the most important words in this line. There the rhythm dramatically changes. With the word "edges," it becomes trochaic, consisting of a stressed followed by an unstressed syllable. This rhythm is aggressive, almost suggesting a stabbing motion, thus dramatizing the final image of the poem. It raises the heat of emotion. The speaker does not want to ever leave her lover again because leaving her lover is like inflicting an injury on herself. Lowell has used the organic rhythm of the words themselves to create an emotional sensation in the reader. The cadence of this final line enacts the last image, which is then indelibly impressed upon the reader's mind.

Source: Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on "The Taxi," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2009.

Carl E. Rollyson Jr.

In the following excerpt, Rollyson addresses Lowell's relationship with Ada Russell, who was the inspiration for the poem "The Taxi."

When Amy Lowell died in 1925 at the age of 51, she was at the height of her fame. Her two-volume biography of John Keats, published in the last year of her life, had been greeted in this country with almost universal acclaim. She was



LOWELL WENT ON LECTURE TOURS THE WAY ROCK BANDS ROLL FROM TOWN TO TOWN TODAY, WITH AN ENTOURAGE, A SUITE AT THE BEST HOTEL, AND A GATHERING OF REPORTERS AWAITING HER LATEST OUTRAGE."

the premier platform performer among her generation of poets.

In 1926, Lowell's posthumous volume of verse, *What's O'Clock*, was awarded a Pulitzer Prize. She had remained in the public eye ever since the publication of her second book, *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed* (1914). She had wrested the Imagist movement away from Ezra Pound, producing three best-selling anthologies of Imagist verse while publishing a book of her own poetry nearly every year. Pound retaliated, calling her appropriation "Amygism."

The pugnacious Lowell dominated the poetry scene in every sense of the word, supporting journals like *Poetry* and *The Little Review*, and publishing pronunciamentos about the "new poetry." Standing only five feet tall and weighing as much as 250 pounds, she made good copy: The sister of Harvard's president, she smoked big black cigars and cursed. She lived on the family estate in Brookline, Massachusetts, where her seven rambunctious sheep dogs terrorized her guests. She wore a pince nez that made her look—so one biographer thought—like Theodore Roosevelt. She was even known to say "Bully!" Lowell traveled in a maroon Pierce Arrow, which she shipped to England in 1914 when she decided to look up Pound and seize her piece of the poetry action in London. Pound wanted her monetary support but scorned her verse. When she chose not to play by his rules, he mocked her, parading around a party she was hosting with a tin bathtub on his head—his way of ridiculing her bath poem, written in her patented polyphonic prose:

> Little spots of sunshine lie on the surface of the
> water and dance, dance, and their reflections
> wobble deliciously over the ceiling; a stir of my
> finger sets them whirring, reeling. I move a
> foot, and the planes of light in the water jar. I lie
> back and laugh, and let the green-white water,
> the sun-flawed beryl water, flow over me. The
> day is almost too bright to bear, the green water
> covers me from the too bright day. I will lie here
> awhile and play with the water and the sun
> spots.

Reading this dithyramb to the Poetry Society of America, Lowell caused an uproar. This was not poetry at all, the conservative membership protested. Another account of this episode mentions titters, as Society members envisioned the elephantine poet at her ablutions—or rather her profanation of what a dignified poet ought to perform.

Lowell went on lecture tours the way rock bands roll from town to town today, with an entourage, a suite at the best hotel, and a gathering of reporters awaiting her latest outrage. On the lecture platform, she would read a poem and then pause, looking out at her audience: "Well, hiss or applaud! But do something!" Almost always she got an ovation—and some hisses. At receptions and dinner parties, she was carefully watched. When would she light up? She seldom disappointed, although her favored stogie was, in fact, a small brown panatela.

Other women poets—chiefly Elinor Wylie and Edna St. Vincent Millay—also commanded press attention, but none had Amy Lowell's authority. Publishers deferred to her contractual terms. D. H. Lawrence, Richard Aldington, H. D., and others depended on her largesse and her business sense. She was Poetry, Inc. Today she would be, of course, Poetry.com. T. S. Eliot called her the "demon saleswoman" of modern poetry. Academic critics such as John Livingston Lowes deemed her one of the masters of the sensuous image in English poetry. She helped make the reputations of Edwin Arlington Robinson and Robert Frost.

Of course, Lowell had her detractors, but their views were rarely reflected in reviews of her books. As Norman Mailer said of Marilyn Monroe—Lowell had crashed through a publicity barrier, which meant that no matter what kind of press she got, it all accrued to her benefit.

Although she came from a wealthy and staunchly capitalist family and called herself "the last of the barons," it was not her politics but her poetics that captured the public imagination. She was for free verse, or what she called "cadenced verse." Although she would produce sonnets and other sorts of poems with rhyme schemes, she was celebrated for lines of uneven length, a bold, informal voice, and bright, colorful sensory imagery.

Lowell was all surface, her grumbling dissenters alleged, but she always seemed to carry the day by switching modes—from grand historical narratives, to hokkus, to lyrics, to polyphonic prose, to books about contemporary poetry that read as though she had just left the lecture platform to address you, the common reader.

It is not surprising, then, that her enemies—never able to get much traction during her lifetime—should pounce just as soon as the energetic Lowell dropped dead from a stroke. The urge to cut this incubus down to size was irresistible. Clement Wood, a poet and critic who had feuded with Lowell, was first up in 1926, producing a biography systematically dismantling Lowell's reputation as a poet and critic. Lowell had been prolific and prolix, producing in a fifteen-year span an immense and uneven variety of verse and prose that made her an easy target for tendentious criticism. Wood's verdict, in short, was that Lowell was no poet at all. He skirted her lesbianism with references to the "Sapphic fragments" of a "singer of Lesbos." He employed what he called the "new psychology" to suggest her work was wish fulfillment, the product of a desire to be accepted. Lowell's need was pathological, Wood implied, because of her obesity—a word he never used, referring instead to her "immense physique." Wood favored sarcasm, concluding, "All the Harvard pundits and all the claquing men can't set Miss Lowell on a pedestal again." He was chaffing John Livingston Lowes, chair of Harvard's English department, and countless critics who had reviewed her writing positively.

Lowell's next biographer, S. Foster Damon, produced a monumental biography in 1935, noting that Wood's snide attack had not been widely reviewed or credited, but the damage had been done—in part because Wood had played off the epithets of critics like Witter Bynner, who had dubbed Lowell the "hippopoetess," a term Ezra Pound also took up as a way of conflating the person with the poet. Damon, a member of Lowell's inner circle, restored her dignity by detailing her heroic dedication to her writing and to the cause of poetry, but he also unwittingly played Wood's hand by emphasizing the "triumph of the spirit over the tragedy of the body." Poetry, in other words, is what Lowell could do instead of living a full, "normal" life. Damon meant his words as a tribute, but because he did not tell the complete story of Lowell's love life and her working days, he could not recover for readers the Amy Lowell he knew.

Damon's plight raises two issues that plague Lowell biography. Lowell's lover and constant companion, Ada Dwyer Russell, destroyed their letters at Lowell's request. As unfortunate was Lowell's directive to her secretaries that they destroy the drafts of her work each day. Damon could have partly rectified this enormous loss had he candidly described the intimacy between "Peter" (Lowell's nickname for Ada) and the poet. But Russell, who had worked closely with the poet, was also Lowell's executor. Russell lived until 1952, resisting all requests to tell the story of her relationship with Lowell, and thus depriving readers not merely of a love story but of an insight into the poetic process. Damon's reticence made it all too easy for Wood's virulent version of Lowell to metastasize in Horace Gregory's hostile *Amy Lowell: Portrait of the Poet in Her Time* (1958). Employing Wood's vulgar Freudianism, Gregory sketched a view of a masculinized woman who used her bulk as a defense against a hurtful world. Gregory seemed to have no idea that Russell and Lowell had been lovers, although the evidence was rather plain to see, eventually emerging in Jean Gould's *Amy: The World of Amy Lowell and the Imagist Movement* (1975). Relying on critics such as Glenn Richard Ruilhy, who published in 1957 an edition of Lowell's poetry that emphasized her stunning love poetry, as well as on fresh interviews with Lowell's surviving family and friends, Gould began the work of restoring the person and poet to her full humanity and range . . . .

Source: Carl E. Rollyson Jr., "The Absence of Amy Lowell," in *New Criterion*, Vol. 26, No. 1, September 2007, pp. 77–81.

David Orr

In the following excerpt, Orr considers Lowell as a Modernist poet.

. . . "On or about December 1910," wrote Virginia Woolf, "human character changed." You can tell a lot about someone by how much irony he reads into this announcement. Many people have taken Woolf's statement at face value, leading to the persistence of what you might call the creationist theory of Modernism. (And Eliot said, "Let there be a general sense of displacement and alienation": and there was a general sense of displacement and alienation.) As many critics have noted, this can be a deeply unsatisfying way of looking at early twentieth-century poetry—for one thing, it tends to overstate the importance of minor but "modern" looking poets like H. D., while struggling to explain the persistence of major but un-"modern" looking poets like Frost. If human character really changed in 1910, someone would seem to have forgotten to tell quite a few humans about it.

It's useful, then, to remember that "Modernism" was at least as much a convergence of period styles as a literary revolution. Nothing illustrates this fact quite as decisively as the poetry of Amy Lowell. Lowell, who died in 1925, was an enthusiastic modernist, a talented literary impresario, and an unremarkable poet in the Poundian imagiste mode—which is just another way of saying that most of her poems look like this:

> Then I see you,
> Standing under a spire of pale blue larkspur,
> With a basket of roses on your arm.
> You are cool, like silver,
> And you smile.

Of course, the above also looks a lot like this:

> Through the upland meadows
> I go alone.
> For I dreamed of someone last night
> Who is waiting for me.
> Flower and blossom, tell me do you know of her?

Which in turn could easily be mistaken for this:

> Frail beauty,
> green, gold and incandescent whiteness,
> narcissi, daffodils,
> you have brought me Spring and longing,
> wistfulness,
> in your irradiance.

In other words, shortly after December 1910, everyone from Amy Lowell (first quote) to John Gould Fletcher (second) to F. S. Flint (third) sounded like a Chinese translation. Viva la revolucion! Honor Moore, the editor of this volume, argues that Lowell's achievement is best seen not in her earliest poetry, but in "the erotic lyrics she wrote to the woman with whom she lived the final twelve years of her life." She's right. Yet even Lowell's strongest poems in this vein remain far less interesting than Virginia Woolf's correspondence with Vita Sackville-West, to say nothing of Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography*. But then, how could it be otherwise? Virginia Woolf was a genius; Amy Lowell was only a modernist . . . .

Source: David Orr, "Eight Takes," in *Poetry*, Vol. 187, No. 3, December 2005, pp. 233–48.

Diane Ellen Hamer

In the following excerpt, Hamer discusses Lowell's use of polyphonic prose, spare images, and free verse.

All told, Lowell wrote nine books of poetry and four books of prose, and edited several anthologies, in the twelve years from age 39 to her death of a stroke at 51. Some of the poetry is exquisite and timeless, some is dreadful and forgettable. Lowell usually wrote in free verse—vers libre, as she called it. Her body of work is sufficiently large that most readers will find something of interest, what with subjects ranging from history, war and the Far East to lesbian love, gardens, and everyday life activities.

Amy Lowell was born in Boston in 1874 to Augustus and Katharine Lawrence Lowell, part of the large Lowell-Lawrence clan. She was the baby sister of the future president of Harvard University, Abbott Lawrence Lowell. She was first educated at home and later at private schools reserved for upper-class girls. She was largely self-educated, though, as she didn't do well in the confines of the classroom. She was a smart, sensitive tomboy caught in a social class and a larger culture that made it very hard for her to find herself. In time she would come to be regarded, quite incorrectly, as a lonely old maid. Her letters and her friends' reminiscences show that she had crushes on girls and women from an early age, and that she understood on some level that making a life with another woman was not socially acceptable. However, upon meeting the actress Ada Dwyer Russell in 1912, she emerged as both a writer and a lesbian . . . .

Russell was instrumental in Lowell's success, both as her muse and as her helpmate, tending to Amy's personal and work needs with

absolute devotion and care. It's a love story that can only be gleaned from the poetry, which is to say that Lowell chose to be far less obvious about their relationship than did that other lesbian couple of the era, Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas. In a section of *Pictures of the Floating World* (1919), many of the love poems are gathered in a section that Lowell called "Two Speak Together." Most of the poems are short and episodic, or in some cases a series of haiku-like passages stitched together into a longer piece . . . .

Lowell's first book of poetry was mostly conventional fare, but after reading a poem by HD (Hilda Doolittle), who called herself an "imagiste," Lowell declared herself to be an imagiste as well. Unfortunately, as she explored the world of the "new poetry," she wound up in a feud with Ezra Pound. Pound was willing to use Lowell for funding and networking, but wasn't above ridiculing her when it suited him. Nor did other authors refrain from disparaging Lowell in their letters and dinner conversation, even while continuing to use their friendship with her to advance their own careers. As shown by Bonnie Kime Scott in her essay in the *American Modern* collection, Lowell was to D. H. Lawrence "a poet, a friend, and a facilitator, rather than a patron, [such] that she was rewarded his dedication of *New Poems* in 1918." However, Lawrence and others sometimes "expressed doubts about her poetry and the very lectures she used to spread their reputations. They worried that they were not always enhanced by her agency." Regardless of the infighting, Amy Lowell and Ada Russell did have a large circle of friends made up of other writers, society people, and family members who frequented their home, often for elaborate dinner parties. Lowell commanded their attention on these occasions but was also capable of genuine concern for her friends and colleagues.

At the height of her notoriety, Lowell was her own best promoter. She believed that marketing oneself was necessary to sell poetry to the general public. She used her reputation as a cigar-smoking woman to attract people to her public performances, which in turn she used to advance both her own career and those of her friends. By traveling and reading her poems before women's clubs and poetry groups, at society teas and small invitational events, she brought her poems to life and managed to market them to literary magazines and anthologies. Her poems were meant to be read aloud, especially those in what she called polyphonic prose. Here the typescript looked like prose, but the cadences and rhymes created a more musical sound, which she likened to the effect of a symphony, with many voices in one. "Only read it aloud. Gentle Reader, I beg, and you will see what you will see," she wrote in the preface to *Men, Women and Ghosts* (1916).

Lowell borrowed from and expanded upon the work of earlier writers to achieve her aural effect. This dependence upon hearing the poems read aloud has undoubtedly limited their appeal. But the main reason that Lowell is barely more than a footnote in literature can be traced to the 20th-century scourges of misogyny, homophobia, and fat phobia (Lowell was far from thin). It didn't help that as an upper-class woman she was often considered a dilettante, and her death at 51 cheated her out of the longevity that might have given her more time to establish herself in American letters. Even with her penchant for entertaining and traveling, she did not develop a cult of personality as, say, Stein and Hemingway did.

Although she won a posthumous Pulitzer Prize, and two of her poems, "Patterns" and "Madonna of the Evening Flowers" are widely published in poetry anthologies, her fame today is confined to a rather small number of devoted readers. Her lasting contribution to modern poetry will probably be the combination of her use of polyphonic prose and her spare images. While she will never be as widely known as Gertrude Stein or Djuna Barnes, she does join them and other innovative writers who blasted into the 20th century with new ways of looking at and writing about the world. In the end, like Stein, Lowell may well be best remembered not for her poetry but for her public persona as a cigar-smoking iconoclast who broke free of conventional sex roles to become an American original.

Source: Diane Ellen Hamer, "Amy Lowell Wasn't Writing about Flowers," in *Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide*, Vol. 11, No. 4, July–August 2004, pp. 13–15.

Claire Healey

In the following essay, Healey discusses Lowell's contribution to the Imagist movement.

Amygism may be considered a term of reproach, yet, in truth, one cannot overlook Amy Lowell's contribution to the Imagist movement. She



FROM THE MOMENT OF HER FIRST INTRODUCTION INTO THE COTERIE IN LONDON, SHE GAVE TOTALLY OF HER TIME, ENERGY, AND CONVICTIONS; IN HER SELF-APPOINTED ROLE OF SPOKESMAN FOR THE IMAGISTS, SHE WAS AS DAUNTLESS AND INEXHAUSTIBLE AS POUND HAD BEEN BEFORE HER."

was unwavering in her attempt to create a climate conducive to the writing of Imagist poetry and the unpublished essays discussed here attest to her devotion to this poetic experiment.

Imagism was described by Ford Madox Ford as a "slender and lovely little movement." Though this little movement flourished between 1912 and 1917, it was in the summer of 1913 that the Imagists began to hit their stride. In that summer Miss Lowell made her first visit to London, and was suitably introduced by Ezra Pound to the current literary personalities, among them Richard Aldington, H. D., Ford and F. S. Flint. For the next few months Amy Lowell associated herself with the Imagists of London, fully aware of what it meant to be a member of such a select group.

Though Miss Lowell had the distinct advantage of being a relative of the distinguished James Russell Lowell, a descendant of the Lowles of Somersetshire, she had not, at the time of her first London visit, achieved any real distinction as a poet or critic. Robert Lowell expressed these sentiments about his relative in 1965: "My distant cousin Amy, some of whose poetry really is rather good, struck her brothers Percival and Lawrence as being a bit odd. They wished her well, but didn't quite understand what she was about."

A glance at Miss Lowell's adventure with the Imagists, however, leads one to suspect that she did know what she was *about*, for not long after her London arrival she was publicly recognized as an Imagist poet. Pound launched her, along with William Carlos Williams and Skipwith Cannell, in the September issue of *The New Freewoman*. Pound also arranged for the publication of her poetry in the influential magazine, *Egoist*, and promised that "when he got through [with her] she'll think she was born in free verse."

From the time of her first contact with the Imagists, Miss Lowell became an ardent campaigner, demonstrating limitless energy and a cultivated devotion to poetry. However, because of the discord within the Imagist group, together with a certain amount of public indifference, the enthusiasm for the "school" began to wane after Miss Lowell's second visit to London in July, 1914. From that time there was a shift of allegiance and authority from London to Boston with Amy Lowell ultimately importing to America a modified version of the Imagist credo which Pound and his colleagues had drafted in 1912.

By the fall of 1914 it became apparent that a splinter group was organizing itself and eventually H. D., F. S. Flint, Richard Aldington, and John Gould Fletcher were attracted into the Lowell orbit, despite warnings from Pound that the movement would collapse when "pleasure seekers exploited Imagism with cheap imitation." Under Lowell's zealous leadership, however, the splinter group embarked on a program to place before the public its own Imagist poetry and its own reconstituted doctrine. The careers of several poets were intimately involved as Amy Lowell began her promotion of Imagism in the United States.

With the control which Miss Lowell was about to assume came the responsibilities of critic, a role which Pound had previously carried out for the Imagist group. Along with her poetry Miss Lowell wrote a number of critical essays and from thence her poetic credenda eventually emerged. In the role of critic she wrote six prefaces to her own volumes of collected poems, two studies of French and American poetry, and a number of essays, some of which still remain unpublished. In her determined campaign for recognition, her strategy was not unlike that of Pound when he first arrived in London in 1910: "Publicize. publicize."

Among Miss Lowell's unpublished papers are two undated manuscripts, one simply entitled "The Imagists," which was probably written about May, 1915, when, as Miss Lowell writes, "the author of the oldest Imagist poem, T. E. Hulme [was]... in the trenches at Ypres." "The Imagists" is a précis, an attempt by Miss Lowell to define the term "Imagist" and to review for her American audience (an audience which did not

fully understand or appreciate Imagist poetry), the principles of the school.

> This is the name by which a new school of English poetry styles itself, which started about 1908, and has undergone an important development during the course of the present war. In England all literary activity is not at a standstill, as it is with us. Life continues, thought also, imagination also, although the author of the oldest Imagist poem, T. E. Hulme, at this moment, as are many French poets, is in the trenches at Ypres. The English Imagists evidently come from the French symbolists. One sees that at once in their horror of the cliché, the horror of rhetoric and the grandiose, of the oratorical style, that easy style with which the imitators of Victor Hugo have disgusted us forever. As positive precepts, they wish precision of language, clearness of vision, concentration of thought, all of which they like to combine in a dominant image. Mr. Harold Monroe, who has given an excellent outline of Imagism in the last number of the *Egoist*, finds the greater part of these principles in the best English poets and theorists of poetry, from Dryden to Matthew Arnold, but recent poets have neglected them too much. It is in this way that new literary schools are formed; they are always a reaction against the carelessness of the leading school and the worship which it necessarily has for cliché started during its ascendancy. In poetry, even more than in any other art, constant renewal is necessary, and when we see a school endeavoring to do this, above all by invoking eternal, although disregarded principles, we can only augur for its future.
>
> From still another point of view, I could consider Imagism as a proof of the vitality of the English race. To renew poetry "to the sound of the canon of the West" as Goethe said, is a fine proof, not of decadence, but of force. When one has that one puts it into everything.

This unpublished essay was written about the time of the publication of the anthology *Some Imagist Poets*, and in the preface to that anthology Miss Lowell points out the "differences in taste and judgment" which had arisen among the contributors since the publication of *Des Imagistes* in 1914.

In another unpublished essay, "Two Imagist Poets," Amy Lowell further develops her convictions regarding Imagist poetry. Although she seems perplexed that the American public is having difficulty understanding Imagism, she makes no attempt in this essay to explain Imagism. Instead she focuses on two members of her splinter group, Richard Aldington and F. S. Flint, and is graciously generous in her praise:

> . . . my joining the Imagists was a case of "birds of a feather flocking together." I well remember the first poems I ever saw by H. D. and how beautiful I thought them, and I remember the almost painful delight with which F. S. Flint's "London" and "The Swan" affected me. No succeeding reading has dulled my pleasure in these poems; they have taken their place as permanent possessions.

It is interesting to note that months before she composed these unpublished essays, Amy Lowell wrote her own preface to *Sword Blades and Poppy Seeds*. In this preface, written during the heyday of Imagism, she describes poetry as a *trade*. Although she was intimately associated with the Imagists, she still felt justified, while experimenting with Imagism, to use the "more classic English meters." Apparently referring to Imagism, she remarked in that preface that schools are founded on reaction against the old and "the present poetic revival has proved . . . that a great many of the younger poets are seeing things their ancestors never saw."

It was inevitable, if not totally accidental, that Miss Lowell was to become known to her American audience as "the founder of Imagism," an idea to which Pound, in high dudgeon, objected strenuously. But early in her association with she Imagists, Miss Lowell, with characteristic assurance, had confided to Margaret Anderson that she had joined the London literary circle in 1913 in order "to put the Imagists on the map." Her excursion with the Imagists, during the period from 1913–1917 was a way of life for her. From the moment of her first introduction into the coterie in London, she gave totally of her time, energy, and convictions; in her self-appointed role of spokesman for the Imagists, she was as dauntless and inexhaustible as Pound had been before her.

Source: Claire Healey, "Some Imagist Essays: Amy Lowell," in *New England Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No. 1, March 1970, pp. 134–38.

Winfield Townley Scott

In the following excerpt, Scott discusses Lowell's skill and reputation as an Imagist poet.

The spring of 1935 marked a decade since the death of Amy Lowell. Ten years ago, with scant ceremony, even as she had wished, her ashes were buried at Mount Auburn; the prim stone with the name, two dates, and "Brookline" was set over them, and there, beneath madonna



IT WAS EXTRAORDINARILY FORTUNATE FOR HER THAT THE POETIC MOVEMENT CALLED IMAGISM AROSE WHEN IT DID. THE MOVEMENT DID NOT MAKE HER A WRITER—SHE WAS THAT ALREADY—BUT IT MADE HER A SUCCESSFUL AND A FAMOUS WRITER."

lilies and lilacs, lay the last of the most flamboyant lady in American letters.

Her death, like her brief career, was headline news. Almost every one who read knew something about Amy Lowell. She did not become a celebrity until she was almost forty years old, and at her death she was only fifty-one; but during those eleven years she had written nearly seven hundred poems, two volumes of critical essays (and material from which another was made), and an enormous, twelve-hundred-page biography of John Keats. Her reviews and her letters were innumerable. She traveled extensively; she read and lectured widely. In spite of her unwieldy body and her pathetic illnesses her vigor was amazing. There is no indication that, had she lived, her production of poetry would not have continued to flourish. She was planning with Florence Ayscough another volume of translations from the Chinese, she was arranging a visit to Mary Austin to study Indian poetry in the Southwest, she was preparing to write her autobiography.

Everybody, indeed, had heard of Amy Lowell in one way or another: she made a wider personal impression than any other writer of her time. Already before Mount Auburn had received her ashes, Miss Lowell was something of a legendary figure. Nobody who met her could forget that forthright lady of the vast bulk, the oaths, and the cigars. The voluminous publication of her work kept her constantly in the public eye. And there were picturesque stories: of "Sevenels" and its dinners over which Ada Russell presided and at which Miss Lowell was invariably late; of how she worked by night and slept by day—and when the queen slept, the castle held its breath, and when she woke, it burst into a wild activity of butchers and bakers, cooks and gardeners, maids, and chauffeurs, and secretaries. Here were wealth and work combined in extraordinary splendor. The world heard, repeated, and did not forget: the big bed with its umbrella and its many pillows; the special hotel suites with clocks and mirrors swathed in black at her arrival; the bardlings who came and went at "Sevenels"—one of them with his trousers torn by the famous sheep-dogs; of "Winky," the cat; of the champagne raid to supply Eleanora Duse—and all the intriguing, endless rest of the romance.

Now, since the days of these rare deeds, ten years have slipped away—ten years that should provide a fair perspective for trying to decide just how much of her story will endure. Certainly Amy Lowell survives as a legendary figure, and she will continue to do so. Genuinely spectacular characters are too few for us ever to let go such a gorgeous specimen as she. Eccentricity, however, makes for only a second-rate kind of immortality; such was not Miss Lowell's ambition, nor should it be the primary concern of any one who takes literature seriously. The important considerations are those that confront her work, which is no less extravagant than her career. Out of all this "electrical storm" of making verse and prose is there anything left to give promise of endurance in American letters? If so, what is it, and where does it belong? These questions have not yet been satisfactorily answered; yet the time seems ripe for trying to answer them.

To begin with, the fame of Amy Lowell is in a state of excellent health. The collection of clippings kept by Mrs. Russell approaches a score of massive scrap-books, and additions arrive at the rate of one hundred a month. In other words, Amy Lowell is mentioned in print about three times, on an average, every day. During this decade, too, have appeared the four posthumous books which complete Miss Lowell's own work; *What's O'Clock*, the first of them, won the Pulitzer award. There has been no single volume of her collected verse, but *Selected Poems*, edited by John Livingston Lowes, was published in 1928. A large, official biography by S. Foster Damon appears this autumn. No study of her has been brought out except that by Clement Wood, a book which forfeits respect, in spite of its partial truthfulness, because of the gloomy atmosphere of personal resentment which hangs over most of the pages.

So much for the footnotes to fame. On the other hand, the poetic scene has shifted considerably since Miss Lowell's death. There was a

time, in the heyday of the battles about "free verse," when all the experimentalists looked alike. Now they do not. Ezra Pound, the chameleon, seems to have little connection with the imagists of yesteryear, and his literary influence has been second only to that of T. S. Eliot, who, as the most imitated poet and critic of the past decade, has no resemblance whatever to the group of Amy Lowell. Most of those who stood in that mythical "front rank" with her are lost to view. Edwin Arlington Robinson, Vachel Lindsay, and Elinor Wylie are dead; Edgar Lee Masters and John Gould Fletcher have faded badly; H. D. seems as minor as she is remote. Many poets, like Carl Sandburg, are concerned chiefly, or wholly, with prose; and Robert Frost has added nothing significant to his secure reputation.

Beside Robinson's *Tristram*, Stephen Vincent Benet's *John Brown's Body* has been the most noted poetry; Robinson Jeffers has gained, ironically enough, the most publicity—and a position of genuine worth; Edna Millay's prestige, unlike her talent, continues undiminished; Hart Crane and Archibald MacLeish have come to fame, and the first of them is dead. Aside from these, there have been no prominent appearances. Many of the young poets who looked like heirs to the thrones ten years ago have just gone on being promising—or, worse yet, they have not.

It may be, as Mr. MacLeish, I believe, has remarked, that whatever position poetry holds in America to-day is due to the showman's genius of Amy Lowell. Yet much that she herself stood for seems already sunk out of sight. The indeterminable benefits of "imagism" may remain to bless us, but certainly most of its own expressions have little to do with our current poetry. The more prominent magazines have lapsed into the verse habits of the early nineteen-hundreds: rarely do they print anything but competent, rhymed bromides. There is little tumult and shouting compared with the brave days of poetry in *vers libre*. It may not be insignificant in regard to Amy Lowell that this state of comparative silence as to versification has existed ever since her grave received the ashes of a very tired body and brain.

So, in brief, have the ten years since her death gone by. During that time, Amy Lowell has been both affirmed and denied. To a larger extent she has been ignored—an almost inevitable condition following the death of an author and not necessarily significant. Joseph Conrad, a very great artist, leaps to the mind as an apt parallel, but these lapses of public memory have followed all careers, from Shakespeare's down. In other words, Amy Lowell, now that she is dead, no longer commands the place of prominence she had in life, but the hold of her name on the public mind is tenacious. All questions about her literary production resolve themselves into a single, timely query—what will attain to a fairly sure permanence? The answer will be found not in the posthumous decade but, probably by virtue of it, in the one that went before it.

However it is looked at, Amy Lowell's life contained elements of doubt and disillusionment and even tragedy; yet there was some triumph and there was, near the beginning of her career, something which one feels bound to call luck. It was extraordinarily fortunate for her that the poetic movement called imagism arose when it did. The movement did not make her a writer—she was that already—but it made her a successful and a famous writer.

After ten years of conscientious study of verse and the methods of making it, Miss Lowell, in 1912, published her first book, *A Dome of Many-Colored Glass*. That book shows what she had learned. It is completely negligible; only her later fame makes certain of the sonnets of some autobiographical interest. As literature the entire book fails. Its notes are Keatsian or Wordsworthian; they sound only as echoes—never with authority, fresh personality, or even promise. It was as literary, as secluded and unaired, as most of the verse then being written in America. It is not wholly fanciful to suppose that she was thinking of these poems when, in the opening lines of her second book, *Sword Blades and Poppy Seed*, she mentioned her discarded work as "vile abortions." This second volume is really a combination of the old imitations and the new experiments. To pick it up after the first is to be struck immediately with its surety. For whatever it was worth, her own voice had come to her at last.

Thus Amy Lowell, having deliberately set out to learn the craft of poetry, came to the end of ten years with nothing to show but feeble imitations of the great masters. When the windows of the *vers libre* movement were first opened, the fresh air awakened her own work quite as much as it did the rest of American verse. She learned more in one year than she had previously learned in ten. The poetic renaissance brought such poets as Lindsay and Sandburg an audience and fame; to

Miss Lowell it brought a way to write. Even though she already possessed certain gifts which enabled her to appreciate an experimental school of poetry; even though, while not among the discoverers of the "new" poetic principles, she had the perspicacity to join the movement and the vigor to do more than any other in forwarding its purpose—she was, after all, exceedingly lucky. The proof of this good luck lies in the difference in content between her first book and her second.

A Dome of Many-Colored Glass was not merely the lame, unpromising book of a young poet; it was the sort of first book that shows maturity and long apprenticeship. It proves that its author desired to write poetry, that she could find no individual way of writing it, and that, after all, she had very little to say. One thing, however, Amy Lowell could do strikingly well: her skill at making pictures with words was superlative. The essential emphasis in the new school of poetic experimentation was the picture—the "image." Its tenets were antagonistic to conventional inversions, to the hackneyed; they contained much in favor of new forms, of unrhymed and cadenced verse. At the moment of this manifesto, Miss Lowell wandered somewhere in the rear of what was soon to be called the enemy company; the moment after, she appeared in full uniform as commander-in-chief of the oncoming "imagists." It makes a perfect scene. Her move was as wise as it was inevitable; she could not have imagined for herself a more fortunate accident.

From this time on, the victories were largely hers. Not many people would choose to deny that she often achieved technical brilliance; that her experiments in verse forms were sometimes important and always interesting; that she was honest and daring; that she exhibited a productivity the variety and volume of which are, in themselves, striking; that her career as poet and critic—as distinct from any consideration of her own creation in those rôles—was unquestionably one of invigorating helpfulness in a dozen directions. All this belongs to literary history and is not necessarily a mark of literature itself. It remains to determine her real successes as a creative writer.

Too much criticism is written in a mystery-story manner: the critic, honestly striving not to beg his questions, amasses the evidence for his conclusions—or, less honestly perhaps, he strives to surprise and convince all at once at a climax. There is no good reason for wasting words. Amy Lowell's ultimate fame, as far as her own work is concerned, will rest on a dozen short poems and her biography of Keats. Such a record would not be bad, by any means, but this radical subtraction from the whole seems remarkable only to us who are near enough to be aware of the vast bulk of her writings—most of which later generations will easily forget.

The majority of Amy Lowell's poems are poetry of the present tense: the poem and the events seem to be simultaneous. Reflection is generally rapid and casual. It is a spoken poetry and, because much of it is in the cadence which Miss Lowell closely allied to natural human breathing, these qualities are appropriate to the case. It is, consistently enough, a poetry of pictures, and therefore it is not surprising that it is rarely, if ever, a profound poetry. At its best—such as "Lilacs," or "To Carl Sandburg," or "Meeting-House Hill"—it is a poetry of feelings and moods; never is it a poetry of thought and ideas. It is not static or dull at any given point, for Miss Lowell observed keenly and recorded sharply. After the period of her first two books she was almost invariably expert in craftsmanship . . .

Her life, her career, was a magnificent masterpiece. She, herself, must have thought it a failure, ultimately, for she could not be what she most desired to be—a great poet. Her poems are the work of a woman who would have shown an extraordinary energy in any career; they are, even at their most expert, remarkable in the very light of their weakness—for Amy Lowell was not essentially a poet at all.

"God made me a business woman," she said, "and I made myself a poet." In a limited sense she did; but the poet is not quite the genuine article. First, she loved poetry; then, about the age of thirty, she decided to write it. After ten years of work, she appeared in print without the least sign of the real spark—no valid power of observation, no memorable gift of expression. Intelligently, then, she swung into the new experiments and, with a certain skill at description and great vigor of personality, improved her technique till it was a clever instrument. Her most famous poem, "Patterns," illustrates her most characteristic abilities: vivid picturization, verse beautifully handled, and the symbolism of an idea. But the pictures outweigh the idea, the verse is better than the pictures, and the whole

poem does not fuse into fine art. It remains embroidery work.

"Patterns," to be frank, is artificial and theatrical. Much of Amy Lowell's verse—and most of it, of course, is less well done than "Patterns"—must share the oblivion of all writing that has never really lived. As a poet Miss Lowell lacked the profound and vital power of penetration. She never said anything undeniably important about life. She never even implied as much. Her frequent use of symbolism had a varying success. With it, she occasionally secured a fine, macabre effect—as in "Time's Acre" and "Four Sides of a House"; but, altogether, her symbolism has neither the simple profundity of Yeats's poems nor the involved profundity of Blake at his best; it increases the turgid making of pictures.

A few of her things, however, give promise of long life. A dozen times or so—in the poems already cited, in the "Madonna of the Evening Flowers," in "Garden by Moonlight," and one or two more—she wrote not to hide but to reveal herself. She shows a little of what she actually felt, of what she was really like. These are poems of moods, of feelings; yet the author of them had learned how to use words with astonishing effect. Here is not display, but expression; and the very earnestness, the very sincerity, of her feeling matches her command of image, of cadence, and vocabulary. Qualities of technique, in turn, are strengthened and assured. These are not great poems: at best, they put her name a little below such poets as Whittier and Longfellow.

So, after a decade, all that Amy Lowell said seems to threaten to return to the nothingness that it was in the beginning. A little remains, and, as things go in the world of letters, that little is a great deal. Perhaps she thumped her drum loudly in order not to hear the beating of her own heart. It is all of a piece with the oddity of life that only the drum stops.

Source: Winfield Townley Scott, "Amy Lowell after Ten Years," in *New England Quarterly*, Vol. 8, No. 3, September 1935, pp. 320–30.

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This collection describes various movements in twentieth-century American poetry, including the imagists as well as the Harlem Renaissance movement, the New Critics, the confessionals, and the Beats. Beach provides a comprehensive overview of modernism that will help students understand the roots of contemporary American poetry.

Gioia, Dana, David Mason, and Meg Schoerke, eds., *Twentieth-Century American Poetics: Poets on the Art of Poetry*, McGraw-Hill Humanities/Social Sciences/Languages, 2003.

These fifty-eight essays written by fifty-three different American poets, including Amy Lowell, offer various views of the nature and function of poetry.

Heymann, C. David, *American Aristocracy: The Lives and Times of James Russell, Amy, and Robert Lowell*, Dodd Mead, 1980.

Heymann's book examines the lives of Lowell and her more successful brother James and cousin Robert, offering a view of the entire family, their wealth and social status, and the times in which they lived.

Meskimmon, Marsha, *Women Making Art: History, Subjectivity, Aesthetics*, Routledge, 2003.

Throughout much of history, the products of women's creativity were either unrecognized or

considered insignificant. In this book, Meskimmon examines creative work by women from many different cultures and a wide variety of different historic periods.

Munich, Adrienne, and Melissa Bradshaw, eds., *Amy Lowell, American Modern*, Rutgers University Press, 2004.

This book contains a collection of essays about Lowell's position as a poet, the influences of her times, the imagist movement, and female poets of the twentieth century, giving the reader a broad background in which to understand Lowell and her accomplishments.

Pratt, William, *Imagist Poems*, Storyline Press, 2001.

This book is described as the only anthology of imagist poems. Poets such as Lowell, Ezra Pound, H. D., Richard Aldington, and many more are included.

Thanatopsis

WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT

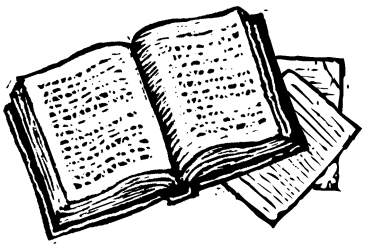
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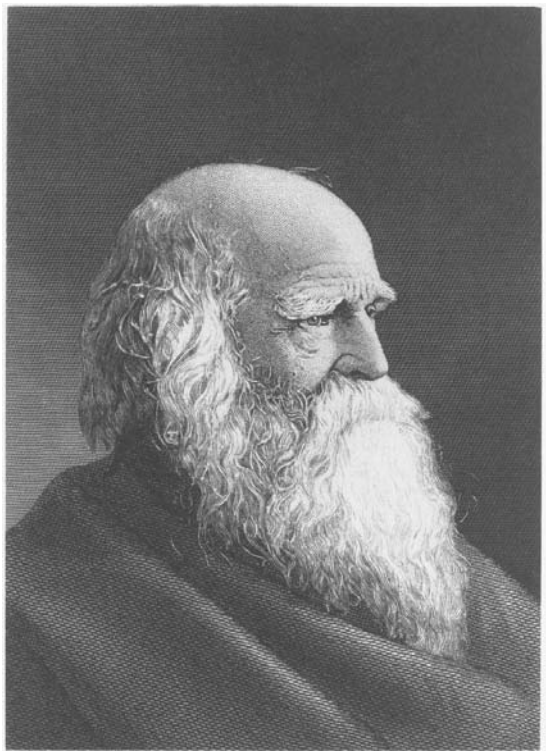
"Thanatopsis" is one of the earliest poems written by the nineteenth-century American poet William Cullen Bryant. *Thanatopsis* is a Greek word that means meditation on or contemplation of death, and the poem is an elegy that attempts to console humans, given that everyone eventually has to die.

The poem went through a number of revisions before reaching its final form. The first version was probably written between 1813 and 1815, when Bryant was still in his teens. It was published in the *North American Review* in September 1817, after Bryant's father showed it to the journal's editor without his son's knowledge. Bryant then revised the poem and it was published in his *Poems* in 1821.

As the best-known poem of one of the most significant early American writers, "Thanatopsis" is frequently anthologized. It can be found in the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, seventh edition (2007), as well as in several reprints of Bryant's work, including *Poems by William Cullen Bryant* in the Michigan Historical Reprint Series (2005) published by the Scholarly Publishing Office of the University of Michigan Library, and *Poetical Works of William Cullen Bryant* (2003) by Kessinger Publishing.

When first published, "Thanatopsis" marked a new beginning for American poetry, and Bryant went on to become one of the most celebrated poets of the century. Although most of his work is





William Cullen Bryant (The Library of Congress)

little read now, "Thanatopsis" endures because of its sonorous blank verse and its dignified plea to humans not to fear death but to trust in the benevolence, continuity, and harmony of nature.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

William Cullen Bryant was born on November 3, 1794, in Cummington, Massachusetts, to Peter, a physician and surgeon, and Sarah Snell Bryant. His father was a cultured, intellectual man who read and wrote poetry, and he encouraged the early literary efforts of his son. Bryant was a precocious boy, and when he was thirteen his first poems were published in the Hampshire *Gazette*. A year later, in 1808, Bryant's poem, *The Embargo, or Sketches of the Times; A Satire*, was published as a pamphlet. It was an attack on President Thomas Jefferson, stimulated by the political views of Bryant's father. The poem met with an enthusiastic reception, after which Bryant expanded it, and a second edition was published.

After studying with a private tutor, Bryant entered Williams College in 1810 but withdrew after one year. He decided to train for the law and joined the law office of a congressman in Bridgewater. In 1815, he was admitted to the bar, and from 1816 to 1825 he practiced law in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. It was during this period that Bryant had his first literary successes. In 1817, his poem "Thanatopsis," which he had probably started writing in about 1815, was published in the *North American Review*.

In 1821, Bryant married Frances Fairchild. The same year, he was invited to give the commencement address at Harvard College. He wrote the poem "The Ages," in honor of the occasion, and it was published with seven other poems, including a revised version of "Thanatopsis," in *Poems* (1821). Bryant was immediately recognized as a new poetic voice.

Several years later, Bryant decided to abandon the practice of law and enter journalism. In 1825, he moved to New York City, where he became editor of the *New York Review*. Two years later he joined the New York *Evening Post*, and in 1829 he became part owner and editor-in-chief, a position he held until his death.

As a political journalist, Bryant supported the Free Soil movement, which opposed the expansion of slavery, and he was a supporter of Abraham Lincoln and the Republican Party. During his years as a journalist, Bryant continued to publish poetry, and the appearance of his *Poems* in 1832 established his reputation as the leading American poet of the day. Other collections of Bryant's poetry include *The Fountain and Other Poems* (1842), *The White-Footed Deer and Other Poems* (1846), and *Thirty Poems* (1864).

Bryant also wrote *Letters of a Traveler* (1850) and *Letters from the East* (1869), which were accounts of his extensive travels in Europe and Latin America. In 1870, his translation of Homer's *Iliad* was published, followed two years later by his translation of the *Odyssey*.

In late May 1878, Bryant gave a speech in honor of the Italian patriot Joseph Mazzini in Central Park, New York. On the walk home he fell and suffered a concussion. He did not recover and died on June 12, 1878, at the age of eighty-four.

POEM TEXT

To him who in the love of Nature holds
Communion with her visible forms, she speaks
A various language; for his gayer hours
She has a voice of gladness, and a smile

And eloquence of beauty, and she glides
Into his darker musings, with a mild
And healing sympathy, that steals away
Their sharpness, ere he is aware. When thoughts
Of the last bitter hour come like a blight
Over thy spirit, and sad images
Of the stern agony, and shroud, and pall,
And breathless darkness, and the narrow house,
Make thee to shudder, and grow sick at heart—
Go forth, under the open sky, and list
To Nature's teachings, while from all around—
Earth and her waters, and the depths of air—
Comes a still voice—

Yet a few days, and thee
The all-beholding sun shall see no more
In all his course; nor yet in the cold ground,
Where thy pale form was laid, with many tears,
Nor in the embrace of ocean, shall exist
Thy image. Earth, that nourished thee, shall claim
Thy growth, to be resolved to earth again,
And, lost each human trace, surrendering up
Thine individual being, shalt thou go
To mix for ever with the elements,
To be a brother to the insensible rock
And to the sluggish clod, which the rude swain
Turns with his share, and treads upon. The oak
Shall send his roots abroad, and pierce thy mould.

Yet not to thine eternal resting-place
Shalt thou retire alone, nor couldst thou wish
Couch more magnificent. Thou shalt lie down
With patriarchs of the infant world—with kings,
The powerful of the earth—the wise, the good,
Fair forms, and hoary seers of ages past,
All in one mighty sepulchre. The hills
Rock-ribbed and ancient as the sun—the vales
Stretching in pensive quietness between;
The venerable woods—rivers that move
In majesty, and the complaining brooks
That make the meadows green; and, poured round all,
Old Ocean's gray and melancholy waste,—
Are but the solemn decorations all
Of the great tomb of man. The golden sun,
The planets, all the infinite host of heaven,
Are shining on the sad abodes of death,
Through the still lapse of ages. All that tread
The globe are but a handful to the tribes
That slumber in its bosom.—Take the wings
Of morning, pierce the Barcan wilderness,
Or lose thyself in the continuous woods
Where rolls the Oregon, and hears no sound,
Save his own dashings—yet the dead are there:
And millions in those solitudes, since first
The flight of years began, have laid them down
In their last sleep—the dead reign there alone.
So shalt thou rest, and what if thou withdraw
In silence from the living, and no friend
Take note of thy departure? All that breathe
Will share thy destiny. The gay will laugh
When thou art gone, the solemn brood of care
Plod on, and each one as before will chase
His favorite phantom; yet all these shall leave
Their mirth and their employments, and shall come
And make their bed with thee. As the long train
Of ages glides away, the sons of men,
The youth in life's fresh spring, and he who goes
In the full strength of years, matron and maid,
The speechless babe, and the gray-headed man—
Shall one by one be gathered to thy side,
By those, who in their turn shall follow them.

So live, that when thy summons comes to join
The innumerable caravan, which moves
To that mysterious realm, where each shall take
His chamber in the silent halls of death,
Thou go not, like the quarry-slave at night,
Scourged to his dungeon, but, sustained and soothed
By an unfaltering trust, approach thy grave,
Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch
About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams.

POEM SUMMARY

Lines 1–31

"Thanatopsis" begins by painting a verbal picture of the many different aspects of nature, which anyone who loves nature is able to discern. When a person is in a good mood, nature has a "voice of gladness," and appears in great beauty. When a person is feeling sad, nature can quickly alleviate that feeling. The poet then ventures some advice to his reader. He says that whenever people are disturbed by thoughts of their inevitable death, they should go out into nature and listen to nature's message, which it offers through earth, air, and water. In this "still voice," nature reminds humans that in a short while, they will no longer see the sun on its daily course. Their physical form will no longer exist, either in the ground where it is laid, or in the ocean. The earth that nourishes them will reclaim them. No trace of individuality will remain; all that is distinctive to the person will be mixed with the elements. The person's remains will be a "brother" to rocks and the earth that the farmer plows. The roots of the oak tree will spread around and pierce the human remains.

Lines 32–58

The poet now embarks on a consolation for the inevitability of death. He tells his reader that not only will he not go to his final "resting-place" alone but he could not wish for a more



MEDIA ADAPTATIONS

- The William Cullen Bryant Bicentennial Concert by the Long Island Composers Alliance includes a track titled "Thanatopsis," composed by Joseph Pehrson and performed by Akmal Parwez with Patricia Leland Rudoff on violin. It was released on CD on the Capstone label in 1995.

"magnificent" place to go. Lying in the earth he will be with all the illustrious dead who have ever lived, including kings, wise men, and seers from the past. Everyone lies in the same "mighty sepulchre." The poet then elaborates on what makes up this sepulchre: the ancient hills, the quiet valleys, the old woods, majestic rivers and "complaining brooks," and green meadows, as well as the ocean. All these natural phenomena are "solemn decorations" of the tomb of all humanity. In line 46, he expands the picture to include the sun, the planets, and the entire heavens, which throughout the ages look down upon this mass graveyard. Beginning at line 49, the poet explains that all the people who are currently living on the earth make up only a small fraction of those who have lived in the past and whose remains now lie in the earth. To illustrate his point, the poet then ranges far and wide: across the ocean to the Barcan desert (which is in Libya) and then westward to the Oregon River. In these solitary places, too, millions of the dead are present, having been buried there since the beginning of time.

Lines 59–82

Having explained the company his reader will keep in death, the poet now asks his reader to consider the possibility that his death may not be lamented or even noticed by anyone. Then the poet embarks on a consolation for that hypothetical situation. Even though life will continue as usual with some people happy and some unhappy and everyone chasing their particular dream in life, everyone will eventually die and "make their bed with thee." The poet then elaborates on this thought. As ages go by, everyone—the young, the middle-aged, the old, even babies—will go to their deaths and therefore lie next to the reader's remains, put there by others who will in their turn be laid in the earth.

Having established his consolations regarding the inevitability of death, in line 74 the poet offers his final advice to his reader: live in the light of that knowledge, and when the time for death comes, go willingly. Do not be like a slave who has to be driven by a whip to work in a quarry at night, but be uplifted and comforted like someone who is going to bed, wraps the bedding around him, and lies down to await "pleasant dreams."

THEMES

Overcoming Fear of Death

For a poem written in the early nineteenth century, in which Christian belief was the norm in the United States, this is an unusual elegy in the sense that it offers none of the traditional consolations to humans faced with their own certain mortality. In "Thanatopsis" there is no Christian afterlife in which the believer can expect to go to heaven and live forever with God. Nor is there any divine judgment in which the good are rewarded and the evil punished. The poet makes no mention of the human soul, and therefore offers no distinction between body and soul in the sense that the mortal body dies but the soul is eternal. In this poem, nothing that lives is eternal except the forms of nature. Everything goes to death after its brief time under the sun; the material world is all there is. Consolation, the strength and wisdom to overcome fear, exists in the knowledge that the prospect of utter extinction is not to be dreaded. The individual will certainly die, no trace of him or her remaining. "Surrendering up / Thine individual being" (lines 25–26) and mingling with the elements, each human will become "a brother to the insensible rock" (line 28). But this is a fate not to be mourned because being absorbed in the continuing beauty and grandeur of nature is the universal human lot. In death, humans are incorporated into nature's harmonious forms, which will endure over the years. What could be more satisfying, the poem argues, than lying with the illustrious dead of all former ages, in the "great tomb of man" (line 46)? According to this point of view, consciousness, self-awareness—the

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY



- Select another poem that deals with death and write an essay in which you compare and contrast it with "Thanatopsis." Possible poems for comparison include "Scented Herbiage of My Breast" by Walt Whitman, "Prospice" by Robert Browning, "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London" by Dylan Thomas, or another poem of your choice.
- Write a poem in which the central theme is death. It can be an elegy to a particular person or a general reflection about death. What is the speaker's attitude toward death? What consolation can be found in the absence of a loved person, or in the face of the inevitable mortality of all humans? You may use "Thanatopsis" for inspiration but feel free to present a different argument or approach.
- "Thanatopsis" underwent substantial revision between its first publication in 1817 and its appearance in Bryant's *Poems* in 1821. Originally the poem was much shorter. In the revised version, Bryant added lines 1–17, as well as the last 15 and a half lines, beginning with "As the long train." Examine the poem with these revisions in mind, and write an essay in which you explain how the added lines alter or develop the theme of the poem. Is the final version more, or less, hopeful? Does it offer more consolation in the face of death? What sort of consolation? Is the consolation based on logical argument or feeling?
- Many of the poems written by the so-called "graveyard" poets, including Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," are set in graveyards, and no doubt many of these poets visited graveyards for creative inspiration. Go to a local cemetery and read the inscriptions on the gravestones. Take note of those that contain uplifting sentiments, expressing hopes of an afterlife. Give a presentation to your class describing some of the epitaphs you saw and explaining some of the thoughts and feelings you had when walking in the cemetery.

awareness of being "I"—the uniqueness of being human, as well as the uniqueness of the human ability to reason, are not qualities that are to be valued above all else. Humans are not superior to the rest of the creation in the sense that the fate of a human is the same as that of a dog, or a cow, or a monkey. Death makes no distinctions. Although survivors, as mentioned in the poem, may mourn the departed, the extinction of consciousness is not a disaster or a catastrophe. There is little reason to prefer consciousness over unconsciousness. Each has its appropriate time and place. In this way the poet seeks to overcome the fear of death and encourage a wise acceptance of it.

Nature as Nourishing Force

Before the poet develops the theme of death and extinction, he presents nature as a guide and teacher, a nourishing maternal force and a presence to which humans can turn when they are faced with disturbing thoughts about death. In order to receive this nourishing support, a person must be open to the messages that nature can impart; he or she must be able to hold "communion with her visible forms" (line 2), that is, to enter into a relationship with nature. If people are able to do this, nature's power to comfort will happen without any effort on the part of the individual. It manifests itself "ere he is aware" (line 8). Nature as a benevolent force is thus shown to be stronger than the human mind, with a power to influence it for the better. The "visible forms" that represent nature's teaching are extolled in lines about the beauty of the hills, woods, vales, rivers, brooks, oceans, and meadows. Nature's grandeur is evoked in "the infinite host of heaven" (line 47). These forms impress

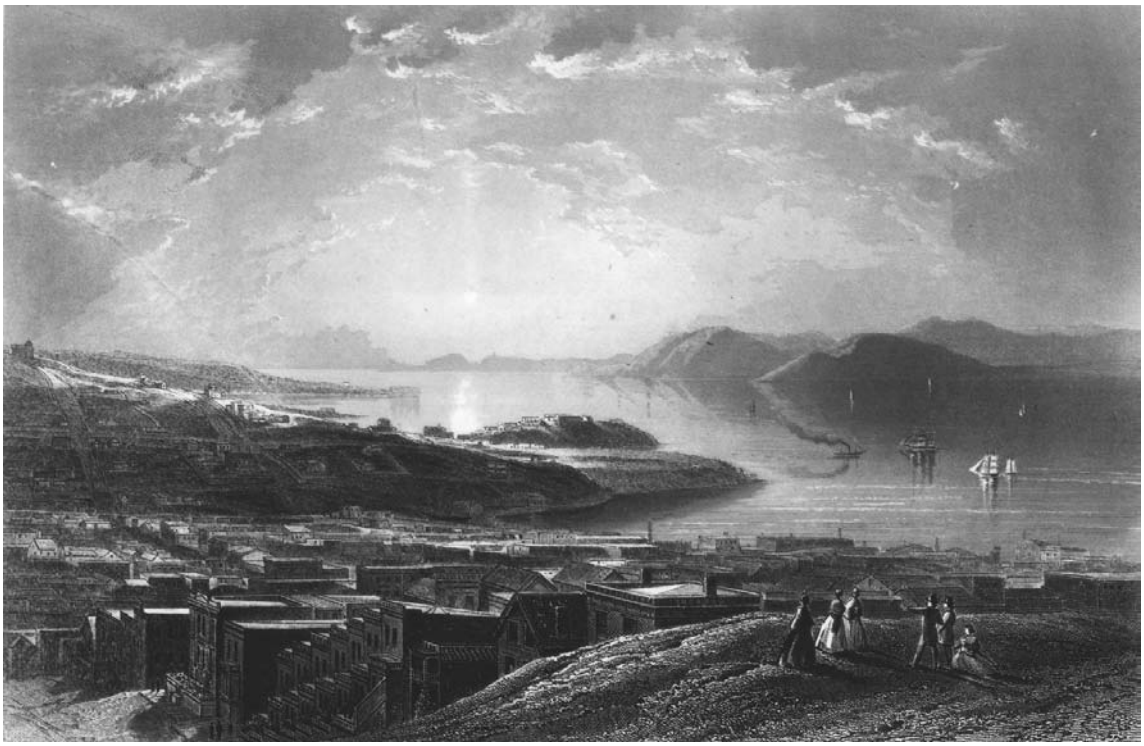


Illustration from Picturesque America *by William Cullen Bryant* (© The London Art Archive / Alamy)

themselves on the human senses and lead the individual to understand and accept that the earth is a desirable resting place for human beings when they die. Nature speaks its message, through its visible forms, in a "still voice" (line 17) that emanates from earth, water, and the air itself. In using the words "still voice," the poet alludes, or refers, to a well-known passage in the Old Testament, in which the prophet Elijah hears God's "still small voice" after the turmoil of wind, earthquake, and fire (1 Kings 19:12). But there is a difference in keeping with the non-religious perspective of the poet. In the Bible, the voice of God is not in the various phenomena of nature but is heard after those phenomena have passed. In contrast, in "Thanatopsis," the "still voice" is the voice not of a God external to nature, but that of nature itself.

STYLE

Elegy

An elegy is a formal and somber poem that either laments the death of a particular person or is a more general meditation on death. Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," a poem that Bryant was familiar with, is an example of the form. "Thanatopsis" fulfills the requirements of the elegy since it is a serious poem that meditates on the inevitability of death for every human being and attempts to seek some kind of consolation in the face of certain extinction.

Blank Verse

The poem is written in blank verse, which is unrhymed verse usually written in iambic pentameter, a line of five iambic feet. A foot consists of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. Line 19, "the all-beholding sun shall see no more," and line 24, "Thy growth, to be resolved to earth again," are examples of regular iambic pentameter. However, the poet does not rigidly adhere to iambic pentameter, and most of the lines feature variations of one sort or another. These include the use of trochees, in which the iambic foot is reversed, a stressed syllable being followed by an unstressed one. An example occurs in the first foot of line 16: "Earth and her waters, and the depths of air," in which the word "earth" is stressed. The poet also employs spondees, in which both syllables of the

foot are stressed, as in the first foot of line 39, which describes the hills as "rock-ribbed and ancient as the sun." Further variety is gained by use of the caesura, a pause often but not always in the middle of the line, indicated by a comma, semicolon, or period, as in line 46: "Of the great tomb of man. The golden sun." The poem also features many examples of enjambment, in which a unit of meaning (a phrase or a sentence) continues from one line to the next without punctuation, as in lines 8–9, "When thoughts / Of the last bitter hour come like a blight."

Personification

Personification is a figure of speech in which inanimate objects or abstractions are treated as if they have human attributes or feelings. In "Thanatopsis," nature is personified in the opening lines as possessing "a voice of gladness, and a smile" (line 4); nature also possesses a "mild / And healing sympathy" (lines 6–7) with which she leads people away from sad and depressing thoughts. The impression given is of nature as mother and caring nurse. Later in the poem, the poet uses a technique similar to personification, known as the pathetic fallacy. This occurs in his description of the "pensive quietness" of the valleys (line 40), the "complaining brooks" (line 42), and the "gray and melancholy" ocean (line 44), all of which present aspects of nature as if they contained human feelings. According to M. H. Abrams in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, the pathetic fallacy is simply a "less formally managed" version of personification.

Simile

Several similes bring out the contrast between fear of death and the calm acceptance of it that form part of the creative tension of the poem. A simile is a figure of speech in which one thing is compared to something else, often by the use of the word "like" or "as." The fear of death is presented in the simile near the end of the poem, when the poet urges a person to go to death "not, like the quarry-slave at night, / Scourged to his dungeon" (lines 78–79). The simile that follows just two lines later, and which concludes the poem, expresses the opposite attitude of glad acceptance. A person is encouraged to approach death "Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch / About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams" (lines 81–82). The simile compares death to sleep, and is the third occasion when the poet uses this simile. The earlier references occur at lines 50–51, about "the tribes" that "slumber" in earth, and line 58, in which the dead lie down "in their last sleep."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Early American Literature

In 1790, the United States, a new nation, possessed few if any writers of distinction. The poets of the day looked to England for their literary models, especially to the neoclassical poetry of Alexander Pope. The most prominent American poets were the nine members of a group known as the Hartford Wits or the Connecticut Wits. The best known of these young writers from Connecticut were Joel Barlow (1754–1812); Timothy Dwight (1752–1817), who was the president of Yale University; and John Trumbull (1756–1843). Barlow is best remembered for his mock-epic poem, "The Hasty Pudding" (1796). The work of poet and journalist Philip Freneau (1752–1832) was also notable during this period. Although these poets did celebrate American independence and contrasted the bright future of the young country with European countries that labored under the weight of the past, they still lacked originality, deriving their literary inspiration from England. After the war of 1812–14, in which the United States defeated Britain and showed it was ready to assume a prominent international role, essays began appearing in American literary journals calling for the establishment of a genuine American literature. When Bryant published "Thanatopsis" in 1817 and then his first collection of poems in 1821, it was clear to many that a new voice in American literature had arrived. Bryant himself, in "Poetry's Relation to Our Age and Country," an essay published in 1825–26, forcefully argued against the pessimists who believed that conditions in the United States in the 1820s were not conducive to the production of great literature:

> . . . All the materials of poetry exist in our own country, with all the ordinary encouragements and opportunities for making a successful use of them. . . . If . . . our poetry should finally fail of rivalling that of Europe, it will be because Genius sits idle in the midst of its treasures.

It was a similar story with the novel. Charles Brockden Brown is remembered for his Gothic novel, *Wieland* (1798), but it was only with the publication of James Fenimore Cooper's first important novel, *The Spy*, in 1821, that a new

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **1820s:** In the early work of Bryant, James Fenimore Cooper, Edgar Allan Poe, and the prose writings of Washington Irving, the United States begins to establish its own literary culture.

  Today: The United States possesses a wide literary culture that represents many ethnicities and groups that were not permitted to be part of the literary landscape in the early nineteenth century. This new culture includes works by African American, Asian American, and Native American authors, as well as literature written by women.

- **1820s:** Life expectancy at birth in the United States is 39.5 years. This is comparable to life expectancy in the United Kingdom (40), France (37), and Germany (41), and higher than Spain (28), Russia (28), India (21), and the world average (26).

  Today: As cited in the *World Factbook*, the 2008 estimated life expectancy for the total population of the United States is 78.14 years. For men, the life expectancy is 75.29 years, and for women, 81.13 years.

- **1820s:** Most American writers of any note are concentrated in the original thirteen colonies. Literary circles are small, and many prominent writers know and socialize with one another. In 1825, James Fenimore Cooper founds the Bread and Cheese Club in New York, which includes poets Bryant and Fitz-Greene Halleck, and other writers, artists, and intellectuals. During this period, New York rivals the Philadelphia of Benjamin Franklin's time as a center for culture and creativity.

  Today: Although New York has long been the center of the American publishing world, American literary culture is widely dispersed. The age of electronic publishing offers the prospect of further decentralization and democratization of the production of literary works. Desktop publishing and such technologies as print on demand enables thousands of individuals and small publishers to make their books available to readers via the World Wide Web. Likewise, writers from across the country and the globe find literary communities online.

American note was sounded in that genre. Cooper is regarded as the first great American novelist. He went on to publish *The Pioneers* in 1823, which was the first of the famous "Leatherstocking" series, featuring the adventures of Nathaniel (Natty) Bumppo (also known as Hawkeye, Deerslayer, and Leatherstocking). One of the best-known novels in that series, *The Last of the Mohicans*, was published in 1826. Two distinguished American writers, Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne, also began publishing in this decade. Poe's book of poems, *Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane and Minor Poems* appeared in 1829, and Hawthorne's anonymously published novel, *Fanshawe*, in 1828. By 1830, American literature was set for a new flowering of writers who could give full expression to the young nation's spirit. Many of those who would become the giants of American literature in the mid-nineteenth century were born during the exact period that Bryant was writing and revising "Thanatopsis": Henry David Thoreau in 1817, and James Russell Lowell, Henry Melville, and Walt Whitman, all in 1819.

The British Graveyard Poets

In developing the themes of "Thanatopsis," Bryant was influenced by his reading of the eighteenth-century British "graveyard" poets. These were poets who wrote gloomy, melancholy poems about death, often set in graveyards. Sometimes employing the kind of imagery associated with the Gothic novel in their attempt to conjure up for the reader an atmosphere that

would convey the horrors of death and the decay of the physical body. These poets are usually thought of as precursors of the British romantic movement. The best-known poem of the graveyard school is Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" (1751). Other such poems include Robert Blair's "The Grave" (1743) and Edward Young's *Night-Thoughts* (1742). Other graveyard poets include Beilby Porteus, the bishop of London, especially his poem "Death" (1759); Henry Kirke White; Thomas Parnell; Thomas Percy; Thomas Warton; Mark Akenside; and James McPherson. Later in the eighteenth century, poets in France and Germany were writing graveyard poems, and in American literature, the graveyard school was represented by Philip Freneau's "The House of Night" (1779).

Bryant studied the work of many of the British graveyard poets. Charles H. Brown, in his biography *William Cullen Bryant*, cites an autobiographical fragment by Bryant in which the poet states that he was inspired to write "Thanatopsis" after reading Young, Blair, and White. Brown points out that the thought and language of "Thanatopsis" shows a particular debt to Blair's "The Grave." However, the graveyard poets did not always dwell on death alone. Often they developed a theme of immortality or at least a hope for an afterlife (as in Gray's elegy) that is not present in "Thanatopsis."

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

When Bryant's father submitted his son's poem, "Thanatopsis" to the *North American Review*, one member of the editorial board, Richard Henry Dana, declared after he read it, "That was never written on this side of the water" (quoted in *William Cullen Bryant* by Charles H. Brown). Dana could not believe that an American poet could have written such lines. When the poem was reprinted in Bryant's *Poems* (1821), it reached a wider audience that was similarly impressed. A review in a New York journal, the *American*, praised Bryant's poems for "their exquisite taste, taste, their keen relish for the beauties of nature, their magnificent imagery, and their pure and majestic morality" (quoted in Brown). When Bryant's book was published in England a year later as *Specimens of the American Poets*, it included a note about the lines of "Thanatopsis" that "there are few pieces, in the works of even the very first of our living poets, which exceed them in sublimity and compass of poetical thought" (quoted in William Ellery Leonard's "Bryant and the Minor Poets" in *The Cambridge History of American Literature*). During the nineteenth century Bryant's poetry continued to be held in high regard. "Thanatopsis" was regarded by many as a religious poem, although some Christian writers objected to it because it offered no hope of immortality. Bryant's reputation as a poet declined after his death until he was considered no more than a minor poet. Leonard's verdict on Bryant was that "he is not one of the world's master-poets, because he was not pre-eminently endowed with intellectual intensity and imaginative concentration."

Although Bryant's poetry continues to occupy only a minor place in the literary canon, many modern critics agree that the publication of "Thanatopsis" marked the beginning of a true American literature, in contrast to literature that derived from the nation's colonial past. Because of this the poem still attracts commentary from contemporary literary critics. In the *History of American Literature* (1983), Marshall Walker argues that although the influence of Gray, Young, Cowper, and Thomson influenced the feeling and language of the poem, "the absence of God and the injunction to live by the dictates of nature indicate a more than incipient romanticism." Frank Gado argues in his essay "The Eternal Flow of Things," published in *William Cullen Bryant: An American Voice*, that "Thanatopsis" is not in fact similar in theme to Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," a poem with which it is often compared. Whereas the elegy is a "lament for unfulfilled lives," "Thanatopsis," in contrast, "celebrates the nothingness of death. Precisely because it is nothing, death makes it imperative to live, to exploit and enjoy life's possibilities unafraid, accountable only to our own consciences."

CRITICISM

Bryan Aubrey

Aubrey holds a Ph.D. in English. In this essay, he examines some of Bryant's sources for "Thanatopsis" and how Bryant adapted these sources to fit his own vision.

WHAT DO I READ NEXT?



- After "Thanatopsis," Bryant's best-remembered poem is probably "The Prairies" (1832), a 124-line blank verse reflection he wrote after seeing the Great Plains for the first time, having visited his brother in southern Illinois. "The Prairies" is an optimistic poem, at once a celebration of nature and of the promise inherent in the young American nation. The poem can be found in the seventh edition of the *Norton Anthology of American Literature* (2007).
- *The Denial of Death* (1973) by Ernest Becker won the Pulitzer Prize in 1974. Becker investigates why humans find it so difficult to acknowledge their own mortality. He outlines a new view of the nature of humanity that involves a fresh approach to life and living. The book has relevance for a poet such as Bryant, who had a strong need to come to terms with death. A paperback edition was published by Free Press in 1997.
- Like Bryant, Walt Whitman was a poet who wrote extensively and passionately about death in poems such as "O Captain My Captain," "Song of Myself," "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," and "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking." Whitman self-published his poetry in a single complete volume, *Leaves of Grass*, which he continuously revised and reprinted. His final edition was published in 1892, the year he died. Whitman's *The Complete Poems*, edited by Francis Murphy, appears in the Penguin Classics series (2005).
- Seventeenth-century English poet John Donne's sonnet, "Death Be Not Proud" (written c. 1610), the last in his sequence of "Holy Sonnets," is an examination of death that takes the terror out of it. Death is not as dreadful as people think it is, and will ultimately be conquered. The poem can be found in *John Donne's Poetry* (Norton Critical Edition) edited by Donald R. Dickson (2006), and many other editions and anthologies.
- "Adonais," by English romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley is a pastoral elegy written in 1821, following the death of the poet John Keats. Expressing Shelley's long interest in Platonism, it envisions the dead poet attaining a kind of immortality by being incorporated into the one spirit that permeates all nature. The poem can be found in almost any edition of Shelley's works, including *Shelley: Poems*, in the Everyman's Library Pocket Poets (1993).

William Cullen Bryant is one of those venerable poets from the distant past who have an established and honored place in literary history but are little read in the twenty-first century. As Bryant's solemn face gazes out from formal nineteenth-century photographs, the textbooks inform us that in those long-gone days he helped to usher in the dawn of an authentic American literature. A giant in his own age, he looms not so large in ours. In his day he was thought to be superior to Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and other poets of the mid-century, but almost no one would maintain such a view in the twenty-first century. His poem "Thanatopsis," however, is one of the few exceptions to the obscurity into which his work has fallen. Regarded as his greatest poem, and written in what Albert F. McLean (in his biography *William Cullen Bryant*) calls Bryant's "voice of eloquent reverie," it still has its admirers, and it has even supplied the name for a contemporary heavy-rock band based in Chicago.

"Thanatopsis," with its secular orientation and its refusal to take comfort in religion, is not quite the sort of poem one might have expected the young Bryant to write since he was raised in a



IF THE POEM IS READ ALOUD, IT IS HARD FOR THE LISTENER TO RESIST THE GRAND SWEEP OF THE BLANK VERSE, WHICH RESONATES WITH A CALM MATURITY THAT MAKES ONE FORGET THAT IT WAS WRITTEN BY A POET STILL IN HIS TEENAGE YEARS."

pious home under the influence of his grandfather's strict Calvinism, although his father's more liberal views and love of poetry provided a counterweight to the stern religious training. It was because of his father's library that Bryant was able to educate himself in the English poetic tradition. He was especially drawn to the eighteenth-century "graveyard" poets, but when he came to write "Thanatopsis" in the same vein, he was not inclined to offer his readers the customary type of consolation. Robert Blair's "The Grave," for example, which Bryant certainly read, is a very long poem about death that culminates in the conquest of death by Christ. Death can be accepted only with the promise that it will be overcome. Similarly, Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," a meditation on the transience of life, offers an epitaph written on the gravestone stating that the man whose death the poet has been discussing now rests with God, having found his eternal friend, which was all he would have wished for. This is what makes Gray's elegy, although it has a poetic power that has made it the best-remembered of the graveyard poems, conventional in its conclusions. It is a pious poem. Conventional Christian piety, however, is far from the mind of the author of "Thanatopsis," and he subverts the thought in Gray's poem in small and large details. For example, whereas in the final stanzas of Gray's elegy, the speaker offers the possibility that a man's absence might be noticed by an old man who has closely observed him in life, "Thanatopsis" moves to its conclusion by asking "what if thou withdraw / In silence from the living, and no friend / Take note of thy departure?" (lines 59–61), making the prospect of death apparently even more gloomy and painful. The conclusion offers no transcendental friend as heavenly recompense for the sufferings man may have endured in his earthly life.

Other than the graveyard poets, one of the main influences on "Thanatopsis" was the English romantic poet William Wordsworth. Bryant read *Lyrical Ballads*, published in 1798 by Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge; there was a copy of this book in the library of Bryant's father. Richard Henry Dana recalls Bryant telling him that when he started reading *Lyrical Ballads*, "a thousand springs seemed to gush up at once into his heart, and the face of Nature, of a sudden, to change into a strange freshness and life" (quoted in Brown). A seminal work in literary history, *Lyrical Ballads* included many poems that would have caught the attention of the young poet in Massachusetts, particularly Wordsworth's meditations on the death of a young girl, Lucy, who is presented as being incorporated into the forms of nature, and the poem "The Tables Turned," in which the speaker implores his interlocutor to allow nature to be his teacher, just as Bryant presents nature as a wise teacher in "Thanatopsis." In addition, the stately, majestic blank verse lines in which the poet of "Thanatopsis" admiringly presents all the varied phenomena of nature surely owes much to the blank verse of "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey," also in *Lyrical Ballads* and one of Wordsworth's most famous poems, in which he worships nature as nurse and moral guide to man. Like Wordsworth, Bryant in "Thanatopsis" advocates an "unfaltering trust" (line 80) in nature, a phrase that would fit easily into "Tintern Abbey" (see, for example, line 133) and is quite in harmony with its theme. It is to Wordsworth that Bryant owes at least part of his fulsome celebration of nature in "Thanatopsis"—not only its beauty but the succor it offers to those who are feeling the burden of life. As McLean points out, in his attitude toward nature, Bryant reverses the usual "contempt of orthodox Protestantism for things of this world."

As with the graveyard poets, Bryant follows his poetic influences only to a certain degree. In "Tintern Abbey" and many other poems, notably *The Prelude*, Wordsworth presents a kind of pantheism, in which the inner essence of man's mind is identified as part of the great mind of nature; the soul of man is, in a sense, the soul of the universe also, and it is this that gives man, in Wordsworth's view, the ability to commune with nature. Nature puts man in touch with the deepest aspects of himself, the infinite nature of his own mind. Bryant will have none of this. Just as

he refuses the orthodox theism of the graveyard school, he declines to take up the pantheism inherent not only in Wordsworth but in many other romantic poets. He is prepared to look death in the eye, so to speak, without reaching for a religious, or other transcendental creed, to comfort him.

Interestingly, in other poems by Bryant that deal with death, he adopts a far more traditional Christian position. In "Hymn to Death," written in 1820, about the same time as "Thanatopsis," he praises death because it avenges those who have been wronged and destroys the oppressors, a moral perspective absent from "Thanatopsis." Moreover, while he was in the process of writing "Hymn to Death," his father, Peter Bryant, died, and Bryant concluded his poem with these thoroughly orthodox Christian lines about the certainty of the resurrection of the body:

> Rest, in the bosom of God, till the brief sleep
> Of death is over, and a happier life
> Shall dawn to waken thine insensible dust.

Such a conclusion is far from the dignified acceptance of the irrevocable extinction of the individual that is the central theme of "Thanatopsis," a theme that Bryant develops relentlessly over eighty-two lines in which he employs all his poetic resources to convince his reader of the truth and wisdom of his assertions. The poem appeals to both reason (what is the point in fearing or resisting the inevitable?) and to feeling (receptiveness to the beauty of nature and its message of harmony and continuity in the face of the transience of all life). If the poem is read aloud, it is hard for the listener to resist the grand sweep of the blank verse, which resonates with a calm maturity that makes one forget that it was written by a poet still in his teenage years. At an age when most young people are still discovering and learning how to assert their own individuality and make their way in the world, here is a poet who appeals to his readers to transcend the smallness of the individual personality in an awareness of the wider whole and the inevitable end of things, who hints that the grand hopes and desires that people spend their lives pursuing may be mere illusions ("each one as before will chase / His favorite phantom," [lines 64–65]), and counsels them to live ("So live, that when thy summons comes," [line 74]) in the light of this sobering but invaluable knowledge. It is an achievement that has justly preserved the name of William Cullen Bryant for each new generation of poetry readers for nearly two hundred years.

Source: Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on "Thanatopsis," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2009.

Robert A. Ferguson

In the following excerpt, Ferguson examines what it meant for Bryant to write nature poetry such as "Thanatopsis" in what was still the American frontier wilderness.

Our first leading poet William Cullen Bryant was a young and rather angry lawyer in Western Massachusetts just after the War of 1812. He wrote verse for another fifty years, but most of his important poems were finished before he decided, in 1825, to try journalism in New York City. These facts, while minimal, mark the creative context of a poet who has been victimized by more false impressions than any counterpart in American literature. Inflated by literary nationalists in his own day, and dismissed as a mere precursor by later generations, Bryant survives, if at all, as one of the bearded schoolroom bards—"the dear old poet" once toasted jocularly by Hawthorne, Melville, and Holmes on a picnic in the Berkshires. Observers looking beyond the stereotype have been drawn to the complications in the later career. For Bryant also served for forty-three years as editor-in-chief of the New York *Evening Post*, leaving critics with an absorbing problem: how reconcile the idle dreamer who shuns worldly strife in poems like "Green River" with the self-made millionaire, the political commentator, the eager campaigner advising Abraham Lincoln on cabinet appointments. Whittier and Emerson were certain that the newspaperman's "daily twaddle" and penchant for the "thistles and teazles of politics" undermined both his virtue and his creativity. Friends countered by isolating the high-mindedness of the poet in a separation of functions. "Not even the shadow of his business must fall upon the consecrated haunts of his muse," claimed John Bigelow in a defense of his business partner. The ensuing debate created the "chaste and tidy envelop of the Man of Letters" that scholars have recently corrected by documenting Bryant's involvements. But the very premises of modern reactions have kept attention upon the public figure of mid-century. We need to concentrate upon the true poet of thirty years before—the more elusive Bryant who wrote "Thanatopsis" and "To A Waterfowl" when James Monroe was president.

"IN 'THANATOPSIS' TRUST WINS OVER FEAR THROUGH AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE AND ARTISTIC CONTROL. EVENTUAL CALM BUILDS LEGITIMATELY OUT OF CRAFT AND VISION. HERE, IN THE DEMONSTRATED PROWESS OF THE POET, IS BRYANT'S HIGHEST MOMENT."

Missing is a firm sense of the creative framework available to Bryant between 1814 and 1825. What kind of poet was it possible to be in Federalist New England during The Era of Good Feeling? We know that Bryant was influenced by Alison's *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste* and Wordsworth's critical essays and *Lyrical Ballads*. But how did Alison's associationist views and aesthetic principles translate within early Republican circles? What did it mean to read Wordsworth and write nature poetry in what was still a frontier wilderness? Answers may suggest an intrinsic context for the poet, but they are not easy to formulate. The generalizations placing Bryant between the neoclassical and romantic impulses of Europe reveal little about his situation in America, and we are only beginning to understand the responsiveness of Bryant and other early American intellectuals to Scottish moralists like Alison. Bryant also faced a different natural setting from that of the English Romantics. In fact, he committed himself to both the difference and the importance of locality and context. "Let me counsel you," he advised his brother John, "to draw your images, in describing Nature, from what you observe around you.... The skylark is an English bird, and an American who has never visited Europe has no right to be in raptures about it."...

The poet's masterpiece "Thanatopsis" depends upon the context we have traced, and the influence is crucial because Bryant wrote a poem quite different from the one modern readers have found. In spite of prevailing interpretations, "Thanatopsis" is not a dialogue between the persona of the poet and a voice in Nature. Even the earliest proponent of a shift in speakers within the poem, Carl Van Doren in 1915, was bothered by seeming inconsistency in Nature's point of view, and every hypothesis since then has presented its own problems. Are there many voices in "Thanatopsis" or only two? Has the poet returned in a concluding section or does dialogue lapse into monologue? Is exchange finally unequal because man cannot hope to reach Nature's philosophical level or because of Bryant's own uncertain craftsmanship? Scholarly debate will prove endless because discussion is based upon a faulty premise and upon too much attention given to the supposed poet of Nature. There is only one speaking voice in "Thanatopsis"—that of the poet guiding his reader through a train of related mental associations toward sublime emotion and a sense of unified calm.

The extraordinary tonal uniformity of "Thanatopsis"—always a problem for those seeking an exchange—offers intuitive support for a unified voice. One can also look to Albert McLean's brilliant insight that the structure of the poem parallels the tripartite division of *doctrine, reasons, uses* in Puritan sermonology. For in sharing the structure, the rhetorical tone, and the directive, didactic thrust of a sermon, "Thanatopsis" must function within genre as a formal discourse of instruction and not as dialogue. Everything about Bryant's background substantiates this conclusion. Like most early republicans, he preferred oratory as a literary form, and his poems rely heavily upon the sustained eloquence of pulpit and platform.

If the initial section of "Thanatopsis" corresponds to the doctrine of a sermon, Bryant's text is clearly Alison's *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste*.

> To him who in the love of Nature holds
> Communion with her visible forms, she speaks
> A various language; for his gayer hours
> She has a voice of gladness, and a smile
> And eloquence of beauty, and she glides
> Into his darker musings, with a mild
> And healing sympathy, that steals away
> Their sharpness, ere he is aware. When thoughts
> Of the last bitter hour come like a blight
> Over thy spirit, and sad images
> Of the stern agony, and shroud, and pall,
> And breathless darkness, and the narrow house,
> Make thee to shudder, and grow sick at heart;—
> Go forth, under the open sky, and list

To Nature's teachings, while from all around—
Earth and her waters, and the depths of air—
Comes a still voice.—

William Hudson has shown how Bryant relied upon Alison's belief in a healing principle of Nature and how the poet may have been influenced in this passage by Alison's description of autumnal decay and melancholy. In addition, Alison wrote frequently of the "expression" of Nature's general form, and he gave Bryant his central premise: "the gaiety of Nature alone, is beautiful to the cheerful man; its melancholy, to the man of sadness."

The Alisonian aesthetics behind this statement also furnished Bryant with a methodology for "Thanatopsis" that makes dialogue between man and his external world extremely unlikely. In *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste* Nature either reflects man's moods or awakens him to an internal process of moral emotion, but it is incapable of intellectual exchange. "Matter in itself is unfitted to produce any kind of emotion," explained Alison the sensationalist. Mind, on the other hand, held a sway that is hard to reconcile with Nature's apparent dominance within "Thanatopsis" in all theories of a dialogue. "Our minds," wrote Alison, " instead of being governed by the character of external objects, are enabled to bestow upon them a character which does not belong to them." Nature is a catalyst at the beginning of mental process; it is "fitted to awaken us to moral emotion; to lead us, when once the key of our imagination is struck, to trains of fascinating and of endless imagery."

This train of inward images and emotions is what we find in "Thanatopsis." In an earlier introduction dating from 1815, Bryant had placed his poem within the "better genius" of a poet who "would thus commune" through a series of mental images. The subsequent personification of Nature in the final version eliminates this device, but a reading shows that point of view always remains in the thought of an observer. Nature in "Thanatopsis" speaks only to one who first "holds/ Communion with her visible forms" in an approximation of Alisonian sensation and perception. The language of Nature appears "various" because it mirrors changes in human emotion and works within the mind of man ("she glides into his darker musings"). In consequence, the still voice of the poem requires an ear already listening to Nature's teachings; it comes "from all around—Earth and her waters, and the depths of air" or through a conscious appreciation of Nature's comprehensive design. Even the noun "Communion"—foregrounded in line two in a striking variation upon the verb form of 1815—confirms Bryant's focus upon individual mind facing mystery. In Calvinist New England the very concept of the Sacrament bespoke mental preparation and introspective analysis of emotion. Bryant was fully aware of the literary tradition in sacramental meditations that turned private religious devotion into poetic experience.

Unity of mind and voice are significant because they point toward the actual strategy of Bryant's masterpiece. "Thanatopsis" is not an exchange between a poet of the woods and his source of inspiration but rather a deliberate movement *away from Nature* by an American in search of other controls. We already have examined Bryant's apprehensions regarding the natural world; here Nature actually becomes the source of terror that Edmund Burke called the ruling principle of the sublime. Read in isolation, the short second section of the poem is a dark vision of Nature's role in the destruction of man.

Yet a few days, and thee
The all-beholding sun shall see no more
In all his course; nor yet in the cold ground,
Where thy pale form was laid, with many tears,
Nor in the embrace of ocean, shall exist
Thy image. Earth, that nourished thee, shall claim
Thy growth, to be resolved to earth again,
And, lost each human trace, surrendering up
Thine individual being, shalt thou go
To mix for ever with the elements,
To be a brother to the insensible rock
And to the sluggish clod, which the rude swain
Turns with his share, and treads upon. The oak
Shall send his roots abroad, and pierce thy mould.

In associationist terms, Bryant is creating the simple, unified emotion—in this case fear—that the ensuing train of mental association and sublime emotion will depend upon. Structurally, we have moved from philosophical assertion to the emotional center of "Thanatopsis"; from the thought of fear —"when thoughts of the last bitter hour come"—to horrifying violation—"pierce thy mould." Bryant's blank verse is usually filled with monosyllabic vocabulary. But in these last three lines only three words are minimally longer in a

relentless march for masculine rhythms that helps to snuff out all personality. From such devastation there can be no recovery in Nature.

Instead, the solutions of the last two sections of Bryant's poem come from the world of man. Organic decay and individual mortality in Nature are replaced by a reassuring commonality in human life. Death becomes a social experience: "all that breathe/ Will share thy destiny." In a typical reach for dimension, Bryant also uses cosmic size both to create sublime effect and to insure an anthropocentric universe. Nature's forms "are but the solemn decorations all/ Of the great tomb of man," while sun and stars shine down as mourners upon the "one mighty sepulchre" that is earth. Even more important, enveloping Nature is soon saturated in metaphoric language from the human condition. The dying recline and sleep on couches in Nature's resting place of chambers and silent halls. Patriarchs, kings, tribes, and caravans fill the forests in a society of the unseen dead. The poet allows his reader an Alisonian control over this world of mental associations. "Pierced" in section two, we are now encouraged to "pierce the Barcan wilderness." The result is indeed the hoped-for calm emphasized by the Scottish moralist:

> sustained and soothed
> By an unfaltering trust, approach thy grave,
> Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch
> About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams.

Lost on modern readers, these comforts are peculiarly interesting in light of the anxieties and concerns we have seen in the early republican. Bryant solves many problems at once in "Thanatopsis." For one thing, the vast reaches of the western wilderness are suddenly populated with a living dead that bring form and even decorum to Nature. The Oregon River —"in the continuous woods/ Where rolls the Oregon"—was a favorite symbol of uncharted frontier for Americans in the first third of the nineteenth century. When Bryant announces "yet the dead are there," he implies a previous human reach and control that will inevitably come again. There is also a striking democracy in Bryant's society of the dead that owes much to republican instincts. The dead kings and patriarchs of the New World are the anachronisms of forgotten and lesser civilizations. But lying now in equality alongside matrons, maids, and speechless babes, they strangely prefigure and now corroborate the republican values of a more progressive era within "the long train of ages."

The very stillness of social vision in "Thanatopsis" is a final, implicit source of comfort to a poet who frequently complained of the turbulent American society and faced an unwelcome vocational decision within it. Writing "Thanatopsis" in the fall of 1815 just before beginning legal practice in Massachusetts, Bryant was confronting the same "employments" that seem trivial and cause loss of perspective in his poem ("each one as before will chase/ His favorite phantom"). He frequently formed his descriptions of vocational difficulties from slave imagery, and the last lines of "Thanatopsis" should be understood as an attempt to rise above such narrow, worldly cares.

> So live, that . . .
> Thou go not like the quarry-slave at night,
> Scourged to his dungeon, but, sustained and soothed
> By an unfaltering trust, approach thy grave.

The problem Bryant wrestled with all of his life was to serve one's community while retaining the saving perspective of the true poet in touch with both Nature and society.

Believing in civic involvement, the man of letters still expected the poet to function above the world. "Thanatopsis" not only revolves around this conviction, it is the ultimate portrayal of the balance Bryant tried to achieve. In this sense, movement from a preoccupation with "the narrow house" or coffin of section one to celebration of earth's mighty sepulchre in section three represents a resolution to accept the world. As the social forms of man circumscribe Nature in "Thanatopsis" they lend philosophical support to the speaker's decision. Bryant's final injunction, "So live," is the declaration of this acceptance, and it encompasses citizen and lawyer as well as poet. Nevertheless, the "unfaltering trust" on which emotional resolution depends is the higher achievement of the poet alone. In "Thanatopsis" trust wins over fear through aesthetic experience and artistic control. Eventual calm builds legitimately out of craft and vision. Here, in the demonstrated prowess of the poet, is Bryant's highest moment. No American poet, with the possible exception of Edgar Allan Poe, would reach any higher for a generation to come.

Source: Robert A. Ferguson, "William Cullen Bryant: The Creative Context of the Poet," in *New England Quarterly*, Vol. 53, No. 4, December 1980, pp. 431–63.



IT IS THIS INTELLECTUAL CONTENT, ABOVE ALL TECHNICAL PROFICIENCY AND SENTIMENTAL APPEAL, THAT MAKES 'THANATOPSIS' STRONG AND MEANINGFUL."

Albert F. McLean Jr.

In the following essay, McLean discusses the influence of New England and the Puritan plain style on Bryant's "Thanatopsis."

While "Thanatopsis" (1817, 1821) has received appreciative glances from literary historians, who view it as a convenient transitional piece between deism and romanticism, and from moralists, who consider it a "broad and noble consolation for death," there is hardly a whisper to indicate that this poem stands within an indigenous literary and intellectual tradition. Too often we have concentrated upon William Cullen Bryant's extreme youth when he composed the poem and thus have lapsed into an assumption that "Thanatopsis" is merely a superior imitation of Wordsworth and the graveyard poets. A somewhat broader perspective, however, reveals that Bryant drew heavily upon his New England environment for both the form of his work and its basic rationality. His debt to the Puritan plain style puts "Thanatopsis" in a new light that offers much to both historians and moralists.

The basic simplicity and orderliness of the plain style are well illustrated by the formal structure of "Thanatopsis," with its three stanzas of blank verse, each dealing with a particular approach to the problem of death. But this tripartite structure had its specific analogue in the leading literary form of the plain style, the sermon. Here the three divisions followed the logical pattern of *doctrine, reasons*, and *uses*, a rigid sequence that had persisted into nineteenth-century Protestantism in spite of the inroads of evangelical preaching and humanistic eloquence. We need not assume that Bryant consciously adapted this form to verse; in fact, circumstances indicate that he stumbled into it quite unconsciously. The sermon, however, was a traditional and habitual way of thought for the New England mind, a mental process which combined the universal truth of doctrine with its application to everyday life, and accomplished this through the mediating function of the "reason."

From Bryant's numerous revisions of the poem it seems clear that the sermon form was not superimposed upon the verse, but grew organically from problems inherent in the material. These revisions cover nearly a decade and indicate the poet's dissatisfaction with both the opening and the conclusion of the work, both before and after its publication in the *North American Review* of 1817. Five lines that he doggedly retained through each stage of the rewriting appear to have contained the source of his difficulty and, eventually, the seeds for the poem's subsequent growth. These five lines speculate on the disintegration of the human body:

> Earth, that nourished thee, shall claim
> Thy growth, to be resolved to earth again,
> And, lost each human trace, surrendering up
> Thine individual being, shalt thou go
> To mix for ever with the elements. . . .

The implicit problem here is the philosophic one for which both Calvinism and deism had offered their solutions: "If the individual forms upon which human experience is based dissolve into mere substance, what order of reality is there beyond substance?" Bryant, like the generation of Emerson, sought a mediating position between the blunt supernaturalism of Calvinism and the commitments of the deists to impersonal, natural law. In order for the poet to make sense to himself and to his times, he had somehow to articulate the assumptions upon which his consolations for death were to be based. No solution to the problem appears in his revisions until after 1817, and the consolations had to rest on the uneasy assumption that a greater reality of some sort existed in which the dead were not "alone," some greater context than that of the "human trace" and "individual being."

Bryant's own recognition of this problem is evident in his hesitant handling of the poem's opening lines. Originally the text was conceived of as an emanation from the poet himself:

> It was his better genius that was wont
> To steal upon the bard what time his steps
> Sought the repose of nature. . . .

This unsatisfactory narrative device was first omitted from the version printed in the *North American Review*, but then restored to

the manuscript on which Bryant worked during the period 1818–1820. In his final reworking of the material on his visit to Cambridge in 1821 he dropped the "better genius" completely and personified Nature so that she might speak to Man. Obviously he had labored to find a "voice" which would give immediacy and dramatic unity to the poem but which would avoid the pitfalls of subjectivity. The voice of genius was highly suspect even when Emerson was to proclaim its authority and the theme was too lofty to be handled by a mere mortal. Nature, of course, provided a "voice" that was universal and detached, that could speak of man's destruction without bias or fear. Bryant's final choice of Nature indicates his appreciation of the breadth of his theme and the necessity of firmly grounding his message on universal truths rather than on personal rationalizations.

This personification of Nature had another result. Carl Van Doren has noted that Nature speaks in two separate states and lacks "full consistency." While teaching a doctrine of hard truth, she also ministers to man in a maternal role. Bryant drew upon the rhetoric of sentimental verse, especially for the "sustained and soothed" of the concluding stanza, in order to soften his stoic message. But this use of contemporary idiom merely qualifies, and does not seem to alter, the basic rationality of "Thanatopsis."

With this adoption of the "voice" of Nature as a dramatic frame, the poem grew organically toward the wider areas of thought suggested by the disintegration of "individual being." In the first three lines we find Bryant's observation that the "visible forms" of nature are unstable:

> To him who in the love of Nature holds
> Communion with her visible forms, she speaks
> A various language....

This emphasis upon the temporal and transient qualities of the visual experience is repeated in references, not only to "form" (lines 20 and 36), but also to "image" (lines 10 and 22) and to "phantom" (line 64). The concluding statement of the poem that man should approach the grave as one who "lies down to pleasant *dreams*" strikes the final ironic chord of Bryant's skepticism regarding things seen.

Quite simply, Bryant had by 1821 worked his way back to the roots of his thought about death. His introduction could state the *doctrine*, vaguely platonic, upon which the rest of the poem would be based: that beyond the deceptive and transient "forms" of the natural order lay a realm of truth known to man only through the exercise of his intuition. This intuition was not the creative faculty of Emerson's "poet," but a passive, receptive channel through which could flow the wisdom of universal truth. And it is not to Emerson's "transparent eyeball" that nature will reveal itself, for it is the ear that must

> Go forth, under the open sky, and *list*
> To Nature's teachings, while from all around—
> Earth and her waters, and the depths of air—
> Comes a *still voice*—

Bryant's distrust of "forms" seems to have led him close to the bias of Thoreau and Poe, who felt that the ear is a more reliable instrument than the eye in the quest for spiritual truth.

Just as Bryant worked his way toward a statement of philosophical doctrine in the beginning of the poem, so did his further thought lead him to formulate the practical application, the *uses*, latent in this view of life and death. His concluding statement in the earlier versions had been little more than a summary of the consolations:

> Thus shalt thou rest—and what tho' thou shd'st steal
> Unheeded from the living and no one
> Take note that thou art gone—they too must share
> In this dread pause of being.

But with the spiritual context into which his personification of Nature led him, the revised version could enjoin the individual to "live" so that he might face death "sustained and soothed by an unfaltering trust." Thus the rational mind, heir to the seventeenth-century divine, would turn from idle speculation about the human plight, not only heavenward in search of doctrine, but eventually earthward in pursuit of the good life.

Although the evidence suggests that Bryant's use of the sermon form was an organic development of his own thought, it is surprising how closely he followed traditional usage. The transitions, for example, are characteristically abrupt. The doctrine, while it is not a biblical quotation, goes to the substitute authority that the deists had recognized—Nature. And the didactic conclusion, although it is less strenuous than most pulpit exhortations, does follow the

familiar contrast between the injunction and the sanction: the misery of the slave "scourged to his dungeon," as opposed to the Socratic dignity of the

> one who wraps the drapery of his couch
> About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams.

But it is the second stanza, the equivalent of the *reasons*, that demonstrates the forensic skill of a Puritan scholar. The entire stanza can be considered a rebuttal of the two major objections that the individual consciousness might raise to the natural destruction of his form. Since Bryant had started his law studies as early as 1811, these were probably responsible for the careful, systematic presentation of his argument.

To the first objection, represented by the harrowing loneliness of the "narrow house," Nature promises that man shall not "retire alone." Not only are there many persons from the past to share the sepulchre, but death is the fate of men everywhere in the present, and even future generations—

> Shall one by one be gathered to thy side,
> By those, who in their turn shall follow them.

Death, far from being lonely, is essentially communal when seen in an historical perspective.

The second objection to the acceptance of death on natural terms is the loss of dignity that a gentleman and humanist might feel being

> . . . a brother to the insensible rock
> And to the sluggish clod, which the rude swain
> Turns with his share, and treads upon.

Here again Nature answers dialectically. The persons who have gone before are men of virtue and station, "patriarchs," "kings," "the powerful," "the wise, the good, fair forms, and hoary seers." Even more than this, all the physical forms in nature lend beauty and dignity to the grave. The earth, sea, and planets

> Are but the solemn decorations all
> Of the great tomb of man.

And the final consolation is that earthly "mirth" and "employments" are but "favorite phantoms," and so fulfillment in life, the wise man knows, is mere illusion.

It is this intellectual content, above all technical proficiency and sentimental appeal, that makes "Thanatopsis" strong and meaningful. And it is intellectual motivation, rather than any mechanical similarity to the sermon form, that puts William Cullen Bryant within the tradition of American Puritanism.

Source: Albert F. McLean Jr., "Bryant's 'Thanatopsis': A Sermon in Stone," in *American Literature*, Vol. 31, No. 4, January 1960, pp. 474–79.

"THE GOOD OFFICES OF *THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW* AND OF ITS EDITORS HAD BEEN EXERCISED AT A CRUCIAL PERIOD IN BRYANT'S LIFE."

Tremaine McDowell

In the following essay, McDowell discusses the impact of "Thanatopsis" on Bryant's literary career.

Early in October of 1816, William Cullen Bryant then twenty-two years of age, arrived in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, to undertake the practice of law. During his first years in that profession, he produced but little poetry. In vain did his former comrade, Jacob Porter, exhort the young barrister:

> "Such merits in thy poems shine,
> Such beauties grace thy matchless line;
> To spread thy fame, then, ne'er decline,
> But court the muses,
> And a bright breathing chaplet twine
> Sans all excuses."

During the last months of 1816, Bryant apparently wrote no verse. In 1817 and 1818, he composed two uninspired odes for the Berkshire Agricultural Society, translated "Love's Power," and revised his translation of a fragment from Simonides and his paraphrase of David's lament for Jonathan. Only twice was Bryant touched by the divine fire—in 1818 when he wrote "The Burial Place," and in 1819 when he composed "Green River."

Despite moments of disgust with the law, Bryant, from 1816 to 1821, was in reality debating the abandonment of verse. Unwilling to injure his professional prospects by any extraneous activities, he discussed the problem in 1817 with his former tutor in the law, the Honorable

William Baylies. The latter, naturally enough, was all practicality: "It is not surprising," he wrote Bryant, "that you should meet difficulty in breaking off all connection with the Muse, as your love has ever met so favorable a return. I do not however condemn your resolution—Poetry is, *a commodity*, I know, not suited to the American market—it will neither help a man to wealth or office." That Bryant was indeed able to adhere to his resolution and avoid the muse, has already been indicated. He would perhaps have succeeded in entirely stifling his genius had not stimulus from *The North American Review* and its editors eventually counteracted the advice of materialistic friends. Bryant's relations with the *Review* from 1816 to 1821, therefore, form an exceedingly important episode in his literary biography.

Prior to one of his departures for Bridgewater, where he was studying law, Bryant in 1814 or 1815 set in motion a train of momentous events, by placing in his father's desk, for his father's eye, a small sheaf of manuscript poems. Among these was the fragmentary "Thanatopsis," composed in 1811. Dr. Peter Bryant found the manuscripts while Cullen, as he was known to the family, was still in Bridgewater. "Thanatopsis" and a second poem Peter Bryant took across the valley to Worthington for the inspection of his friends, Mr. and Mrs. Samuel Howe. "We were greatly delighted with them," Mrs. Howe later recalled, "and so was his father and he enjoyed our commendation of them very much." In all truth, Dr. Bryant was more than delighted; carrying "Thanatopsis" to a neighbor in Cummington, he exclaimed, with tears running down his face: "Oh! read that; it is Cullen's." That moment, to the father's mind, was undoubtedly full recompense for the years of care which he had expended on his son's training in verse.

While the poem was still in Dr. Bryant's hands, Edward T. Channing, Richard Henry Dana, Jared Sparks, Willard Phillips, and a group of their associates took over from William Tudor the control of *The North American Review*. Late in May, 1817, Peter Bryant went up to Boston for his only term as state senator. From the city, he wrote Cullen in June that their mutual friend, Willard Phillips, desired him to contribute something to the new magazine. "I wish," the Doctor added, "if you have leisure, you would comply, as it might be the means of introducing you to notice in the capital. Those who contribute are generally known to the *literati* in and about Boston." Since the son made no reply, Peter Bryant determined to act on his own initiative. He had in his possession in Boston five of Cullen's poems, among them being "Thanatopsis"—three in the boy's handwriting and two transcribed by the Doctor from the much-revised originals. These he carried to the residence of Phillips; since the latter was absent, the manuscripts were left for his inspection. Phillips submitted them to Channing, who found them excellent. He, in turn, read them to Dana, when the latter one day came into Boston from Cambridge. Dana, much excited, interrupted the reading of "Thanatopsis" with an exclamation which, from him, was supreme praise: "That was never written on this side of the water!" Despite the belief that Bryant derived his title either from Kirke White's "Thanatos" or from the Greek, the poem in reality reached Boston untitled; the word "Thanatopsis" was now coined among the editors of the *Review*.

Sparks did not see the poems for some time, for, in September, he was much distressed because no poetry save inferior stuff was available for the current issue. Phillips, however, reassured him; and when *The North American Review* for September came from the press, five of the seven poems which it contained were by Cullen Bryant. These were a translation from Horace, an imitation of the same author, four stanzas on death erroneously printed as a portion of "Thanatopsis,""Thanatopsis" itself, and "A Fragment." Such are the facts, as far as they can now be ascertained, of the much debated publication of Bryant's most famous poem.

Various circumstances led the editors of the *Review* to assume that "Thanatopsis" was the work of Peter Bryant. First of all, the latter had left the poems at the home of Phillips, with his name but no word concerning their authorship. Again, "Thanatopsis" and the accompanying stanzas on death were found in the Doctor's autograph, while the remaining poems were in another hand. The issue was further clouded by the fact that Peter Bryant's note prefacing the translation from Horace contained no specific reference to his son's authorship of that piece. Finally, if Dana doubted whether "Thanatopsis" could have been composed by any American, his disbelief would have been increased rather than lessened had he been asked to accept as author the son rather than the father. Cullen Bryant

learned of this misunderstanding in December, when Phillips wrote him as follows: "Your 'Fragment' was exceedingly liked here; among others Mr. Channing spoke very highly of it. All the judges here say your fragment and your Father's Thanatopsis are among the very best poetry that has been published in this country." Dr. Bryant in February, 1818, informed Cullen that he had "set Phillips right" as to the authorship of the poem. Channing, however, was still laboring under the same misapprehension in March, 1819, when, in writing to the son, he expressed the hope that the *Review* might have "more pieces from you & your father." As for Dana, his incredulity had taken him to the senate chamber to inspect Peter Bryant. The Doctor, he discovered, had "a finely marked and highly intellectual-looking head . . . But with all my examination I could not discover 'Thanatopsis' in it." Eventually persuaded by the misinformed majority that Peter Bryant had indeed composed the poem, he remained ignorant of the true identity of the writer until 1821, when he spoke to Cullen Bryant of the excellence of his father's "Thanatopsis." Cullen corrected him, and they enjoyed, according to Dana, a hearty laugh over the latter's "physiognomical perplexity." However, the anonymity of all work printed in the *Review* and this resultant confusion of identity made it impossible that any immediate personal recognition should come from Boston to the author of "Thanatopsis."

"Thanatopsis," handicapped by the inferior lines prefixed to it, caused no furore in the literary world at large. Although the leading spirits among the group who supported the *Review* were indeed enthusiastic, none of the newspapers to which Bryant contributed reprinted his new verses, and apparently they passed unnoticed in New York. The general public, in fact, had no idea that a great poem had been produced on this side the Atlantic. As Dana later observed, such compositions were in that day too "high metaphysical" for the *"ordinaries."*

Although Cullen Bryant was gratified by recognition from Boston, he did not at once resume the writing of poetry. However, he became an active supporter of *The North American Review*. At Great Barrington, he was instrumental in the organization of a literary club; and in October, 1817, he forwarded to Phillips a subscription to the *Review* in the name of the new society. The financial resources of the magazine were apparently meager, for instead of supplying a complimentary copy to this substantial contributor, Phillips wrote: "As for pay, let your father when he comes down in the winter pay two dollars and a half which will be the price of this volume." Nearly a year later, however, Edward Channing informed Bryant concerning the current subscription notice: "With this you have no concern. I wish you to accept a copy of each no. & I will see that it is regularly forwarded." That Bryant himself was forced to control personal expenditures as carefully as did Phillips the exchequer of the *Review*, appeared in 1819 when he wrote Channing to this effect:

> "I return you one of the Numbers for December. I supposed, when I received it, that it was sent to me by some mistake, and I ought to have returned it before. It is true that I subscribed for the work at first, in behalf of a Literary association—but that association came to nothing before I received my first Number—so I was left to take it on my own account."

Fortunately, no false pride constrained the struggling young lawyer from emulating his mother's frugality.

More significant, and in the end highly fruitful, was the interest now manifested in the poet by the editors of *The North American*. In his letter of December 2, 1817, Phillips begged, on behalf of the *Review*, that Bryant would "encourage it by writing for it." The latter responded through his father, to whom he wrote on January 8, 1818:

> "I have sent you a correct copy of my version of 'The Fragment of Simonides,' and another little poem which I wrote while at Bridgewater, which you may get inserted if you please in that work. I would contribute something in prose if I knew on what subject to write."

To the two poems was added, either by Cullen or by his father, "To a Waterfowl." As had been the case with Bryant's first contributions to the *Review*, these three poems were now taken to Boston by Dr. Bryant in person and there delivered to Phillips. Duly approved and admired by the editors, they formed the entire poetical contents of the *Review* for March, 1818. Cullen Bryant had again scored something of an anonymous triumph, but he still lacked public recognition.

In February, 1818, while Peter Bryant was still in Boston, Phillips addressed to him a note, suggesting that Brown's *Essay on American Poetry* "is a very good subject for Cullen." Phillips, after requesting that the son review the

book for the June issue of *The North American*, added: "Let him, if he has the means, give a short history of and criticism of our poetry." Allen's and Eliot's biographical dictionaries Phillips suggested as reference books. When Dr. Bryant forwarded the note to Great Barrington, his son replied that he would attempt a review if he could procure a copy of the essay. "Luckily," Bryant wrote later, "I found the volume in this neighborhood, and escaped throwing away my money on it. It is poor stuff." The vigilant Phillips, hearing nothing in the interim from the Bryants, wrote the son on April 2 concerning the review: "I hope you consented to undertake it. We should like to have it for July." When Cullen on the fourteenth agreed to furnish the desired article, the indefatigable Phillips promptly wrote again, urging that the manuscript be in his hands at the earliest moment possible. The editor's diligence was at length rewarded; and "An Essay on American Poetry" appeared in the *Review* for July, 1818.

Bryant made careful preparation for the writing of this, his first prose contribution to what was, despite its limited circulation, the leading American journal of that day. He took stock of his own knowledge of American poetry; and he visited the homestead at Cummington to consult his father and his father's library. In the essay which he at last produced, Bryant made short work of Solyman Brown of Litchfield and his poems. The "Essay," a versified survey of classical and modern poetry and criticism, he riddled with unsparing sarcasm. The fugitive poems and notes which followed, he rendered absurd by the quotation of damning excerpts. And finally, Bryant succinctly disposed of the unhappy author: "Mr. Brown," he concluded, "has fallen into a great mistake in thinking himself qualified to write a book." The boy who had penned "The Embargo" a decade earlier had, as a young lawyer, lost none of his asperity.

The comments on poetry in America with which Bryant prefaced his extermination of Solyman Brown were, in reality, of more import than was the latter's entire volume. Bryant first of all protested against both the "unmerited contumely" which had been meted out to American literature by critics abroad, and also "the swaggering and pompous pretensions" of patriotic eulogists at home. With excellent judgment, he appealed for a new standard among authors and critics alike:

> "The poetical adventurer should be taught that it is only the productions of genius, taste, and diligence that can find favour at the bar of criticism—that his writings are not to be applauded merely because they are written by an American, and are not decidedly bad; and that he must produce some more satisfactory evidence of his claim to celebrity than an extract from the parish register."

In estimating his predecessors in verse, Bryant revealed his own ideas of what constituted true poetry. In his opinion, Trumbull lacked scrupulousness in diction; Dwight was artificial and mechanical; Barlow belied his early promise by deteriorating into verbosity and meretricious decoration. Paine, possessing remarkable force and exuberance of imagination, wandered off into conceits and the false sublime. "He was a fine, but misguided genius," was Bryant's conclusion. In contrast to the defects which marred the work of these men, the reviewer enthusiastically commended the poetical virtues of William Cliffton, singling out for praise the purity of his diction and the variety of his imagery, his delicacy and polish, his faithfulness to nature and to human emotions, and the elegance of his fancy. Taken as a whole, the essay indicated that such a writer as Cliffton was, in Bryant's mind, America's nearest approximation to the ideal poet.

Impressed by Bryant's ability, Edward Channing now addressed to him two letters, both calculated to delight an unknown young barrister. In September, 1818, Channing expressed the thanks of the proprietors of the *Review* for his essay on American poetry. "I doubt not," Channing went on to say, "you have heard in many ways of the great pleasure which our readers have received from that & your earlier communications to the work." To remove the impression that any American literary journal must inevitably be uneven in quality and short in life, he appealed to Bryant for further aid: "Excuse me then, when I ask you to spare a little time from your profession, & give it to us." Either a review or an essay would be very welcome; as for poetry, the editors were finding it difficult to secure enough good verse to maintain a department. As Bryant realized, this was praise indeed; and he lost no time in replying.

> "I am much gratified [he wrote] with the favourable reception that my contribution to the North American Review has met with . . . — as well as with the obliging manner in which it has been communicated to me, and feel myself happy if I may be esteemed to have done anything for the literature of my country."

As for further contributions, he had been unable to complete an essay on which he was working; he enclosed, however, another of the poems written before he entered the law; namely, "The Yellow Violet." Not long thereafter, it appears that Bryant forwarded to the *Review* an essay, "On the Happy Temperament"—probably the composition with which he was busy in September.

Bryant received in the following March a second letter from Channing, now editor-in-chief of *The North American*. The poet, it developed, had set so high a standard with his own contributions that the *Review* could no longer maintain a section of verse. "Unless you will supply more," Channing explained, "or set some other poet to work who will be worthy of your company, I fear our poetical department must be given up." He asked permission to keep "The Yellow Violet" and secure its publication elsewhere. Channing continued in a most flattering vein, urging Bryant to abandon anonymity and to come before the public with a volume of verse:

> "A poet stands in no need of hints or instructions; but may I not ask you, if we may not expect a volume from you in spite of your profession?... If I had any right or wish to commend you—in your own hearing—I should have urged your obligation to write by comparing you with greater men than we can boast of. Excuse me, if I have interfered with what belongs only to yourself, & charitably ascribe it to my sense of your merits, & my wish to see our home genius more active in the good cause."

Channing then asked for a review of Paulding's *The Backwoodsman* and an original essay for *The North American*, and stated that two complimentary copies of the magazine were now being sent to Great Barrington. In concluding, Channing very properly apologized for his verbosity. On receipt of this second eulogy, Bryant was all but overwhelmed. Replying, he admitted his disconcertment:

> "To commendations so flattering as you are pleased to bestow on me, coming from such a quarter, I hardly know what to say. Had you seen more of those attempts of mine concerning which you express yourself so favorably, your opinion would perhaps have been different."

As for publishing, Bryant was equally modest:

> "I may perhaps, some time or other, venture a little collection of poetry in print,—for I do not write much—and should it be favorably received, it may give me courage to do something more."

The project of publishing thus became firmly rooted in the poet's mind.

Bryant's second prose contribution to the *Review* appeared in the following June; namely, his essay, "On the Happy Temperament." Just as his review of Brown's volume contained Bryant's critical credo, so this essay contained certain essential tenets of his mature philosophy of life. He was careful to point out that he ever desired "to promote innocent and well-timed cheerfulness;" never did he wish "to throw the slightest shade over those weak and wintry glimpses of happiness which are sometimes permitted to find their way to this earth." And yet, there is truly little opportunity for rational joy unless one closes his eyes to the inequalities and evils of society, to the mental and physical suffering about him, and to the continual severing of the ties of friendship and love. The knowledge that his own father was soon to die was evidently in Bryant's mind: "But hard and bitter," he said, "is the trial when we see those whom we love drawn toward the grave by the irresistible progress of disease and decay." This decorous lawyer who now set himself down as an enemy of joviality was a far different person from the young student who had patronized Worthington grogshops and frequented Bridgewater balls. "In short," this new Bryant austerely declared, "the melancholy feelings... are the parents of almost all our virtues. The temperament of unbroken cheerfulness is the temperament of insensibility." Fortunately, the young gentleman was not always thus dominated by the contemporary cult of tearfulness.

In 1819, James T. Hillhouse published a poetic drama, *Percy's Masque;* in October of the following year, Bryant reviewed the play in *The North American*. Although there is no evidence that the Berkshire lawyer had as yet seen a formal stage production, he commented with assurance on the dilemma of the dramatist, caught between the practical demands of theatrical effectiveness and the abstract standards of artistic excellence. Bryant's sole venture in the drama, a farce entitled *The Heroes*, completed two years later, was a failure; his poems, likewise, were usually more successful when he spoke in his own person than when he attempted dramatic monologues. What the intensely concentric Bryant lacked was in this review succinctly outlined in his own characterization of the ideal dramatist:

> "But the dramatist must, so to speak, put off his identity, and put on the characters which he describes. He must bring before him the personages of his plot, and see their faces and hear their voices in his retirement; he must do more; he must enter into their bosoms, he must feel with their hearts and speak with their lips. Now, it is obvious, all this demands great versatility of talent, as well as a state of strong and peculiar mental excitement."

As for *Percy's Masque*, it was commended for the characteristics which at the moment seemed to Bryant to be essential; namely, simplicity of plot, consistency in characterization, and restraint in diction.

A somewhat puzzling paper, "On the Use of Trisyllabic feet in Iambic Verse" concluded, in September, 1821, the series of essays which Bryant contributed during this period to *The North American Review*. From this essay, it is possible to deduce little save the obvious inference that Bryant was interested in the technique of his avocation.

The North American Review had now published, in the course of nine issues, a total of four says and eight poems from Bryant's pen. Superficially, this signified that the young gentleman had been given an opportunity to publish "Thanatopsis" and to air his opinions on poetry and on life. In reality, the results were of the utmost moment to his career as a poet. First of all, Bryant was stimulated to resume composition, producing in 1820 a group of poems addressed to Miss Fanny Fairchild, represented by "Oh Fairest of the Rural Maids"; five contributions to a Unitarian hymnal; "Hymn to Death"; and "A Winter Piece"; and in 1821, "The West Wind"; "A Walk at Sunset"; and "The Ages". Secondly, the official approval of the *literati* of Boston came in April of 1821, in the form of a letter from William J. Spooner, informing Bryant that he had been unanimously chosen to deliver the annual poem before the next meeting of the Phi Beta Kappa society of Harvard University. Finally, a printer having been secured while Bryant was in Cambridge for the Harvard commencement, this notice appeared in *The Columbian Centinel* for September 12, 1821:

> *BRYANT'S POEMS*
> POEMS by William Cullen Bryant, including a Poem delivered before the Phi Beta Kappa Society—just published, and for sale at GREENLEAF'S Statinary Store,
> No. 4, Court-Street.—Price 31 cents.

Anonymity was done with; Bryant had unequivocally presented himself before the public as a poet—in his own person before a Cambridge audience and in his pamphlet, *Poems*, before the world.

The good offices of *The North American Review* and of its editors had been exercised at a crucial period in Bryant's life. Making themselves felt when the poet had all but disappeared in the lawyer, Channing and Sparks, Phillips and Dana quickened Bryant's flagging interest in letters, then turned his mind toward publication, and at last inspired him to renewed creative activity. It was these four gentlemen, likewise, who secured for Bryant the honor of appearing at Harvard; and it was they, again, who saw his volume through the press and directed its sale, in the rôle of modern publishers. Bryant never forgot this indebtedness. Channing and Sparks were his life-long friends; and Dana became his only intimate and confidant. Of Phillips, Bryant in 1873 wrote as follows:

> "The publication of the poems which you mention, through his agency, was properly my introduction to the literary world, and led to my coming out with the little volume which you and he and Channing encouraged me to publish, and which he so kindly reviewed in the 'North American.' To me he was particularly kind—unconsciously so, as it seemed; it was apparently a kindness which he could not help."

This "distant voice of kindness" from the staff of the *Review*, by keeping the youth Bryant within the field of *belles lettres* during the critical period from 1816 to 1821, made it certain that, during the half-century which followed, the man Bryant would never again consider desertion of the muse.

Source: Tremaine McDowell, "Bryant and *The North American Review,*" in *American Literature*, Vol. 1, No. 1, March 1929, pp. 14–26.

John William Scholl

In the following essay, Scholl addresses the historical significance of the setting of "Thanatopsis."

> Take the wings
> Of morning, pierce the Barcan wilderness,
> Or lose thyself in the continuous woods
> Where rolls the Oregon, and hears no sound.
> Save his own dashings—yet the dead are there.
>
> William Cullen Bryant, "Thanatopsis."

The Barcan wilderness and the Oregon are the only place-names used in the whole poem. Readers may have frequently asked themselves why just these particular places should have occurred to the poet's mind, when he wished to symbolize the whole world as a sepulcher of the dead.

The explanation is to be found in the current and local interest which two events had for the poet.

Bryant was born in Cummington in the northwestern part of Hampshire county, Mass., and was educated there and later at Williams College in the northwestern corner of Berkshire county. His chief reading, aside from his father's well-stocked library, was the Hampshire *Gazette*. His outlook on the world was therefore much colored by Connecticut valley happenings.

In this same valley, in Hampden county, town of Brimfield, lived Gen. William Eaton. He had been a soldier with Mad Anthony Wayne in Ohio, and on resigning his military commission in 1798 was appointed Consul to Tunis. He was engaged there in difficult and tedious negotiations with the Bey, to prevent him from harassing unprotected American commerce in the Mediterranean. In June, 1803, he returned to the United States. As war had broken out with Tripoli because of piracy upon our commerce, Eaton was sent back June, 1804, as Naval Agent of the United States, accompanying our fleet of five vessels under command of Com. Barron. In the fall of 1805 Gen. Eaton landed in Alexandria. Here he learned that Hamet Pasha, the rightful sovereign of Tripoli, than deposed and in exile, was in upper Egypt. Wishing to get into communication with the Pasha, he proceeded with three men by Nile-boat to Cairo. Here he employed a skillful young fellow, a sort of Proteus, named Eugene Leitensdorfer, to bring Hamet to the American station. This man, accompanied by an attendant and two dromedaries, penetrated the desert, traveling night and day, feeding the animals balls of meal and eggs, reached safely the Mameluke camp, and brought the Pasha and 150 retainers back with him.

In March, 1805, Gen. Eaton started with his little army from Alexandria. It consisted of six private marines, twenty-five cannoneers, thirty-eight Greeks, and some Arab cavalry, besides the Pasha's party, in all about 400 men. The baggage was carried on 107 camels. This strange army was now to march into the interior and cooperate from the rear with the American fleet which was to attack from the front. With the greatest hardship, Eaton's motley company traversed the desert of Barca for 600 miles, facing the double danger of starvation and mutiny among such a mixed and undisciplined body of soldiery. They made the trip in nineteen days, in itself a remarkable feat, and helped the fleet as planned. On March 27 a two-hour battle against odds of ten to one ended in the capture of the city of Derne, and led soon after to a treaty with the thoroughly frightened reigning Pasha of Tripoli.

In November, 1805, Gen. Eaton returned to the United States, and was received with fêtes in his honor. The press was everywhere filled with laudatory notices of his Barcan enterprise and bravery. Massachusetts voted him a gift of 10,000 acres of land as a recognition of his services.

Bryant (b. 1794) was at that time an intelligent lad of eleven years enjoying the advantages of an unusual home. When we remember that Jefferson's "Embargo" in 1808 was the object of a lengthy satirical polemic in verse in the poet's fourteenth year, we should not be surprised at the lad's interest in national movements at so early an age. He was deeply impressed by the events themselves, and particularly by the local celebrations of that march through the desert of Barca.

The other allusion is possibly more familiar. The Oregon was the name first given to the Columbia river, whose mouth had been discovered and entered a few miles by Capt. Gray. After the purchase of Louisiana in 1803, President Jefferson dreamed of the possibility of ascending the newly-acquired Missouri river to its source, which might lie somewhere near the source of that other magnificent western river, whose greatness was apparent from its size and its current at the mouth. He secured a grant of funds for the expedition and sent his own private secretary, Capt. Lewis, as leader, to try to make the dream come true. The expedition was made in 1804–6. Several circumstances caused this event to take hold of the American imagination with great intensity; the magnitude and daring of the enterprise, its significance as a feature of American empire-building, its commercial importance in opening up a field for successful American rivalry with the British and Russians in the profitable fur trade with China, etc. When the details of the voyage became known, about

1807, the regions traversed stood out in the popular fancy as the "Great Lone Land," a place where the party had traveled four long months without seeing a single human being not of their own party.

Bryant, aged thirteen, must have been carried away like the rest of Americans with the remarkable world-romance of the voyage and the new region.

"Thanatopsis" was written in 1811. It is no wonder then that Barca and Oregon became concrete symbols of East and West, and both of uninhabited wastes which death might be supposed to spare—but does not.

Source: John William Scholl, "On the Two Place-Names in 'Thanatopsis,'" in *Modern Language Notes*, Vol. 28, No. 8, December 1913, pp. 247–49.

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This is a collection of twenty-four essays written for the general reader. Taken as a whole, the essays present an overview of major social, political, economic, and cultural developments in the United States in the nineteenth century.

Krapf, Norbert, ed., *Under Open Sky: Poets on William Cullen Bryant*, Fordham University Press, 1986.

This is a collection of eleven short essays and fourteen poems, all by contemporary American poets, discussing and reflecting on the poetry of Bryant. Two of the poems, by Philip Appleman and Linda Pastan, were directly inspired by "Thanatopsis."

Muller, Gilbert H., *William Cullen Bryant: Author of America*, State University of New York Press, 2008.

This is a new biography of Bryant that shows the full extent of his influence on the cultural life of nineteenth-century America. Muller draws on previously unpublished letters as well as Bryant's extensive journalism for the New York *Evening Post* to create a vivid portrait of Bryant's life and times.

Rio-Jelliffe, R., "'Thanatopsis' and the Development of American Literature," in *William Cullen Bryant and His America: Centennial Conference Proceedings 1878–1978*, edited by Stanley Brodwin, Michael D'Innocenzo, and Joseph G. Astman, AMS Press, 1983, pp. 133–54.

Rio-Jelliffe discusses Bryant's theory of poetry and suggests that he is a precursor of the romantic movement in the United States. She examines the structure and language of "Thanatopsis," finding complexities such as contradiction and paradox.

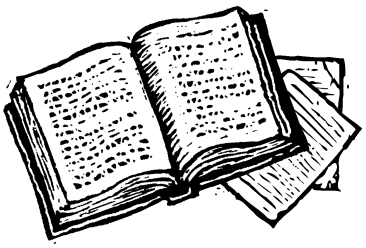
The Walrus and the Carpenter

LEWIS CARROLL

1871

"The Walrus and the Carpenter" first appeared in 1871, in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, the sequel to his *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). The verse is recited to Alice by Tweedledee, one of "two fat little men," Tweedledee and Tweedledum, whom Alice encounters as she is seeking the way out of the forest of confusion through which she has been wandering. Inside *Through the Looking Glass*, "The Walrus and the Carpenter" reflects the world that Alice has entered when she went through the looking glass to the other side of it, where everything is perversely inverted, accounting for what seems to be the nonsense of the verse. Additionally, the poem functions, like the other famous set of verses in *Through the Looking Glass*, "The Jabberwocky," the way a cadenza does in a concerto, to show off the composer's technical virtuosity and mastery of form for the delight of the listeners or, in this case, the readers.

Extricated from its context and considered as a freestanding work, "The Walrus and the Carpenter" is a bizarre animal fable seemingly devised by topsy-turvy Aesop, offering a moral warning against following seductive strangers. Beyond that, however, it is suggestive of something that is being expressed symbolically. Each element of the poem can stand for something else that remains undefined in the poem but that may be introduced by each reader. Walrus and carpenter, for example, may represent predators;





Lewis Carroll (Public Domain)

oysters may represent prey; the sea may stand for the safety of home, while the beach may suggest the danger of the outside world where there is no sure foundation, only sand.

"The Walrus and the Carpenter" appears in chapter four of *Through the Looking Glass* and is available in the 1998 Oxford World Classics edition of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland & Through the Looking Glass*, New American Library, New York, 1960.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Lewis Carroll was born Charles Lutwidge Dodgson in Daresbury, Cheshire, in the northwest of England, on January 27, 1832. He was the third of eleven children, mostly girls. He was the eldest boy. The Reverend Charles Dodgson, Carroll's father, was the vicar in Daresbury. When Carroll was eleven, his father was transferred to Yorkshire, and the family moved into the large rectory and remained there for some twenty-five years. He was schooled at home at first, but when he was twelve he was sent to a private school in Richmond and at fourteen he was sent to Rugby School in Warwickshire, which his father had also attended. Rugby School was a highly prestigious and rigorous school run by Thomas Arnold, a renowned schoolmaster and the father of the great Victorian critic and poet, Matthew Arnold. There Lewis Carroll showed particular aptitude for mathematics. He left Rugby in 1849 and two years later entered Christ Church College at Oxford. Shortly afterward, when he was nineteen, his mother, who was forty-seven, died of what might have been a stroke or meningitis. Carroll won honors at Oxford, but failed a scholarship examination for which he just could not get himself to study. Because of his proficiency in mathematics, however, Carroll was awarded the Christ Church Mathematical Lectureship, which he held for twenty-six years. He remained at Christ Church until his death even though he declined to take ecclesiastical orders, which were usually a prerequisite for remaining there.

Carroll spoke with a stutter. He was reportedly good-looking and around six feet tall. Probably because of a knee injury he sustained in his youth, his deportment was rather stiff. He was deaf in one ear as the result of a childhood illness and constitutionally weak because of a case of whooping cough when he was seventeen.

Carroll was noted for his singing, storytelling, and facility for mimicry. Although he was a mathematician by profession, he was, from his youth, devoted to literature. He wrote short stories as a child for *Mischmasch*, the magazine he put together for his family. His early efforts, usually comic or satiric pieces, were published in several local publications. In 1856, his poem "Solitude" was published in *The Train*. It was the first work he signed with the pseudonym Lewis Carroll. That year, too, Carroll met four-year-old Alice Liddell when Henry Liddell, her father, became dean of Christ Church. Alice Liddell is often thought to be a significant inspiration for the creation of Carroll's Alice. If she is not the model for Alice, certainly she is one of the first for whom Alice's story was intended. Indeed, Carroll presented Alice Liddell with a handwritten, self-illustrated manuscript of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Carroll became a close friend of the entire family. He was in the habit of taking Alice and her sisters rowing, and the stories he told them during those outings became the basis for *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Published in 1865, the book became a great

success, and although it brought Carroll a substantial income, he retained his position teaching mathematics at Christ Church, Oxford. The sequel, *Through the Looking Glass*, in which "The Walrus and the Carpenter" first appeared, was published in 1871. Carroll's third great work, *The Hunting of the Snark*, was published in 1876.

Lewis Carroll was also an accomplished devotee of the new art of photography. His subjects ranged from girls (with Alice Liddell featured prominently among them) and boys to portraits of many famous Victorian painters, poets, scientists, and theater people, many of them friends of his. About one thousand of his estimated three thousand photographs are extant and highly regarded for their technical skill and the simple artistry of their composition. Carroll also enjoyed making up games, both mathematical and lexical. His last literary work, a two-volume novel titled *Sylvie and Bruno*, was published in two parts in 1889 and in 1893, but has not enjoyed the success of the two Alice books and *The Hunting of the Snark*. Carroll traveled to Russia in 1867, and his account of that trip, the *Russian Journal*, was first published in 1935. Carroll died on January 14, 1898, shortly before his sixty-sixth birthday, of pneumonia. He was buried at the Mount Cemetery in Guildford, Surrey.

POEM TEXT

"The sun was shining on the sea,
Shining with all his might:
He did his very best to make
The billows smooth and bright—
And this was odd, because it was
The middle of the night.

"The moon was shining sulkily,
Because she thought the sun
Had got no business to be there
After the day was done—
'It's very rude of him,' she said,
'To come and spoil the fun!'

"The sea was wet as wet could be,
The sands were dry as dry.
You could not see a cloud because
No cloud was in the sky:
No birds were flying overhead—
There were no birds to fly.

"The Walrus and the Carpenter
Were walking close at hand:
They wept like anything to see
Such quantities of sand:
'If this were only cleared away,'
They said, 'it would be grand!'

"'If seven maids with seven mops
Swept it for half a year,
Do you suppose,' the Walrus said,
'That they could get it clear?'
'I doubt it,' said the Carpenter,
And shed a bitter tear.

"'O Oysters, come and walk with us!'
The Walrus did beseech.
'A pleasant walk, a pleasant talk,
Along the briny beach:
We cannot do with more than four,
To give a hand to each.'

"The eldest Oyster looked at him,
But never a word he said:
The eldest Oyster winked his eye,
And shook his heavy head—
Meaning to say he did not choose
To leave the oyster-bed.

"But four young Oysters hurried up,
All eager for the treat:
Their coats were brushed, their faces washed,
Their shoes were clean and neat—
And this was odd, because, you know,
They hadn't any feet.

"Four other Oysters followed them,
And yet another four;
And thick and fast they came at last,
And more, and more, and more—
All hopping through the frothy waves,
And scrambling to the shore.

"The Walrus and the Carpenter
Walked on a mile or so,
And then they rested on a rock
Conveniently low:
And all the little Oysters stood
And waited in a row.

"'The time has come,' the Walrus said,
'To talk of many things:
Of shoes—and ships—and sealing-wax—
Of cabbages—and kings—
And why the sea is boiling hot—
And whether pigs have wings.'

"'But wait a bit,' the Oysters cried,
'Before we have our chat;
For some of us are out of breath,
And all of us are fat!'
'No hurry!' said the Carpenter.
They thanked him much for that.

"'A loaf of bread,' the Walrus said,
'Is what we chiefly need:
Pepper and vinegar besides
Are very good indeed—
Now, if you're ready, Oysters dear,
We can begin to feed.'

"'But not on us!' the Oysters cried,
Turning a little blue.
'After such kindness, that would be
A dismal thing to do!'
'The night is fine,' the Walrus said.
'Do you admire the view?

"'It was so kind of you to come!
And you are very nice!'
The Carpenter said nothing but
'Cut us another slice.
I wish you were not quite so deaf—
I've had to ask you twice!'

"'It seems a shame,' the Walrus said,
'To play them such a trick.
After we've brought them out so far,
And made them trot so quick!'
The Carpenter said nothing but
'The butter's spread too thick!'

"'I weep for you,' the Walrus said:
'I deeply sympathize.'
With sobs and tears he sorted out
Those of the largest size,
Holding his pocket-handkerchief
Before his streaming eyes.

"'O Oysters,' said the Carpenter,
'You've had a pleasant run!
Shall we be trotting home again?'
But answer came there none—
And this was scarcely odd, because
They'd eaten every one."



MEDIA ADAPTATIONS

- In 1951, Walt Disney Productions produced an animated feature film called *Alice in Wonderland* based on the two Alice books. Within the film, "The Walrus and the Carpenter" is presented as a musical number with the verses altered and rearranged.
- In 1993, Christopher Plummer recorded *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass* as a HarperChildrens audio cassette.
- In 1997, the British Broadcasting Corporation issued an audio cassette of the Alice books read by Alan Bennett and published by the Listening Library.

POEM SUMMARY

Stanza 1

The poem begins with a paradox, presented by the peculiar image of the sun shining upon the sea in the middle of the night. The mention of the sea establishes the landscape of the action of the poem. The jaunty rhythm of the poem carries the reader and suggests the easiness of light verse, belying the grim subjects of the poem—seduction, betrayal, and death.

Stanza 2

A wry sort of conflict is introduced since the moon is sulking because of the sun's presence in a realm in which he does not belong. He is robbing the moon of the pleasure of presiding over her domain. The theme of conflicting interests is thus introduced.

Stanza 3

The third stanza is devoted entirely to description. Sea and sand are described by their predominant characteristics of wetness and dryness. The sky is presented as cloudless. Birds are not flying in it for the simple reason that they are not there, or perhaps because, although they exist as a word and a concept, they actually do not exist in the world of the poem. The reality of the poem is a construction of words, not a reflection of the actual world in which the readers live.

Stanza 4

The two principals of the poem, the walrus and the carpenter, are introduced walking along the shore. They are crying at the amount of sand they see and think the setting would be significantly improved if the sand were removed.

Stanza 5

The walrus reflects on the impossibility of clearing the sand from the beach even if a great effort were dedicated to the task. The carpenter agrees with his assessment and cries, apparently because it is so. The apparent absurdity of their conversation, and even the fact that they can be having it, prepares the reader for the interaction between these two and the oysters.

Stanza 6

With no transition, as in the movement of dreams, the walrus turns from talk of clearing the sand from the beach and addresses some

oysters in the water, inviting them to take a walk on the beach. He notes, however, that he and the carpenter can only accommodate four oysters because they have only two hands each. By noting the scarcity of opportunity, he attempts to make his offer seem more desirable.

Stanza 7

The patriarch of the oysters looks at the carpenter from his oyster bed without speaking. He does wink his eye and shake his head, indicating that he has no intention of moving. It is unclear whether he is wise or only weary.

Stanza 8

Four younger oysters, however, are seduced by the walrus's invitation and leave the water to join the walrus and the carpenter on the beach. The oysters are anthropomorphized, or given human characteristics, at first and described as having clean faces and coats and shoes that are polished. But this humanization is challenged in the last two lines of the stanza by the introduction of the fact that oysters do not have feet. By mixing the fantastic and the actual, the poem not only adds to its foolishness but also signals that it is a fable, cautioning the reader not to fall for word tricks.

Stanza 9

After the first oysters make their way to the beach, they are followed by four more and then by recurring groups of oysters all quitting the water for the beach. The psychology of mass movements is keen here. Once a process is set in motion, people often follow others blindly.

Stanza 10

The walrus and the carpenter walk along the beach for a few miles and then stop to rest, perching themselves on a low rock as the oysters stand lined up in front of them. They have mesmerized the oysters with expectation.

Stanza 11

The walrus addresses the waiting oysters, telling them that the moment has arrived to discuss a variety of matters, a rather random list, followed by the kind of nonsensical propositions characteristic of the poem, including questions regarding the reason that the sea is hot to the point of boiling and whether pigs are winged. Rather than offering any real information, the walrus offers a kind of con man's patter, further confusing the oysters.

Stanza 12

The oysters interrupt his discourse, asking him to wait because they say they are fat and need to catch their breath. The carpenter is happy to comply and the oysters thank him. They have no sense of the trickery involved.

Stanza 13

Without transition, the walrus says they need some bread and several condiments, particularly vinegar and pepper. He then addresses the oysters, saying they can begin to eat, using the inclusive first-person plural, thus not revealing that the walrus and carpenter intend to eat them.

Stanza 14

The oysters, however, finally realize with helpless shock that they are the intended meal and protest against such behavior after the apparent kindness the two have shown them. The walrus responds only by speaking of the clarity of the night and asks them if they do not enjoy seeing it.

Stanza 15

With the gracious politeness of a host, and smooth mockery, the walrus continues, thanking the oysters for coming and complimenting them. The carpenter assumes no share in his politeness. Rather he reproaches the walrus for having to ask a second time for a slice of bread.

Stanza 16

The walrus expresses some regret at having misled the oysters and put them to the trouble of having exerted themselves. The carpenter only complains about the butter being too thick on the bread.

Stanza 17

The walrus, however, continues addressing the oysters sympathetically, crying, with a handkerchief to his eyes, as he chooses the juiciest oysters.

Stanza 18

In the final stanza, the walrus turns from being a pseudo-sentimentalist, one who falsely expresses sympathy for his victims, into an ironist, one who mocks their fate, speaking as if they were still alive although he knows they are not, having eaten them himself. He once again addresses the oysters, commenting on the fine exercise they have had from their walk and asks if they would not like to go home now. But the narrator

intervenes with the last word, pointing out that the oysters make no reply for they have all been eaten.

THEMES

Encroachment

Violation of territory is a continuing motif in "The Walrus and the Carpenter." In the first stanza, the sun encroaches on the moon's domain. Later, the walrus and the carpenter draw the oysters out of the sea onto the sand. In each case, a dominant force invades the territory of a weaker entity and the weaker ones, whether the moon or the oysters, are powerless and can only sulk or beg, but to no avail, being displaced and overwhelmed. In the first instance, the moon was not complicit in her defeat. Suddenly the natural order of the universe was violated. In the second, the oysters were complicit, having been foolish enough to stir out of the safety of their natural environment.

Naïveté

When the walrus summons them to walk, the oysters follow without hesitation, eagerly. They leave their beds in the sea without a thought. The eldest oyster, although he seems to be on to the walrus's deception, does not warn the younger ones. He only gives a wink and a shake of his head, regarding only himself, telling the walrus that he will not walk with them but offering the youngsters no further warning or guidance, despite his firm objection. The young oysters are even groomed to look their best: they have washed their faces, brushed their coats, and shined their shoes. Even if they in fact have neither faces, coats, nor shoes, such language suggests eagerness. There is a follow-the-leader effect; after the first four leave the water for the beach, squads of fours continue to emerge and dumbly follow the walrus and the carpenter. When those two finally stop, the oysters line up and dutifully wait for whatever is next, only asking to rest before what they seem to think will be a sort of lecture. Only when they see the walrus and the carpenter preparing bread and condiments and when the walrus talks about beginning to eat, do the oysters realize that they are to be eaten. Even then, they underestimate their predators by arguing that it would be impolite to abuse them so. But it is, of course, too late.



TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY

- "The Walrus and the Carpenter" is about enticement and betrayal, about someone misleading someone else. Write a short story that uses symbols (such as animals, objects, or nature) to dramatize betrayal.
- Research vegetarianism and compile a list of the various arguments advanced in support of it, including ecological reasons, health concerns, the just distribution of resources, and animal rights. Annotate your list with a brief explanation of each pro-vegetarian position, as well as with the opposing argument for each position. Write a brief essay that outlines your own evaluation of the value of vegetarianism. Conclude your essay with a discussion of whether or not there is a world food problem and what role vegetarianism should play, if any, in resolving it.
- Survey friends, relatives, or acquaintances about dreams they have had that seemed to make no sense. Are there any common elements in the dreams? Do the dreamers have any theories on the significance of their dreams? Write a poem, based on one or more of the dreams, that mimics "The Walrus and the Carpenter." In your poem, try to assign significance to the various elements and characters.
- Write a chapter of a memoir in which you discuss an incident in which you were tempted by someone you admired to do something that proved harmful to you.

Order and Disorder

"The Walrus and the Carpenter" begins on a note of cosmic disorder. The sun is usurping the moon's function and doubly disturbing the order of nature by over-illuminating the nighttime landscape. The walrus and the carpenter, when they are introduced, are shown as being displeased with the natural order of things, as emblematized by their desire to see the beach

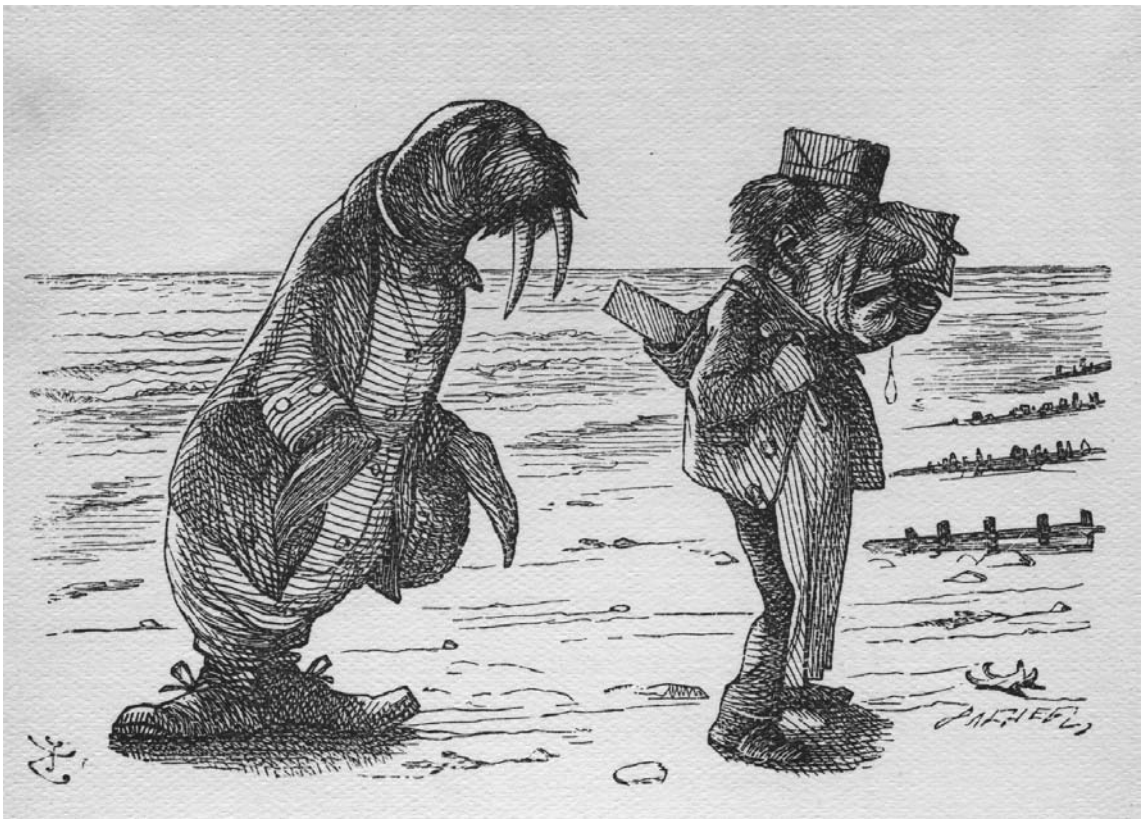


Illustration of "The Walrus and the Carpenter" by Sir John Tenniel, 1820, published in Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There*, 1912* *(© Classic Image | Alamy)*

cleared of sand. Their campaign against the oysters, while it disturbs the order of the oyster world, is, nevertheless, in accord with the order of the natural world. Predation is a fact of the natural order, although in the poem it is made to seem like a betrayal of order because it is a betrayal of the humanized oysters. These disturbances of the natural order within the poem are, of course, reinforced by the fact that the poem itself is a violation of the natural order in that it presents a talking walrus and walking, talking oysters.

Seduction and Betrayal

In "The Walrus and the Carpenter" the oysters are seduced, that is, led astray by someone. The themes of seduction and betrayal are usually linked because seduction implies a fundamental discrepancy in power (the seducer overpowers the seduced) and an unrevealed interest on the part of the seducer. In seduction a process of deception is at work. In "The Walrus and the Carpenter" the walrus entices the oysters, encouraging them to leave their home in the seabed, with honeyed words directly addressed to them, inviting them to walk and talk along the beach. He uses a typical ploy of salesmanship, claiming that his offer is open only to four of them, but he does not limit the number as many groups of four emerge from the water. He continues to charm them with his razzle-dazzle, listing like a pitchman all the things there are to talk about, and he is eloquent even as he begins to devour them. But he does, despite his crocodile tears, devour them, betraying them as he has intended all along.

STYLE

Alliteration

Characteristically "The Walrus and the Carpenter" rushes forward with a propulsive energy as it is read. In large part this is because of alliteration, the repetition of consonant sounds, especially in

the initial letters of neighboring words. The poem is especially rich in sibilants—*s*'s and *sh*'s. These slippery consonants not only help the poem slide along but evoke the sea and the very feeling of swallowing oysters.

Cataloging

At several points in the poem, Carroll narrates the action by the sort of repetition that comes from drawing up a catalog. In the first stanzas, sun, moon, billows, sea, sand, clouds, and birds are mentioned, and their roles in establishing the action and the landscape of the poem are presented. In the sixth stanza, walking and talking are catalogued activities, as are the grooming activities of the oysters in stanza 8. Stanza 11 presents the walrus's famous catalog of the things he says it is time to discuss.

Personification and Anthropomorphism

Anthropomorphism is a literary device that involves endowing nonhuman things with human attributes; in other words, nonhumans become humanized characters. Personification is a figure of speech in which human form or attributes are given to things that are not human. Both devices are used in "The Walrus and the Carpenter." The carpenter is the only actual human being in "The Walrus and the Carpenter" but the verses are peopled with a number of personified or anthropomorphized characters. The sun and the moon are both endowed with human characteristics. The sun is personified as a "he" whose act of shining is described as a willful act of strength. The walrus is anthropomorphized, or entirely humanized. He walks, talks, cries, and schemes. The oysters, too, are turned into human creatures with hands and feet and faces. They walk and speak, wear clothing, and have thoughts and feelings.

Rhythm and Rhyme

The rhythmic pattern of "The Walrus and the Carpenter" is rather simple and jingly, like a march inexorably proceeding on its simple way. Technically, it is produced through an alternation of iambic quadrameter and iambic trimeter lines. Iambic quadrameter lines consist of four iambic feet (pairs of syllables), that is, eight beats with the emphasis on each second beat. An iambic trimeter line has three iambic feet, that is, six beats with each second beat accented. This effortless advance, however, is largely attributable to a complex rhyme scheme that incorporates both regularity and variation. In each of the eighteen stanzas of the poem, the even lines, the second, fourth, and sixth lines, are rhymed, whereas the odd lines, the first, third, and fifth lines, are not. The rhymed lines hold the stanzas together and also hold them back, giving them what in music is called *ritardando*, stopping the narrative short momentarily at the end of the line, whereas the unrhymed lines propel the verses forward. Within this pattern, every now and then, Carroll inserts smaller, interior patterns. The first lines of the first three stanzas, unrhymed in their own stanzas, however, rhyme with each other. Each line ends with a long *e* sound. The effect is to unify the introductory stanzas. Although the fourth stanza breaks the pattern and eschews the rhyme, the long *e* sound, returns in its third, internally unrhymed, line, recapitulating the sound that began the poem and that is laced through the first three stanzas. Because not only the sound of the long *e* but the actual word, in homonymic form—*sea* becomes *see*—is repeated, the narrative turn that is occurring right then in the fourth stanza of the poem, the introduction of the walrus and the carpenter, is signaled as if it were a new narrative beginning.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Child Labor and Exploitation

The oysters are, in effect, children, seduced from their beds and marched through the treacherous sands of the world by two wicked grown-ups who finally devour them. The exploitation of children in England during the nineteenth century was one of the most formidable issues of that century. Whereas London had always had an underclass and posed many challenges to young people, as is highlighted in many eighteenth-century novels, the advent of the industrial revolution and the growth of a factory system of manufacture required a massive number of bodies to serve as levers and connective elements for the running of machinery. Children worked long hours in factories, and often were mangled, maimed, or even killed on the job by the machinery they ran.

Political Conflict in Europe

"The Walrus and the Carpenter," like the book in which it appears, *Through the Looking Glass*,

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **1870s:** Photography is a new technology and practitioners like Carroll use it as a tool for the production of visual art, especially portraiture.

  Today: With the advent of digital cameras and camera phones photography is a ubiquitous phenomena; people are now able to instantaneously capture and share images of themselves and their activities.

- **1870s:** Writers like Carroll create alternate renditions of reality through the imaginative use of nonsense verse and the linguistic techniques of personification and anthropomorphism.

  Today: Anthropomorphism is a feature of many popular films. Through computer technology filmmakers like George Lucas or the graphic artists at Pixar are able to create lifelike animated films that give human characteristics to inanimate objects, machinery, and animals.

- **1870s:** In a number of industrialized countries, children of the poor are exploited in factories or educated in school systems inferior to those that children from wealthy families attend.

  Today: In many industrialized countries, a good education is available to and compulsory for all children, though inequalities still result from disparities in wealth. Children in third-world countries, where many of the goods consumed in the major industrialized countries are produced, are still exploited as laborers. Some are even slaves or forced soldiers.

gives an account of a violent disturbance in one's normal experience of the world. It chronicles disorder. Disorder was very much a matter of current concern in England in 1871 because of events just across the English Channel. After centuries of enmity, the English had begun to achieve serious rapprochement, or reestablishment of peaceful relations, with France, which would be solidified in 1904 when the governments of both countries signed the *Entente Cordiale*. Their alliance was in large measure a response to the threat posed by Germany as it strengthened its military might and imperial designs. In 1871, the French were at war with Prussia (the most powerful German state) and suffered defeat. With the capture of its leader, Louis Napoleon, by the Prussians in July 1870, the Second French Republic fell. A new government, the Third French Republic, was created, but it quickly was opposed by the French working class when it attempted to forge a cease-fire with Prussia by allowing the Prussian army a triumphal procession in Paris. French workers were prepared to fight to prevent the parade. In fright, the new government abandoned Paris and holed up in Versailles. There was no confrontation between workers and Prussian soldiers when the march occurred, and the Prussians left Paris afterward as they had agreed to. With the French government in hiding, the workers took control of Paris and established a commune. The Paris Commune lasted for two months until the end of May 1871, when French army troops reestablished governmental order.

Technological Wonders

The varieties of wonder represented in the *Alice* books and in "The Walrus and the Carpenter" are often disconcerting. They may be seen as nonsense because the violations of the natural order that the works chronicle, and the blurring of boundaries between kinds of phenomena they celebrate, in reality do not occur. Things do not flow into each other and metamorphose as they do in the books and the poem. Yet the books can be seen as representing one response to some of

the actual phenomena of the time. Technological marvels resulted from the Industrial Revolution, which is the name given to the advance made in the latter half of the nineteenth century in the manufacture of goods by machinery and in the use of machine-fabricated materials like steel and construction-grade glass for the construction of buildings. These developments gave the latter part of the century an aspect of wonder. In England, the accomplishments of industrialization were celebrated by the construction of the Crystal Palace in London in 1851. The Crystal Palace was a huge glass, steel, and wood edifice dedicated to displaying the wonders of industrial manufacturing in a pastoral setting, It was a showcase for goods from around the world, bringing together the familiar and the exotic. In 1854, the Crystal Palace was relocated and enlarged. It stood in London until it burned down in 1936. A similar structure, also called a Crystal Palace, was built in 1853 in New York City. It burned down in 1858. Similar marvels were constructed in Berlin and in Paris, where the Grand Palais still stands as an example of Crystal Palace architecture.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

"The Walrus and the Carpenter" and other verse by Carroll, generally called nonsense verse, has become, as Richard Kelly asserts in *Lewis Carroll* (1977), "an integral part of our literary and popular culture." John F. Lehmann, in *Lewis Carroll and the Spirit of Nonsense*, argues that "The Walrus and the Carpenter," along with the nonsense verse of Edward Lear and the devotional poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins and moreso than the epic work of Lord Tennyson, Matthew Arnold, and Robert Browning, "represent[s] the most fertile, even one can say the purest elements in the creative achievement, in the magic of the word of that great [late Victorian] age." Elizabeth Sewell, in *T. S. Eliot: A Collection of Critical Essays*, explains nonsense verse as a poetic strategy designed "to convert language into symbolic logic or music." Writing of the poem in 1932 in *Lewis Carroll*, poet Walter de la Mare highly praises "The Walrus and the Carpenter," asking rhetorically, "What of the visionary light, the colour, the scenery; that wonderful seascape . . . in "The Walrus and the Carpenter," as wide as Milton's in *Il Penseroso*—the quality of its sea, its sands, its space and distances?" Jennifer Geer, in an essay published in *Children's Literature*, argues for a rather sinister understanding of "The Walrus and the Carpenter." In Geer's view, Alice is right to be suspicious of the poem that Tweedledee recites to her in *Through the Looking Glass*: "The poem's nonsense exaggerates conflict between generations. Adult figures' benevolence is nothing more than a hypocritical cloak, and the desire to arrest children's growth is literalized as a desire to kill them." Undeterred by such grim interpretations, the Guinness Brewing Company, the makers of stout, used "The Walrus and the Carpenter" in a 1933 advertising campaign, parodying the verse and having the two seducers longing for some beer with their oysters.

CRITICISM

Neil Heims

Heims is a freelance writer and the author or editor of over two dozen books on literary subjects. In the following essay, he discusses the use of the idea of oddity in "The Walrus and the Carpenter."

"The Walrus and the Carpenter" begins and ends with reflections on oddity. The first stanza presents an example of something characterized as odd; the last, of something characterized as not at all odd. Thus the poem comes full circle from beginning to end. It is not a closed circle, however, but an open spiral. The difference between a circle and a spiral is the difference between repetition and evolution, but in the instance of "The Walrus and the Carpenter" evolution does not indicate progress but only variation. Progress suggests a linear development, movement, most likely an improvement or, at least, intensification. In "The Walrus and the Carpenter," something happens that makes a difference in the poem—the story of the oysters' fate at the hands of the title characters unfolds—yet no progress is made. Rather there is transformation or variation on a theme. The context is changed. The type of phenomenon that the poem shows as odd in the first stanza, and that denotes chaotic disorder in the celestial realm of the cosmos, loses its oddity in the terrestrial realm inhabited by mankind and, although what happens, the consumption of the oysters, is unpleasant, it is part of the natural order. There is movement in the verse, but there is no

WHAT DO I READ NEXT?



- *The Annotated Archy and Mehitabel* by Don Marquis, published by Penguin in 2006, is a collection of verses, presumed to have been typed by Archy the cockroach, who claims to have been a free-verse poet in a past life, about himself and the cat Mehitabel, who says she was Cleopatra in a former life. Marquis printed these verses in his newspaper column in the *New York Sun* between 1916 and 1927.
- *Diet for a Small Planet* (1971) by Francis Moore Lappé deals with the consumption of food in an environmentally responsible way and in a way that minimizes predation and interspecies competition for food.
- *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* by T. S. Eliot, first published in 1939 and reprinted many times, consists of a set of seemingly nonsense verses about a series of humanized cats and their adventures.
- *The Origin of Species* by Charles Darwin, first published in 1857, is the foundational text of evolutionary biology. It presents an account of the progression of the natural world based on the development of species as a result of evolving transformation, a concept Carroll developed to fantastical lengths in his Alice books.
- *Silas Marner* by George Eliot, first published in 1861, is a novel about the mutually beneficial relationship between a man who has withdrawn from society and the abandoned infant girl he raises as his daughter.

real development. Only the context that determines whether something is or is not odd has been changed. The circumstances that cause oddity in the first stanza and negate it in the final one are quite similar. In the first instance the reader is introduced to a paradoxical situation. In the latter instance, the paradox has been dissolved, replaced by irony. But in both instances,



CARROLL USES WIT TO DIVERT THE READER'S ATTENTION FROM THE BRUTALITY OF DESIRE."

the circumstance is one of conflict, of competition between strength and weakness, of defeat, and of domination by one party over another.

The first two stanzas of "The Walrus and the Carpenter" recount what amounts to a contest between the sun and the moon. The sun, in the first stanza, is shown as a usurper who is victorious in his usurpation, encroaching upon the moon's territory. The sun shines at night and thereby violates the natural, cosmological order of things. The moon's response in the second stanza is to sulk at the encroachment, nothing more. Her weaker status, the moon being of lesser luminosity than the sun and her light being only the reflection of the sun's essential fire, renders the moon a non-competitor, able only to complain.

The cause of this break in the order is not presented in the poem, nor is the sun's usurpation and the moon's distress the matter of any further concern. The presentation of the oddity seems only to be an overture to the remainder of the poem, a context for the events to follow, events that in their expression of seduction and betrayal, of domination for the one side and defeat for the other, offer in other terms a recapitulation of the prelude. One force overwhelms and consumes another. The absurdity of the violence done to the cosmic order in the first stanza immunizes the reader against the cartoon absurdity of the central action of the poem, the sly violence of the natural order. The action of the central section, with its cartoon elements of a talking walrus and walking, talking oysters, is an accurate reflection of how things are in nature and among mankind. Humans live by overshadowing, displacing, devouring each other. The world is a place of predators and prey.

The third stanza, while it retains the structure of the first two, relating attributes of sea and sand, sets up a different relation between the two from that presented in the first two stanzas.

Neither sea nor sand usurps the other, nor encroaches upon the other. Each maintains its own proper attribute. The sea is defined by its wetness; the sand is defined by its dryness. In both cases the situation, while needlessly redundant in narration is not odd as before when night is defined by the attribute of day. The third stanza continues in its fastidious redundancy. The sky is cloudless because there are no clouds and there are no birds because there are no birds. The suggestion of something out of the ordinary is only slightly broached by the sixth and final line of the third stanza. Is the assertion of the absence of birds a circumstantial or an absolute one? Does it mean that birds do not happen to be flying then, or does it inform the reader that, in the world of these verses, birds as a species do not exist? As before, with the intrusion of the sun into the moon's territory, the problem is not explored further, and once again the presentation of the situation is best understood as setting a mood, conveying the sense that anything out of the ordinary can happen. After all, everything that does happen in "The Walrus and the Carpenter" is happening in the world that exists on the other side of the mirror, in a reverse world where left is right and right is left. Readers are overhearing a poem of that world that Alice is hearing. Being of the mirror world, then, odd though the phenomena of that world at first glance may appear, they are, after the reader becomes accustomed to the inversions, accurate *reflections* of the world before the mirror. Oysters, although they have neither feet nor, presumably, feelings, do get eaten.

What happens in the fourth stanza is circumstantially independent of the events and nonevents of the preceding three. The eponymous characters are introduced walking together, and for whatever reason—once again none is given—they are crying at the sight of the great quantity of sand, lamenting its infinite plenitude. What else do they expect to find on the beach? The following stanza suggests it is food they are looking for. And by extension and displacement, they are mourning the insatiability of their appetites. The exterior surplus of sand mirrors an interior paucity of comestible matter. In this stanza, however, they begin to consider, wishfully, the possibility of all the sand being cleared away, but the realization of the impossibility of effectuating that wish leads them to further weeping. The immensity of their appetite is insurmountable.

With no overt transition, in the sixth stanza, the walrus is no longer crying. He is addressing the oysters, who have appeared as mysteriously as his tears have disappeared. But their appearance, no matter how unprepared, is not odd, for oysters, after all, live in the sea. Nor is their anthropomorphism odd, for such a conventional literary move has already been made in the poem with the lachrymose walrus. Thus the first section of the poem, stanzas 1 through 5, have prepared the reader for what seems to be an animal fable of the Aesopian kind that begins in the second section of the poem, starting at stanza 6. The excitement of the vocative, of the walrus's direct address to the oysters, replaces the lamentations of the previous stanza. The sand on the shore may be irremovable, but the pangs of appetite can be appeased. Thus the second section of the poem, stanzas 6 through 9, recounts the rhetoric of persuasion and its success. Despite the objection of the skeptical elder oyster, the young are drawn out of their beds. The poem's characteristic verbal and metrical whimsy recurs in the description of the oysters as well shod despite the fact that they do not have feet. Carroll uses wit to divert the reader's attention from the brutality of desire. Wit as a narrative device continues through to the end of the poem, not in order to reduce the brutality recounted but to establish the intellectual room for the reader to reflect upon it, as Alice does after Tweedledee finishes his recitation. Her response may serve as a guide to the reader's.

Alice at first takes sides. She prefers the walrus "because he was a *little* sorry for the poor oysters." She switches her allegiance when Tweedledee points out that he ate more than the carpenter, and tried to hide the number. But the carpenter suffers in her opinion, too, when Tweedledum points out that he ate as many as he could. Instructed by her frustration, Alice abandons any attempt to take sides. "They were *both* very unpleasant characters," she decides, seeing the situation as a whole, yet implicitly identifying with the oysters, who, like her, left their proper environment seduced by the wonders of an unknown realm that turned against them.

Lured out of their beds and marched along the sand, the oysters are mustered on the beach. The walrus begins his razzle-dazzle rhetoric and courteously desists when the dizzy oysters ask to catch their breath. Instead, he begins to make

preparations for a meal, reciting a list of necessary condiments used in the consumption of oysters. Realizing that they are to constitute the meal, the oysters beg him to reconsider, but they have no more power against him than the moon had to vanquish the sun. All they achieve is a rhetoric of sympathy from him and a flood of tears as he devours them. The carpenter, on the other hand, is less a gallant and is more single-mindedly absorbed in securing his bread and getting his share of oysters, making sure he is not cheated by the walrus, given more butter and fewer oysters. The dynamic of rivalry defining the action of the poem is played out even among these apparent partners.

The last stanza begins with a satiric echo of the walrus's invocation of the oysters in the sixth stanza when he first invited them on their death walk. Now he invites them to return home in mockery of their gullibility and expressing his implicit satisfaction and delight in his success at overwhelming them. Similarly, the narrative commentary of the poem's coda, the final two lines, echoes the last two lines of the first stanza. But the parody here is grim. The idea of oddity reappears, now to be repudiated. Encroachment in the first stanza suggested a violation of the way things are. Predation, in the final stanza, is presented as merely the way things are. Buried beneath the final lines is the implicit warning, the moral of the story: therefore, be careful.

Source: Neil Heims, Critical Essay on "The Walrus and the Carpenter," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2009.

Jennifer Geer

In the following excerpt, Geer explores how, through such elements as the poem "The Walrus and the Carpenter," Alice is idealized as a child in Through the Looking-Glass.

The opening and closing sections of Lewis Carroll's two classic children's novels, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and its sequel *Through the Looking-Glass*, have posed perennial difficulties for critics. The prefatory poem and final paragraphs of *Wonderland*, as well as the poems and drawing-room scenes that frame the central narrative in *Looking-Glass*, are nostalgic, gently teasing, and ostensibly serene—and they stand in sharp contrast to Alice's unsentimental, chaotic, and often violent adventures. Although this dichotomy has been interpreted in several ways, most critics agree that the framing sections



THE POEM'S NONSENSE EXAGGERATES CONFLICT BETWEEN GENERATIONS. ADULT FIGURES' BENEVOLENCE IS NOTHING MORE THAN A HYPOCRITICAL CLOAK, AND THE DESIRE TO ARREST CHILDREN'S GROWTH IS LITERALIZED AS A DESIRE TO KILL THEM. THE SAME THEMES RECUR DURING ALICE'S ENCOUNTER WITH HUMPTY DUMPTY."

give a much more conventionally idealized picture of Alice and her dream-journeys than the adventures do. Such idealization is hardly surprising in light of Carroll's legendary devotion to little girls, but in the context of Alice's adventures, the frames *do* surprise. Their portrayals of her journeys through Wonderland and Looking-glass country bear so little resemblance to the journeys themselves that it is difficult to take the frames quite seriously. The closing paragraph of *Wonderland* is lovely but absurd as it blithely affirms that the tale of Alice's adventures, in which mothers sing sadistic lullabies, babies turn into pigs, and little girls shout at queens, will lead Alice's older sister into reveries about delightful children and domestic bliss. From a logical perspective, this final scene is as nonsensical as anything in Wonderland. I would like to suggest that the contrast between frames and adventures in the *Alice* books implies that the frames' idealized visions of Alice are themselves constructed narratives, as fantastic in their own way as the dreamtales they so radically reinterpret.

The *Alice* frames encourage readers to interpret Alice's adventures as fairy tales, a category that in nineteenth-century usage includes literary and traditional tales, nonsense, and what we would now call fantasy fiction. In mid-Victorian discourse, fairy tales often exert a recognizably domestic influence on their readers or listeners. Contemporary periodical articles and reviews commonly portray the tales' virtues as analogous to an ideal home's: readers young and old will find their sympathies awakened and the corrosive effects of an amoral, competitive, and violent world lessened. *Wonderland* and

Looking-Glass, like many Victorian texts, thus characterize the values inscribed in idealized childhood and its tales as domestic and feminine. The *Wonderland* frames suggest that the tale of Alice's dream fosters the happy, loving childhood that will enable her development into a good woman and mother, while the *Looking-Glass* frames anticipate that the tale will create a domestic space powerful enough to keep the stormy world at bay.

In both novels, the contrast between frames and adventures works to undermine such hopes and suggestions by foregrounding potential conflicts between adult and child figures. Adult and child characters in the *Alice* books, as well as the implied readers, often want rather different things from one another; tale-telling both fulfills and frustrates their desires. In *Wonderland* and *Looking-Glass*, Carroll ultimately suggests that both adults and children want power as well as comfort, and that the domestic world of little girls and fairy tales is the unlikely site of power struggles over the comforts of home and childhood. Still, Carroll does not reject the ideals of fairy tales and femininity he so deftly ironizes. He may delight in exposing their illogic, but he remains deeply committed to their emotional power. As Carroll's fellow Oxford don T. B. Strong noted, *Wonderland* and *Looking-Glass* draw heavily on mid-Victorian mores, often taking common words or phrases literally and pressing conventional assumptions to their logical conclusions. The books reveal "all sorts of pitfalls and surprises round the ordinary course of conversation" (Strong 306). Paradoxically, "pitfalls and surprises" can make conventional forms all the more alluring; by implying that the idyllic world of little girls and their fairy tales is really a narrative told by adults for self-interested purposes, the *Alice* books only intensify adult readers' desire for those idealized visions....

Although *Wonderland* offers the possibility that its antidomestic tale will foster Alice's development into a model of ideal womanhood, *Through the Looking-Glass* is far more skeptical about the tale's impact on her future. Much of this skepticism occurs because the later novel draws on rather different views of the relationships between adults, children's literature, and little girls. The *Wonderland* frames certainly idealize Alice, but their emphasis on the benefits she will reap from remembering the tale and retaining "the simple and loving heart of her childhood" assumes continuity between the child's experience and the woman's (164). The *Looking-Glass* frames, however, tend to follow another influential contemporary model of development, which portrays childhood as an innocent, feminized state vastly different from the corrupt, sorrowful adult world. Childhood becomes a sort of secular Eden, a paradise "inviolably, savingly separate from the adult world of anxiety" (Gilead 283). Because this model perceives childhood as separate from and superior to adulthood, it holds that adults do not retain their childlike hearts. Adults can only recapture momentary glimpses of childhood's bliss by interacting with children or by reading, telling, or writing idealized forms of children's literature such as fairy tales. At the same time, childhood becomes the site of a deep sentimental regret that children must lose their innocence as they grow up.

Looking-Glass is thus more determined to idealize the child Alice and more pessimistic about her growth than *Wonderland* is. Whereas *Wonderland*'s prefatory poem gently teases the children who listen to the tale, its *Looking-Glass* counterpart does not. The *Looking-Glass* Alice is an ethereal "Child of the pure unclouded brow" rather than a pair of "little hands" steering the boat with "little skill." The *Looking-Glass* poem also assumes that Alice will lose her joyous innocence as she grows up. The simple, loving girl will develop all too quickly into a "melancholy maiden" subject to adulthood's "bitter tidings" and "unwelcome bed" of anxiety, sexuality and death. Although the poem's speaker wishes Alice to remember him and her happy girlhood, his sad prediction that "No thought of me shall find a place / In thy young life's hereafter" and his reference to "vanish'd summer glory" suggest that she will forget. These circumstances lessen the tale's value as a potentially formative influence on Alice. Instead, Carroll's speaker maintains that his "fairy-tale" will preserve an idealized, domestic childhood world that exists in comforting opposition to "the blinding snow" outside. The tale also will help delay Alice's departure into adulthood by weaving "magic words" to "hold [her] fast" in "childhood's nest of gladness," if only for a moment....

Although the prefatory poem's speaker may wish to fix Alice in an idealized childhood world, her adventures portray her as conspicuously uninterested in any such thing. As

Knoepflmacher has pointed out, Alice's desire to play Looking-glass chess signifies her desire to grow up and gain an adult woman's powers ("Balancing" 511). In Looking-glass country, these desires are inseparable from ambition and competition; Alice is, willing to enter the game as a Pawn, but she would "'*like* to be a Queen, best.'" The speed and relative ease with which she wins the game and becomes a Queen has led Knbepflmacher to argue that *Looking-Glass* endorses Alice's desire to grow, at least until Carroll abruptly rescinds that endorsement in the final chapters (*Ventures* 197–200; 216–26). *Looking-Glass* certainly does depict Alice's progress and implicitly her growth as inevitable: she is a Pawn whose moves are mapped out for her even before she begins to play. But her smoothly overdetermined journey to the Eighth Square does not necessarily indicate acceptance of her growth. The contrast between her success and the coronation feast which literally overturns her triumph only intensifies the sense that maturity is no prize at all, but a profound disappointment. Alice herself, who calmly pretends to mother the black kitten once she returns to her own drawing-room in the final chapter, never quite grasps this implication, but it certainly is available to the adult reader.

Alice initially believes the Red Queen's assurance that "'in the Eighth Square we shall be Queens together, and it's all feasting and fun!'" Once Alice arrives at the Eighth Square, however, she discovers that her new role is hardly fun. The Red and White Queens are determined not to let her take her place with them as an equal. Instead, they assert their own superior status by treating her like a child, dismissing as ignorance and ill-temper all her attempts to establish her position as Queen. They even go so far as to invite themselves to her coronation dinner, justifying the breach of good manners by accusing Alice of not having "'had many lessons in manners yet.'" The Queens' rudeness and Alice's bewildered resentment cast ironic doubt on adults' desire to place children in a world of youthful bliss. Alice's relationships with adult figures are no more blissful in Looking-glass country than they were in Wonderland. Her position during and immediately before her coronation feast may be childlike, but it is hardly the "nest of gladness" that the prefatory poem extols.

Alice's uncomfortable position as child-Queen suggests that the combination of a child's heart and a woman's offices might destroy domestic competence rather than create it. She fares no better at her coronation dinner than David Copperfield's "child-wife," Dora, does at housekeeping in Dickens's novel. Her title notwithstanding, Alice lacks the social experience to be an effective hostess, let alone a ruler. At first, she is even a little relieved when she discovers the feast has started without her; she remarks that she "'should never have known who were the right people to invite!'" All too soon, however, the order that should have characterized a combination of state dinner and Victorian dinner-party plunges into chaos in the face of her inexperience. As an untutored girl, Alice has neither a ruler's public authority nor a hostess's social and managerial skills. The polite compliance that an upper-middle-class girl such as Alice would have been taught in nursery and schoolroom only compounds the social reversals, as she bows to subjects who understand Looking-glass etiquette. And if chess pieces can exercise power over a human Queen at her own coronation dinner, the food and tableware might logically aspire to rule, also. The result is a sort of domestic coup: Alice looks up to find the leg of mutton in the White Queen's chair, the Queen herself in the soup-tureen, and the soup-ladle advancing purposefully toward her own chair, "beckoning to her impatiently to get out of its way."

Admittedly, the combination of a child's character and an adult's position serves Alice well in one respect. She manages to restore order by combining the traits of the mischievous child and the furious, domineering woman. Childishly, Alice demands attention by disrupting the already chaotic feast: "'I can't stand this any longer!' she cried, as she jumped up and seized the tablecloth with both hands: one good pull, and plates, dishes, guests, and candles came crashing down together in a heap on the floor." She then abandons the child's role for the furious woman's, asserting her own dominance by "turning fiercely upon the Red Queen, whom she considered as the cause of all the mischief." Since the scene is already a reversal of conventional order, these additional reversals succeed in righting it. The Red Queen begins to turn into the harmless black kitten on the spot, and Alice soon wakes to find herself back in the snug comfort of a drawing-room armchair. With Alice and the Red Queen restored to their respective roles as child and kitten, the adult narrator can reestablish

control over the scene and return to a peaceful vision of Alice in her drawing-room.

As it turns out, however, this return to order is even more tenuous than in *Wonderland*. On the surface, the end of Alice's dream satisfies child and adult readers' impulse to halt the feast's frightening chaos, as well as adult readers' desire that Alice return to a safe, enclosed childhood world. But although *Looking-Glass* applauds Alice's actions, it also ironizes them. The violence Alice herself does in restoring domestic order suggests that neither the ideal woman nor the ideal girl is fully recoverable: the furious woman underlies the former, while the mischievous child underlies the latter. Thus, even the scenes of Alice in her drawing-room question the figure of the loving, authoritative yet childlike woman more than the closing frame of *Wonderland* does. Because Alice is pretending to be a mother, these scenes imply that the ideal woman who can combine an adult's competence with a child's simplicity exists only in the imagination. Furthermore, Alice's games retain subtle forms of Looking-glass country's conflicts between child and adult figures. Alice mothers her kittens by imitating adult authority figures' treatment of herself, never quite forgetting that she remains under their control. Thus, when she is playfully telling the black kitten that she will punish it for its faults, she begins to wonder if the same technique could be applied to her: "'You know I'm saving up all your punishments for Wednesday week—Suppose they had saved up all *my* punishments? . . . What *would* they do at the end of a year?'" The effect is to emphasize the scene's fictionality (readers know they are watching a child pretending to be a mother) and the possibility of conflict even in Alice's supposedly happy family.

Given *Looking-Glass*'s persistent sense of the ways in which adult figures bully child figures, the mischievous or rebellious child is never far from Alice's games, either. Alice may pretend to be a benevolent mother, but she does not pretend to be a compliant child. The narrator mentions that "once she had really frightened her old nurse by shouting suddenly in her ear, 'Nurse! Do let's pretend that I'm a hungry hyaena, and you're a bone!'" Even her dream-journey into Looking-glass House begins with Alice perched on the chimney-piece, which she almost certainly is not allowed to climb—especially when there is a fire burning. When Alice takes on a motherly role, she playfully recreates her own rebellious impulses in the figure of the black kitten, who is '"a little mischievous darling.'" To a large extent, these fantasies are charming to adult readers: they can recognize their own aggression in Alice's but rest assured that she herself is only "a little mischievous darling." On another level, however, Alice's games are slightly worrisome to adult devotees of idealized little girls. Because this dream-child happily pretends to be an adult and to resist adults, her games remind adults of childhood's transience and of potential conflicts between children's desires and their own.

These tensions between child and adult figures severely limit the possibility of creating a narrative that satisfies adults' longing for an idealized childhood paradise while also amusing child readers. The prefatory poem, for instance, suggests that the tale is as difficult to grasp as Alice's dream-rushes, which begin "to lose all their scent and beauty, from the very moment that she picked them." Like the White Queen's jam, the idealized "fairy-tale" of the *Looking-Glass* poem exists yesterday and tomorrow, but not today. The speaker promises that he will continue "[a] tale begun in other days," but that tale remains an elusive future pleasure. The tale of Looking-glass country as presented in Alice's adventures does not exactly live up to this promise; although it certainly resembles her adventures in Wonderland, it is hardly a vision of "childhood's nest of gladness." Moreover, even the delightfully nostalgic and sentimental tale the poem promises remains a product of adult fiat that may clash with the child's desires. The *Looking-Glass* poem's overtures may be flattering, but its consistent use of imperative verbs and negative constructions implies that it is as much a command as an invitation, and one Alice might choose not to heed.

Alice's adventures in Looking-glass country also question conventional notions of the benevolent tale-teller, the children who wish to be delighted, and the charming tale. Alice is usually reluctant to listen to Looking-glass poetry and remains skeptical of the creatures' claims that their poems will comfort or amuse her. The creatures' poetry and conversations often have the effect of delaying Alice's progress in the chess game; like the prefatory poem's ideal tale, they work to arrest her symbolic journey toward adulthood. This tendency may satisfy adult

readers, but it exasperates Alice, who only wants to advance to the next square and become a Queen. Thus, when Tweedledee asks her if she likes poetry, her response is hardly enthusiastic: "'Ye-es, pretty well—*some* poetry.... Would you tell me which road leads out of the wood?'" The Tweedle brothers' determination to recite the longest poem they know dismays her still more. The poem they tell Alice, "The Walrus and the Carpenter," reveals that she has good reason to be wary. The Walrus and Carpenter lure the "young Oysters" out for what they claim will be "A pleasant walk, a pleasant talk / Along the briny beach," but the walk ends with their eating the young guests. The poem's nonsense exaggerates conflict between generations. Adult figures' benevolence is nothing more than a hypocritical cloak, and the desire to arrest children's growth is literalized as a desire to kill them. The same themes recur during Alice's encounter with Humpty Dumpty. His response to her remark that "'one can't help growing older'" reveals ominous undertones behind adults' desire that children not grow, as he takes the premise to its logical conclusion by asserting that '"*One* can't, perhaps... but *two* can. With proper assistance, you might have left off'" growing. Alice, understandably alarmed, hastens to change the subject.

Looking-Glass never comes to a definitive conclusion about the best ways to balance adult and child readers' desires. It simply gives—and undercuts—two possibilities for creating a tale that can amuse children while satisfying adults' wish for a nostalgic escape into a blissful childhood world. Alice's encounter with the White Knight implies that one way to create such a tale is to ask all parties to pretend. During this scene, Alice graciously submits to a deluded but well-meaning adult's determination to tell a tale, feigning interest in order to please him while giving her future adult self an opportunity to redefine the event in nostalgic, escapist terms. The White Knight casts himself as the ideal tale-teller, and according to the narrator, Alice eventually remembers him in such an idealized light. Admittedly, this memory of the Knight's "mild blue eyes and kindly smile... and... the melancholy music of the song" is a doubtful one. In typical Looking-glass fashion, it is a memory which has not yet happened to the Alice of the adventures, and as Knoepflmacher points out, it is by no means an accurate depiction of her experience in the narrative present (*Ventures* 221–23; "Balancing" 514–15). Although Alice may someday remember herself enjoying the beautiful picture the Knight makes with "the setting sun gleaming through his hair, and shining on his armour in a blaze of light," Carroll gives no indication that she has this reaction while listening to the Knight's song. In the narrative present she is somewhat bored and even critical; she remarks that "'the tune *isn't* his own invention'" and works hard at "trying to feel interested" in yet another piece of poetry. Yet even if Alice's fondness for the Knight and his tale is only an illusion created in retrospect, *Looking-Glass* ultimately presents it as both lovely and fulfilling. Alice's meeting with the Knight suggests that the conflicting desires behind Victorian ideals of girlhood and fairy tales can be well served by a deluded storyteller and a child's polite deception. Because he believes himself wise and benevolent, the Knight is one of the few characters in Wonderland or Looking-glass country who is courteous or helpful to Alice, and for all her impatience, Alice hides it well. Her actions form *Looking-Glass*'s closest approximation to the ideal little girl or to the ideal woman who retains her childlike heart. By exercising an adult's diplomatic tact, Alice manages to fulfill the ideal girl's role of delighting her elders, even if she is only feigning interest.

The closing poem also presents the child and her tales as a lovely yet satisfying illusion. It represents an ingenious, if tenuous, solution to the problem of creating an idealized childhood world. As *Wonderland* does, this poem validates storytelling—or in this case, poetry—as the best way to satisfy the desires behind mid-Victorian idealizations of childhood. The poem is an acrostic on Alice Pleasance Liddell's name; although the children who listened to the original tale of Wonderland have faded into memory and those who will hear the tale have yet to do so, the ideal child remains inscribed into the poem's present. And although Alice does not become an ideal woman who can delight her own children with her tales, this poem recreates the tale of Wonderland and Looking-glass country in a form that offers continuity across generations. Recurring tales of "a Wonderland," told to successive groups of children, will ensure that the girl and her tales remain present, even though each telling's "[e]choes fade and memories die." The poem thus attempts to fix Carroll, the real Alice Liddell, the fictional Alice, and child-listeners in a perpetually available childhood world....

Source: Jennifer Geer, "'All Sorts of Pitfalls and Surprises': Competing Views of Idealized Girlhood in Lewis Carroll's *Alice* Books," in *Children's Literature*, Vol. 31, 2003, pp. 1–24.

Beverly Lyon Clark

In the following excerpt, Clark examines how Carroll uses verse, including "The Walrus and the Carpenter," to contribute humor, nonsense, and the absurd to Through the Looking-Glass.

> You say that I'm "to write a verse"—
>
> O Maggie, put it quite
>
> The other way, and kindly say
>
> That I'm "averse to write"!

In writing to his child-friends Lewis Carroll was not averse to verse, however he might tease. Nor was he averse in his fiction—for it comprises one of the most memorable features of his *Alice* books. It contributes to the humor and nonsense and absurdity of the books, through its play with "real"-world forms and its parody, and through its concreteness and its interaction with the surrounding prose.

Carroll played with "real"-world forms sometimes by making things more orderly and sometimes by making them less. But of course order and disorder are all a matter of perspective. When Humpty Dumpty defines glory as "a nice knock-down argument" he disorders our real-world semantic order, from one perspective, but the simple act of defining the word, of associating it with a meaning and not leaving it in the limbo of meaningless noises, is itself an act of order. Humpty Dumpty's new order may be unfamiliar, but it is not entirely chaotic. Or take "Jabber-wocky." Does it disorder our orderly universe? Yes, in part, for "brillig" and "slithy" have no familiar meaning. Yet, as students of language are fond of pointing out, the grammatical structure of the poem is orderly, making it possible for us to decipher, for instance, the parts of speech to which the nonsense words belong. And the words themselves combine consonants and vowels the way English words do (unlike, say, the Wonderland Gryphon's "Hjckrrh!"). Further, Humpty Dumpty's explication provides an ordering of the meaning as well. When he expounds, "'*Brillig*' means four o'clock in the afternoon—the time when you begin *broiling* things for dinner," he describes a world with a modicum of order, one that can be envisioned as in, say, Tenniel's drawing.

Another way of describing Carroll's play with "real"-world forms is in terms of open and closed fields. Susan Stewart, in her recent study *Nonsense*, catalogues nonsense transformations and finds some within the closed fields described by Elizabeth Sewell in her early *Field of Nonsense*, closing what is traditionally open, while others do the inverse, opening what is closed. Yet whatever we call the two transformations—whether we use this broad definition or else associate nonsense only with the first kind of transformation and associate the second with the absurd—Carroll uses both kinds. He sometimes opens what is traditionally closed (making a mirror into a door) and sometimes closes what is traditionally open and on-going (making time stand still at six o'clock). And often what Carroll does is a complex amalgam of both opening and closing. In his parodies, for instance, some of the wordplay focuses attention on the words, fencing them off from reality, making them a closed world: rhyme and alliteration draw attention to the words and distract us from whatever it is the words are meant to refer to. The parodies also close themselves off as separate worlds to the extent that they do not refer to recognizable reality: how does one balance anything as slippery and floppy as an eel on the end of one's nose? On the other hand, the references to artifacts outside the poems—to other poems—opens the form, and the parodies would also seem to shatter the closed universes of the pietistic poems they mock. The parodies operate in both closed and open fields—they both order and disorder—and part of their effect derives from the confrontation between the two. We can call them nonsense, or something else, but the parodies draw upon both kinds of transformation.

It has become convenient to refer offhand to most of the verse in the *Alice* books as parodies. But again we run into a problem of definition. This time I want to define the term more narrowly, for the very general way in which we use "parody" sometimes blinds us to important distinctions. Sometimes we call something a parody if it reminds us of a previous work, whether or not any satire is intended. But I'd like to reserve parody for something that satirizes. Dwight Macdonald, for instance, situates Carroll's works closer to what he calls burlesque than to parody: "he simply injected an absurd content into the original form with no intention of literary criticism." Macdonald is right for some of

Carroll's verse, but I would disagree with his contention that Carroll never intended literary criticism, for sometimes Carroll does intend literary, if not moral, criticism [MacDonald, 1960].

Sometimes, if not always. For only in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is the verse truly parodic. "*How doth the little crocodile*," for instance, undermines the pious preaching of Isaac Watts's "How doth the little busy bee," which admonishes children to keep busy and avoid mischief: the crocodile presented for our emulation, far from skillfully building a cell or neatly spreading wax, "cheerfully" and "neatly" and "gently"—snares fishes. Much of the other pious verse that Carroll parodies in *Wonderland* is similarly subverted. While Carroll does not entirely disagree with the sentiments of the poems he parodies—especially in later life, when he wanted to outbowdlerize Bowdler—and thus does not mock that which is preached, he does mock the preaching. Carroll may not be criticizing the content (he surely is not inciting children to be slothful), but he does criticize the literary purpose of didactic verse, the way in which it tried to control children. In part Carroll may simply be entering into the child's perspective, adopting the child's responses to pietistic verse, for he shows considerable sympathy for the child's point of view. And perhaps Carroll's satire of the didacticism of previous children's literature clears a niche for the new kind of children's literature he wanted to write. Much as Alice tries to define herself by attempting to recite familiar verse, Carroll seems, intentionally or not, to be defining his fiction through Alice's failure to define herself, through her mangling of her recitations.

In *Through the Looking-Glass* however, it is as if Carroll's success with his first children's book freed him from the need to comment on what previous writers had done for, or to, children. The verse is less parodic. Although some of it plays with pre-existing poems, it is harder to label such playing parody, harder to convict it of literary criticism. Carroll's "parodies" in the two books might be placed on a continuum, from the true parodies like that of Watts to reflections of the original that are not necessarily satires (what Macdonald describes), to mere echoes that may not actually be related to a so-called original. The drinking song begot of Scott, sung at the Looking-glass banquet, mimics some lines of the original but probably without any intent to satirize. And still farther from parody is "The Walrus and the Carpenter," which shares its meter and rhyme scheme with Thomas Hood's "The Dream of Eugene Aram" and also the discovery of an unexpected murderer, but which is not otherwise tied to the so-called original. Carroll himself wrote in a letter to his uncle, "I had no particular poem in mind. The metre is a common one, and I don't think 'Eugene Aram' suggested it more than the many other poems I have read in the same metre" (*Letters*).

Looking-Glass verse tends toward this latter end of the continuum. Carroll here does not demolish children's verse. For the most part, he either uses fantastical nursery rhymes, which do not need to be demolished, or else he plays with adult poetry, which can perhaps be poked and prodded at but need not be so utterly crushed as the sugar-coated moralizing intended for children.

I will demonstrate how Carroll uses pre-existing verse in *Looking-Glass* by examining the changes in rings on Wordsworth's "Resolution and Independence." The White Knight's poem includes echoes of other poems—Wordsworth's "The Thorn" and Thomas Moore's "My Heart and Lute"—but I'll concentrate on "Resolution and Independence." Carroll had written an early version of his poem by 1856, and this version describes a situation fairly close to that in Wordsworth's poem: in both the narrator encounters an extremely old man upon the moor, asks his occupation, and is comforted by the exchange—although Wordsworth's narrator is comforted by the man's cheer and steadfastness, while Carroll's is comforted by the man's "kind intent / To drink my health in beer." The closest verbal echoes are in the closing lines. Wordsworth ends with "I'll think of the Leech-gatherer on the lonely moor!" ["The Prelude" edited by Carlos Baker (1954)], and Carroll ends with "I think of that strange wanderer / Upon the lonely moor."

This echoing of concluding lines is emblematic of the relationship between the two poems. While the Watts parody starts off proclaiming the poem it twists, repeating the opening "How doth the little," as well as "Improve" and "shining" in the second line, the Wordsworth derivative waits till the conclusion for a close verbal echo. Furthermore, Carroll entirely omits all reference to the meditative early verses of Wordsworth's poem, and even changes the meter and rhyme scheme. "Upon the Lonely Moor" is

simply not very close to "Resolution and Independence." And it is not that Wordsworth's lines utterly forbid parody. Surely, if he had wanted to, Carroll could have embellished "Such seemed this Man, not all alive nor dead, / Nor all asleep" by adding something like (but better than) "Nor scrubbing scones nor eating flies / Nor starting in to weep." He apparently wanted to use Wordsworth's dramatic situation as a scaffolding more than he wanted to use Wordsworth's poem as a source for parody.

The later version of Carroll's poem, the one that appears in *Looking-Glass*, is even farther from Wordsworth. The echo in the last two lines has entirely disappeared, and so has all reference to moors. Instead of situating his aged man on a romantic and evocative moor Carroll sits him on a gate. Compared to the earlier version, the nonsense is better, the parody less.

Nevertheless, Carroll himself did call the poem a parody, in a letter to his uncle—but he went on to modify his use of the term: "'Sitting on a Gate' *is* a parody, though not as to style or metre—but its plot is borrowed from Wordsworth's 'Resolution and Independence'..." (*Letters*). Carroll uses the term "parody" for lack of a better word, to describe his borrowing of the plot, or dramatic situation, his use of the poem as a scaffolding. He goes on to indicate what in Wordsworth's poem he might well like to satirize, for it is "a poem that has always amused me a good deal (though it is by no means a comic poem) by the absurd way in which the poet goes on questioning the poor old leech-gatherer, making him tell his history over and over again, and never attending to what he says. Wordsworth ends with a moral—an example I have *not* followed." Carroll uses Wordsworth's dramatic situation here, but doing so, though it may poke fun at the narrator's greater interest in his own thoughts than in human interaction, does not undermine Wordsworth's sentiments, his praise of resolution, nor his communing with nature, nor his introspection. And the final version of the poem has strayed far enough from the original that Carroll needs to stress to his uncle that it *is* a parody.

We may be too eager to find satiric comment on Wordsworth in Carroll's poem, since the convenient label for the poem is parody and that is what parody is supposed to do. But while Carroll might not mind tweaking Wordsworth's nose when he starts platitudinizing, Carroll less clearly satirizes Wordsworth than he does Watts in the crocodile poem. And in other derived poems in *Looking-Glass*, such as that sired by Scott, the original neither pedantic nor moralistic, it is even harder to find what Carroll could be satirizing. The complexity of the relationship between Carroll's and Wordsworth's poems, or Carroll's and Scott's, a relationship not easily defined by our usual interpretation of "parody," complements the complexity of Carroll's nonsense and absurdity, which both reveres and defies, both orders and disorders, both closes and opens.

Another way in which Carroll's verse is humorous and nonsensical, in addition to parodying and playing with forms from the "real" world, is through what Elizabeth Sewell calls "a careful addiction to the concrete," [*The Field of Nonsense* (London, 1952)]. Instead of evoking a twinkling star and comparing it to a diamond, Carroll makes a bat twinkle like a tea-tray. Or he unites shoes, ships and sealing wax, or cabbages and kings. Yet not all of Carroll's verse is humorous in precisely this way. Some of it is less concrete and complete in itself, and part of its humor lies in how it integrates with the surrounding narrative. And since little or no attention has been paid to this other source of humor, I am going to concentrate on it at the expense of "careful concreteness." Again, as with the parodic playing with form, the humor derives from a varying tension, or confrontation, between opening and closing the verse: the concreteness and completeness tend to close it, while the integration with the narrative opens it. In *Wonderland* the King of Hearts attempts to integrate verse into the story when he uses the lines beginning "*They told me you had been to her*" as evidence of the Knave's guilt. Yet the ambiguous pronoun references in the lines invite all interpretations—and substantiate none. And the King's attempt to use this verse as evidence ironically substantiates its inadmissibility and hence underscores the disjunction between verse and story. Much of the humor of the verse derives from the use the King makes of it.

Looking-Glass verse tends to be even more integrated with the narrative. Both form and content are integrated, the latter in four ways. I will first discuss the integration of the content, and then turn to the form.

Overall, the content integrates with the prose thematically. Alice finally says, with only

slight exaggeration, that the poetry was "all about fishes." (And in the context of playing with kittens, and frequently thinking about eating, it is not amiss to dream about fishes.) In addition, some of the verse relates directly to the action: the Red Queen sings a lullaby when the White Queen wants to nap; and the creatures sing toasts at the closing banquet. Some of the verse is interpreted by the characters, who thereby attempt, as it were, to accommodate the verse to the narrative: Humpty Dumpty interprets "Jabberwocky"; and even the Tweedles offer some interpretations of "The Walrus and the Carpenter." Finally, some of the verse is enacted in the story: notably, the nursery rhymes come to life.

In providing sources for Looking-glass characters, the nursery rhymes strengthen the integration of verse and story. Much as Wonderland creatures sprout from metaphoric proverbs (except for the Queen of Hearts and company, derived in part from a nursery rhyme but also from playing cards), such Looking-glass creatures as Humpty Dumpty and the Tweedles derive from nursery rhymes. As Roger Henkle notes, the careers of the nursery-rhyme creatures "are predetermined by the nursery rhymes about them" ["The Mad Hatter's World," in *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 49, 1973]—they derive, in other words, from entire verse-stories, not from mere phrases. Or, even if the creatures are ignorant of their predetermining verses, Alice and the reader are not, and we see how the verse does indeed determine actions, how highly integrated verse and narrative are. In *Wonderland*, on the other hand, while the King acts as if the previous behavior of the Knave of Hearts has been described by a nursery rhyme, Alice and the reader are not convinced. The nursery rhyme does not have determining force there—it is merely posited—while nursery rhymes do affect Looking-glass world, the verse does affect the narrative: Humpty Dumpty does come crashing down . . .

Much of the humor of Humpty Dumpty's verse derives from its integration with the narrative, its interruptions, its incompleteness. Some critics find this the least satisfactory of Carroll's verse, and while it is certainly not the best it does become better if we look at it not in isolation but in context. At times the proper unit of analysis is not the poem by itself but the entire dialogue, of which the poem is just part.

Like Humpty Dumpty's poem, if not always to the same degree, the *Looking-Glass*, poems are surprisingly integrated into the story, thematically and even physically. Of course, they remain typographically distinct from the prose as well—and again there is a tension between opening and closing. Another site for this tension is the overall structure of *Looking-Glass*. In fact, the greater merging of poetry and prose, compared to *Wonderland*, may in part compensate for a more rigid, closed structure in *Looking-Glass*. Where *Wonderland* describes a relatively aimless wandering, *Looking-Glass* describes a prescribed progression toward a goal, as Alice moves across the chessboard. The individual chapters reinforce the structure by corresponding to individual squares. Carroll counteracts the rigidity of this structure in several ways. One is his placement of lines of asterisks: in *Wonderland* these asterisks, signalling Alice's changes in size, can appears at the end of a chapter, coinciding with and reinforcing a narrative boundary; in *Looking-Glass*, though, Carroll seems careful not to place asterisks, here signalling movement to the next square, at the end of a chapter. Thus Carroll dissipates, a little, the clear demarcations of his narrative. Similarly, in *Looking-Glass*, Carroll sometimes does not complete a sentence begun in one chapter until the following chapter: again, Carroll is ameliorating the strict division into chapters. It is as if he wanted to attenuate the rigid boundaries imposed by the chessboard structure. The greater integration of the verse may be similarly compensatory. It attenuates the rigidities of the external scaffolding of the book, much as narrative plays against and dissipates the external scaffolding of the Ulysses story in *Ulysses*.

In fact, Carroll's integration of verse and narrative in *Looking-Glass* is one of the many ways in which he anticipates twentieth-century literature. In some ways *Wonderland* seems rather modern—as in its associative, non-sequential plotting—and in some ways *Looking-Glass* anticipates current fiction. One such way is the way Carroll incorporates verse. His *Looking-Glass* parodies are not true parodies but rather they play against the scaffolding of pre-existing poems, like some of Yeats's poetry, which uses materials in his *A Vision*, yet the images in, say, the Byzantium poems do not need to be followed back to their source before we can appreciate them. Carroll's parodies too can stand alone, divorced from their sources. Though not from

the narrative. For the relationship between verse and narrative also seems modern. Recent writers like Vladimir Nabokov, Thomas Pynchon, and Robert Coover have incorporated verse in their novels yet subverted strict boundaries. In Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, for instance, the novel's plot grows out of footnotes presumably annotating a poem: the poem is far from a mere set piece that a character happens to recite. These novelists carry further certain hints in Carroll's work, going farther than he in merging verse and narrative, fiction and reality.

The interaction of poem and narrative in *Looking-Glass* may thus be approaching twentieth-century forms of interpenetration. And Carroll's humor derives in part from this integration and in part from the opposing tendency toward concrete completeness. Likewise it derives in part from parody and in part from simply playing with "real"-world forms. The humor and nonsense and absurdity depend on a confrontation between opposites, a confrontation that we cannot quite resolve in "real"-world terms. Defining "glory" as "a nice knock-down argument" disagrees with our usual use of the term. It is hard even to make it agree metaphorically, as we can when glory is described as clouds that we trail as we come from God. Instead, the odd juxtaposition, the unresolved confrontation, makes us laugh, strikes us as absurd. And we resolve the disparity, a little, by calling it nonsense, something that need not overturn our comfortable real world. Yet despite its resolution it still hints at revolution, still hints at a more serious questioning of reality.

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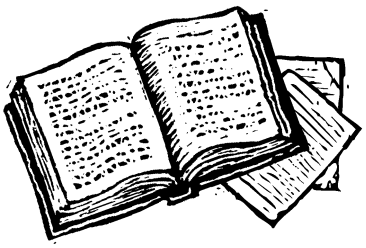
Ye Goatherd Gods

SIR PHILIP SIDNEY

1593

Published posthumously in 1593, having been written sometime between 1577 and 1580, Sir Philip Sidney's poem "Ye Goatherd Gods" was published as part of *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*. Generally shortened to *Arcadia*, this work is a collection of poems that collectively relate a pastoral romance; Sidney wrote the poems as a way to entertain his sister while he was staying with her. A pastoral work is one that concerns shepherds and their lives and is generally emotional and centered on love themes. Sidney actually wrote two versions of *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*. The first one (dubbed *The Old Arcadia*) was later revised, to be referred to as *The New Arcadia*.

"Ye Goatherd Gods" relates the woes of two shepherds who love the same woman. She has left them both, however, and the two shepherds are dejected and heartbroken. They cry out to the gods, to nature, and to the heavens in their angst, and everything they see is altered because of their sorrows. The poem is hyperbolic and highly emotional, with the two speakers engaged in a traditional pastoral singing match.



One of the features of "Ye Goatherd Gods" that makes it such a unique pastoral is that it is written in the form of a double sestina. This is a very specific form of poetry, one that requires discipline and command of language. Sidney so skillfully employs this form that the reader only notices it upon giving the poem careful examination.



Sir Philip Sidney (The Library of Congress)

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Sir Philip Sidney was born at Penshurst, Kent, England, on November 30, 1554, to Lady Mary and Sir Henry Sidney, the latter a lord deputy of Ireland and lord president of the Marches of Wales. Sir Henry Sidney's royal appointment in Wales kept him away from home for much of the young Sidney's childhood. Sidney's mother later became a lady-in-waiting to Queen Elizabeth. She was so closely associated with the queen's care that she contracted smallpox while attending to the queen during her recovery from the illness in 1562. Unfortunately, the disease disfigured Lady Mary's face to the extent that she could no longer appear in court.

Sidney began school at Shrewsbury School in October 1564, along with a boy named Fulke Greville, who would grow to be a close, lifelong friend of Sidney's. In fact, Greville pursued writing and eventually became Sidney's biographer. At Shrewsbury, Sidney learned languages (including Latin), religion, grammar, rhetoric, mathematics, and other subjects typical of a classical education. Sidney attended Oxford but did not graduate. He traveled more widely than was common for a young man in his time, seeing a great deal of Europe and making well-connected friends along the way. He was in Paris for the horror of the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre and the Protestant-Catholic rioting and violence that followed throughout France. Sidney himself was a staunch Protestant, as his friend and mentor Hubert Languet strongly guided him in that direction in his youth.

Upon returning to England, Sidney settled into life as an important courtier, going on diplomatic visits and spurring on young authors he found promising. Among these was Edmund Spenser. Unfortunately, Sidney was temporarily relieved of his position in the court because of his vocal criticism of the queen's potential engagement to a French family. He spent his time away from court with his sister and wrote a lengthy pastoral romantic poetry series called *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*, which includes "Ye Goatherd Gods." Sidney's ability to characterize different types of women in this work and others continues to be a point of acclaim among literary scholars.

After learning that certain Puritan scholars were then writing against poetry, Sidney wrote his *The Defence of Poesy*. Around 1576, Sidney began the first sonnet cycle, and one of the greatest, in Elizabethan literature. It is called *Astrophil and Stella*, and it reflects the agony and ecstasy of a man who loves a woman who is minimally responsive to his passion for her. Scholars agree that these poems came from Sidney's lengthy relationship with Penelope Devereaux. While the two eventually married other people, the poetry reveals much about Sidney's feelings for her.

In 1585, Sidney responded to the call for young soldiers to fight for Protestantism in the Low Countries against Spain. He was seriously injured on September 13, 1586, and died at Anhelm, in the Netherlands, twenty-six days later, at the age of thirty-two. All of his poetry was published posthumously to great acclaim.

POEM SUMMARY

Stanza 1

The first stanza of "Ye Goatherd Gods" is spoken by Strephon. He and Klaius are shepherds in Sidney's larger work *Arcadia*, in which this poem originally appeared. In this stanza, Strephon

appeals to the gods, nymphs, and satyrs, all of whom are common figures in pastoral poetry. These figures and the landscape—valleys, grass, and woods—establish the setting. Strephon then advises the gods, nymphs, and satyrs to grant the favor of listening to his complaining music. He says that his woes come in the morning and stay with him through the evening.

Stanza 2

In the second stanza, Klaius appeals to the heavens in his woe. He addresses first Mercury (which can be seen in the evening), then Diana the huntress (which is the moon), and finally the morning star (or Venus). As in the first stanza, this stanza marks out time by the passing of the day. Klaius also uses Strephon's approach of including landscape in his stanza, likewise emphasizing the outdoor and pastoral. Klaius's fifth line echoes Strephon's fourth line exactly; in both, the shepherds ask the ones they address to lend their ears to the music of complaint. In the last line, Klaius admits that his woeful song makes Echo grow weary in the forests.

Stanza 3

In the third stanza, Strephon recalls his carefree days in the forests enjoying shade and game playing. He was known and loved for his music but now is banished because of his despair. Instead of playing enjoyable music, he is now like a screech owl to himself. The days of contentment and delight in music are gone, destroyed by his sorrows.

Stanza 4

Klaius, in the fourth stanza, also remembers back to a simpler time of hunting in the forest and personifying music of the valleys. Now that his sadness has overtaken him, the whole day is so dark and absent of light that he feels that all day is evening time. His perception of the world is that it is now overwhelming and impossible to conquer. He likens a molehill to a mountain and claims that his crying has replaced music in filling the vales.

Stanza 5

In the fifth stanza, Strephon describes his music as a swan's song; the swan supposedly only sang before it died. He says that only his wails greet the morning, and they are strong enough to climb mountains. His thoughts are no longer like the forests he once loved but are now like barren deserts. It has also been a long time, he says, since he experienced joy or a respected place in society.

Stanza 6

Klaius says in the sixth stanza that it has been a long time since the other people in the valley—who are happy—asked him to stop disrupting their lives with his music. He has grown accustomed to hating both the evening and the morning, as well as to having his thoughts pursue him like wild animals. He wonders if he might not be better underneath a mountain, presumably meaning dead and buried.

Stanza 7

In the seventh stanza, Strephon relates his changed perceptions of the world since his sorrow overtook him. He now sees majestic mountains as gloomy valleys. Strephon anthropomorphizes nature by projecting onto it his own emotions, past and present. What he once saw in the mountains was what he saw in himself, and he now sees them as flattened and dejected, just as he sees himself. In the forest, he hears nightingales and owls, but their music is intermingled. Where he once found solace in the morning, he now feels only the serene that comes in the evening; *serene* here refers not to peacefulness but to damp evening air that was believed to make people sick.

Stanza 8

In the eighth stanza, Klaius resumes Strephon's discussion of the evening air, finding filth in it. He adds that at sunrise, he detects a foul odor; this is the scent of the flowers, but his perception of the world has changed as dramatically as Strephon's has. Instead of finding beauty in the sight and scent of the flowers, he finds ugliness and offense. His perception is so altered that he describes the lovely music of the morning as being like the horrific cries of men being killed in the forest.

Stanza 9

Strephon says in the ninth stanza that he would like to set fire to the forests and bid the sun farewell every night. He sends curses to those who find music. He envies the mountains and hates the valleys. His hatred extends to every part of every day—the night, the evening, the day, and the morning.

Stanza 10

In the tenth stanza, Klaius also delivers a curse, but his is for himself. He describes himself as lower than the lowest valley. He has no desire ever to see another evening, and he proclaims his own self-loathing. He even covers his ears to block the sound of music.

Stanza 11

At last, in the eleventh stanza, Strephon talks directly about the woman he and Klaius love. Reading more of *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*, the reader would know that the object of the shepherds' love is Urania. Urania was one of the Greek muses, and her area of influence was astronomy and astrology. During the Renaissance, Urania was adopted as the muse of Christian poets.

Strephon says that the woman creates music, and it is perfect. Her beauty outshines the morning, and her grandeur surpasses the mountains. The landscape is depicted as having beauty and stateliness, but it is no match for the woman the shepherds' love. For all their complaining about the landscape, it must actually be beautiful to them for them to compare their love to it. Strephon says that when she left, he was cast down into utter darkness.

Stanza 12

Klaius begins the twelfth stanza with the same two words that Strephon used to begin the eleventh stanza. This parallel not only keeps the reader's attention on the new subject of the woman but also indicates that Klaius is continuing Strephon's mode of expression. Klaius says that compared to the woman they love, the Alps are nothing but valleys. He adds that her slightest utterance brings music into existence, and her actions dictate the movements of the heavens and the lushness of the pastures. In their infatuation, the shepherds embrace hyperbole in describing Urania.

Stanza 13

The concluding stanza, unlike the preceding six-line stanzas, is a tristich. A tristich is a stanza with three lines that do not necessarily rhyme (unlike a tercet, which is a three-lined rhyming stanza). In the tristich, Strephon and Klaius speak together. They reiterate that the nature that surrounds them will serve as witnesses to their sorrow. They say that their music actually makes nature wretched. They conclude with the declaration that the same plaintive song is what they sing in the morning and in the evening.

THEMES

Longing in Love

Both shepherds are so overtaken by their love for the absent Urania that each has made his heartbreak his identity and the lens through which he sees the world. Their words are all driven by how much they miss her and long to be near her again. To Strephon and Klaius, the world is impacted by their sorrow; nature is redefined by it; their existence is made miserable because of it; and the world cannot even function without Urania's presence. Even time is reduced to a system by which the two mournful shepherds can only mark the passing of their seemingly endless suffering. Although their expression is hyperbolized, most readers who have been in love—or infatuated, more accurately—can relate to the way the shepherds feel about Urania.

Longing in love is the predominant theme of "Ye Goatherd Gods," to the exclusion of any other theme of emotional experience. In fact, other themes of the work emerge from this central theme. The shepherds are characterized as one-dimensional, and their reliance on hyperbole reinforces this. The reader learns nothing of the backgrounds, families, or life experiences of the shepherds. The reader must wonder if Strephon and Klaius are rivals, but they say nothing of their relationship with one another. In the context of this poem alone, their entire relationship seems to be based on their mutual longing and understanding of the other's deep suffering in longing for Urania.

Indeed, a unique aspect of the two shepherds' declarations of love for the same woman is that they do not appear to be rivals with one another, or even to be competing to see which one loves her more. Typically, a man passionately in love with the same woman as another man would regard the other man as an enemy; he would most likely seek to hurt, kill, or at least tarnish the reputation of the other man, to make it easier for him to win the love of the woman. Another potential mode of combat between two such rivals is a competition to see which one loves her—and presumably deserves her—more. In such a case, each utterance

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY

- The poet Edmund Spenser was encouraged and patronized by Sidney. Read his masterpiece *Shepheards Calendar* and write an essay discussing similarities and differences between Spenser's and Sidney's works.
- The sestina is one of the most difficult forms of poetry to write. It consists of six six-lined stanzas followed by a tristich. The sestina does not rhyme but follows a specific pattern using the end words from each line. Write an abbreviated sestina following the pattern of the first three stanzas of Sidney's "Ye Goatherd Gods," and write a tristich to end your poem. You may write on any topic you choose.
- Read sonnets from Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*, looking for at least one that mirrors the emotional intensity of "Ye Goatherd Gods." What general statements can you make about the nature of love based on these very different works about the same topic by the same poet? Write an essay on the topic.
- Research Elizabethan England, delving into the social, political, and cultural climate, especially in relation to literature and poetry. Write a report on your findings.



Countess of Pembroke, sister of Sir Philip Sidney and an important influence on the poet. "Ye Goatherd Gods" is included in The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia *(Hulton Archive | Getty Images)*

would be intended to outdo the other man's statements. But here, the two shepherds are united in their shared feelings for Urania. They seem to be so focused on her and on their personal pain that they do not notice that they should perhaps be in competition. They may realize that she is gone forever, in which case the notion of rivalry is meaningless.

Nature as a Reflection of Human Emotion

A theme secondary to longing in love is that of nature as an external reflection of internal emotional experience. Everywhere the shepherds look, they see the world through the eyes of their own suffering. As a result, they see the mountains as savage and majestic, the valleys as woeful and overtrodden, and the forests as dark and secretive. Further, everything in nature seems to have changed its qualities completely. Mountains have become flat, while molehills have become mountainous; the morning now brings danger and illness instead of hope and light; flowers have a stench instead of a pleasant aroma; and deserts instead of forests represent Strephon's thoughts. All of these perceptions are the shepherds' projections of their own emotional states onto the world around them. Because their inner worlds have become dark and hopeless, that is how they now perceive the world.

Another instance in which the external world reflects the emotional experiences of Strephon and Klaius occurs toward the end of the poem, when Klaius explains to the reader that the world cannot function properly without Urania. Her words bring music to life and cause the sun to rise and bring morning to the day. The truth, of course, is that she brings a sense of music and joy to his world, and he seeks hope for the future in her.

STYLE

Double Sestina

"Ye Goatherd Gods" is unique in that it is written as a double sestina. The sestina is among the most challenging forms of poetry, and Sidney wrote here a double sestina. Upon first reading, the poem seems like a simple poetic dialogue between two lovelorn shepherds. However, upon closer inspection, the masterful form reveals the skill of the poet. A sestina is a poem with six six-lined stanzas, followed by a concluding tristich (a stanza of three lines, different from a tercet because a tercet rhymes).

The other major structural feature of the sestina is its end-word patterns. The sestina does not rhyme, but the same six words are used to end the lines in all of the six-lined stanzas. These follow a particular pattern. The first stanza determines the pattern, so it can be represented as *abcdef*. In the next stanza, the end words from the previous stanza are used at the ends of the new lines in the following order: from the last line, from the first line, from the fifth line, from the second line, from the fourth line, and finally from the third line. Thus, the second stanza follows the pattern *faebdc*. Each stanza then follows this same formula to derive its end-word pattern. The third stanza follows the pattern *cfdabe*, and so on. The tristich follows the end-word pattern of the last three lines of the previous stanza but also includes within its three lines the other three end words. In a typical sestina, the tristich pattern is *eca*, with the words represented by *bdf* also included in the lines.

What makes "Ye Goatherd Gods" unique is that it is a double sestina, meaning that instead of six stanzas, there are twelve. Sidney takes the poem through the entire end-word pattern twice. In Sidney's tristich, the pattern is different: he uses the first three lines (instead of the last three) from the stanza before it, which are *bdf* ("valleys," "music," and "evening"). Readers can easily find the *eca* words ("morning," "forests," and "mountains") worked into the lines.

Pastoral

Sidney's poem is a pastoral because it features two shepherds in a rustic, outdoor setting. The speakers say nothing of the indoors, and although they never speak about their flocks or their work (beyond subtle references to grass and valleys), they do call on the goatherd gods, and the context of the larger work lets the reader know that they are shepherds. In traditional Greek pastorals, eclogues were a common approach to writing the work. An eclogue is a dialogue or singing match between two shepherds; Virgil famously wrote in this form. Here, Sidney draws on the rich tradition of the Greek pastoral to give his speakers a setting and a way of interacting, although they never address one another. They are speaking in turns about the same topic, their heartache over the absence of Urania. The fact that Urania is the object of their love further reinforces the pastoral quality of the poem because she was a Greek muse. Similarly, the first stanza's calling to nymphs and satyrs helps identify the Greek roots of the form right away. Pastorals are traditionally emotional and often about lost or unrequited love, as is the case in "Ye Goatherd Gods."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Elizabethan England

Sidney was born in 1554 and died in 1586, and Queen Elizabeth was in power from 1558 to 1603. This means that for all but the first four years of Sidney's life, Elizabeth was ruling over England. In that Sidney was a titled man, a traveler, a courtier, a poet and patron, and then a soldier, the queen had considerable influence in his life. Elizabeth's reign continued the Tudor monarchy in England, and she was beloved at home and respected abroad. She was known for being cunning, headstrong, and politically astute, and under her leadership, England grew more secure financially and militarily. The Elizabethan years were a time of growing nationalism, and though Elizabeth never married and thus provided no heir to her throne, she left England strong and secure.

Despite the strength of Elizabeth's reign, religious tensions between Protestants and Catholics plagued England and Europe. Elizabeth, a Protestant, played a part in bringing those tensions to a head when she established the Anglican Church and took part in anti-Catholic persecution. The Vatican and English Catholics wanted to see Mary Stuart, a Catholic, ascend the throne. As a staunch Protestant, Sidney was safe from persecution as long as Elizabeth remained in power.

Elizabeth was in fact a great patroness of the arts, encouraging such luminaries as Edmund

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **1593:** Religious tensions between Catholics and Protestants remain extreme throughout England and Europe. In England, Queen Elizabeth (a Protestant) is in power, although there is a movement to try to install her cousin Mary Stuart (a Catholic) in her place. Queen Elizabeth establishes the Anglican Church, putting the full power of the throne behind Protestantism.

  Today: Catholics and Protestants coexist peacefully the world over. The notable exception to this is in Northern Ireland, where tensions began in the seventeenth century. Although a 1921 treaty held violence at bay for a while, rioting resumed in the 1960s, continuing into the 1990s. In the 1990s and early 2000s, Britain considered returning home rule to Northern Ireland because of the violence.
- **1593:** Writers rely on rich patrons to support them and their art. For example, a poet might be paid a sum to write a poem for a formal occasion of the state. In this era, writing is done for entertainment, praise, and social standing.

  Today: Thousands of writers make a living with their craft thanks to numerous publishers and high literacy rates. In the twenty-first century, outlets such as blogs and other Internet forums allow people to write for a public without having to work with a publisher. Successful bloggers are even able to sell ad space to generate income.
- **1593:** Communities rely heavily on local farms and animal husbandry because goods from distant locations are not readily available. Because of this, occupations such as farming and shepherding are relatively common. There is, however, a sizeable social gap between laborers and the elite, despite the fact that pastorals romanticize farmworkers and the lifestyle of the shepherd.

  Today: Because of the efficiency and convenience of trade across long distances, as well as advancements in food preservation, the traditional shepherding lifestyle is practically nonexistent outside of developing nations.

Spenser, William Byrd, and William Shakespeare. She administered much of her support of the arts through her officers and favorites. Courtiers who were successful in garnering patronage could then act as patrons for other artists and writers. Besides Sidney, Sir Walter Raleigh and Sir Christopher Hatton were successful courtiers who enjoyed power and wealth as a result of their skill in the court. Even Sidney's sister, the Countess of Pembroke, enjoyed success as a patron in Elizabeth's England.

Pastoral Poetry

The first pastoral is believed to have been written in the third century B.C.E. by Theocritus. In Greece, the pastoral developed as a form from that time, taking on specific characteristics. Pastoral works were either dialogues or singing matches between two shepherds, often called eclogues. This is the style that was adopted by Sidney for "Ye Goatherd Gods." Greek pastorals were also sometimes written as lovesick monologues or elegies for lost loved ones. In England, the heyday of pastorals was between 1550 and 1750, when poets sometimes likened acquaintances to romanticized shepherds and shepherdesses. Some of the most famous pastorals are Edmund Spenser's *Shepheards Calendar*, John Milton's "Lycidas," and Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Adonis." The pastoral has been adapted to other genres, such as drama, and the term has been expanded to include anything with a rustic setting.



Title page of The Countesse of Pembroke's Arcadia*, by Sir Philip Sidney* *(© INTERFOTO / Pressebildagentur / Alamy)*

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

Scholars have written much about Sidney's work in general, some about *Arcadia*, and only a little about "Ye Goatherd Gods." However, scholars have made much of Sidney's adherence to the traditional pastoral form and especially to his accomplishment in writing a double sestina. Commenting on *Arcadia*, Walter R. Davis, in the *Reference Guide to English Literature*, writes that Sidney's characters are often philosophical, wondering about the degree of control people have over their world and events. Davis remarks, "Sidney's sophisticated narrative persona views these actions with objectivity and, frequently, with wry comedy." Calling special attention to "Ye Goatherd Gods," Davis refers to it as "the great double sestina," a "really accomplished" poem. Commenting on the historical context of the work, David Loades, writing in the *English Historical Review*, reminds readers that the allegorical slant of *Arcadia* and other pastoral epics has been understood and appreciated by readers and critics for many years. In the case of *Arcadia*, Sidney communicates concern about England, the weaknesses of Queen Elizabeth (though he also knew her strengths), and his traditional view of women. He adds, "Both Arcadias represent the intellectual and moral anguish of men who believed that their ship was being steered towards the icebergs by a pilot whom they would much rather have trusted and loved."

In an extended analysis of Sidney's characterization of the two shepherds, Gary L. Litt, writing in *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, begins his exploration with the bold statement that "Ye Goatherd Gods" is "a masterful demonstration of formal and verbal artifice." As have so many scholars and students of poetry, Litt acknowledges the achievement of the poem's form, genre, tone, and rhetoric:

> Sidney not only masters an unnatural and difficult form, but also presents a mini-drama in which there is subtle differentiation of Klaius and Strephon, a definite pattern of emotional and psychological movement, and an attempt to examine several Renaissance rhetorical and philosophical stances through the characters, styles, and thoughts of the shepherds.

In an 1886 issue of *Littell's Living Age*, the famous critic Edmund Gosse expresses being divided on Sidney's work. He does write glowingly about *Arcadia*, describing it as "deserving more patient attention than has yet been given to it." He also writes, "That famous pastoral is, in a certain sense, one of the most interesting books that ever were published; in the eyes of the literary historian it is a belvidere from which he looks up and down the whole range of English literature."

Assessing Sidney's writing as a whole, however, Gosse finds it somewhat overvalued. He explains, "The positive merit of the bulk of his writings is almost pathetically inadequate to any excess of praise." So, in Gosse's opinion, *Arcadia* is exceptionally strong amid Sidney's other work. Another criticism is offered by William Ernest Henley, who does not find *Arcadia* to be impressive at all. In *Views and Reviews: Essays in Appreciation*, he remarks, "In that 'cold pastoral' he is trying to give breath and substance to as thin and frigid a fashion as has ever afflicted literature."

CRITICISM

Jennifer Bussey
Bussey is an independent writer specializing in literature. In the following essay, she explores Sir Philip Sidney's use of sense imagery to heighten emotion in "Ye Goatherd Gods."

Sir Philip Sidney's "Ye Goatherd Gods" is a pastoral poem written impressively as a double sestina. Sidney wrote the poem as part of *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia* (a long work that includes prose, poetry, and other forms, often shortened to *Arcadia*), all for the entertainment of his younger sister, with whom he was staying at the time. "Ye Goatherd Gods" is, from a content point of view, fairly straightforward. Two shepherds, Strephon and Klaius, are suffering from heartbreak in being absent from Urania, whom they both love desperately. From a characterization and emotional standpoint, the poem does not stray far from this basic theme of longing.

There are other elements of the poem, however, by which Sidney adds complexity. The form of the poem, to be sure, is very sophisticated and complicated, yet the poem itself does not suffer from the constraints of the form. There are subtle differences in the characterizations of the two shepherds, and a very careful reader will appreciate Sidney's added complexity here, too. Furthermore, within the vivid, highly emotional imagery used by the shepherds to describe their woe, Sidney adds a dimension to their expression in the way he uses sense imagery. As one-dimensional as Strephon and Klaius themselves may be emotionally, the sense imagery they invoke is multidimensional. Through sound, sight, smell, and touch, Sidney brings his rustic setting to life, allowing the reader to imagine how that setting looks and feels to the shepherds.

The first sense Sidney calls into play is hearing. In the first stanza, Strephon pleads with the gods, nymphs, and satyrs to lend him their ears for his plaintive song of woe. Even before that, he makes subtle reference to sound when he characterizes the forests as silent. This plea prepares the reader for what will be numerous references to sound, and specifically to music, throughout the poem. This poem is an eclogue, a form of pastoral featuring two shepherds in dialogue or in a singing match. Strephon's mention of a song followed by the shift to a second speaker reinforces the poem's participation in the rich pastoral tradition that inspired Sidney here.



AS ONE-DIMENSIONAL AS STREPHON AND KLAIUS THEMSELVES MAY BE EMOTIONALLY, THE SENSE IMAGERY THEY INVOKE IS MULTIDIMENSIONAL."

Strephon is forthright about the fact that his music is of a complaining nature, which also sets the tone for the reader. Armed with this information, the reader knows the emotional situation of the shepherd and can expect the poem to be emotional and somber. Strephon's plea is immediately followed by Klaius's plea to the heavens and the gods, and he likewise begs them to hear his song of complaint.

The landscape in "Ye Goatherd Gods" is frequently described in terms of sound. While Strephon alluded to the silence of the forest, Klaius describes the valley as loud, filled with the sound of his woeful voice. To further emphasize the auditory aspect of the setting, Klaius comments that Echo has grown weary from his cries. His cries, according to the fourth stanza, have replaced music; sounds that delight the ear are now gone, and mournful music and cries are there instead. Even more horrific, Klaius later imagines that instead of music coming from the forest, he hears the frightening sounds of men being murdered. In the tristich at the end of the poem, both shepherds speak in unison, saying that their music has made their surroundings wretched. Their perception of the world is so colored by their own intense emotions that they imagine they have the power, through their sounds, to corrupt nature and turn it into something awful and ugly. These descriptive features of the landscape give the unfeeling natural world a strong emotional quality.

Sidney uses birds to bring another layer of sound imagery to the poem. Strephon regards himself as his own screech owl in the morning, an image that contrasts with the expected sounds of pleasant chirping in the morning. Even hearing a nearby rooster would be more pleasant than

WHAT DO I READ NEXT?



- *Writing after Sidney: The Literary Response to Sir Philip Sidney, 1586–1640* (2006), by Gavin Alexander, relates the influence Sidney had after his death and the posthumous publication of his work. Alexander gives special attention to the writings of those closest to Sidney, such as his sister and a lifelong friend.
- Edited by Katherine Duncan-Jones, *Sir Philip Sidney: The Major Works* (2002) contains *Old Arcadia*, *New Arcadia*, *The Defence of Poesy*, *Astrophil and Stella*, and other poetry, prose, and letters by Sidney, as well as eulogies written about Sidney after his death at a young age.
- *The Elizabethan Renaissance: The Life of the Society* (2000), by A. L. Rowse, presents the lives of people in Elizabethan England from the elite to the commoners, with details about the routines, practices, and beliefs that permeated their everyday lives.
- *Philip Sidney: A Double Life* (2001), by Alan Stewart, examines the legends surrounding the poet. Stewart aims to give readers a more honest portrayal of this Elizabethan figure.
- Edited by Arthur Symons, *A Pageant of Elizabethan Poetry* (1906) is a collection of writings by the major poets of the Elizabethan age, including Sidney. Symons also includes selections from lesser-known poets of the time.

being one's own screeching owl. In the seventh stanza, the nightingale, too, learns how to make the owl's sounds instead of continuing to make its own pleasant music. In the fifth stanza, Strephon refers to his swan song, the song believed to foretell a swan's death—the last utterance of a beautiful bird knowing it is dying. This, Strephon says, is what he hears every morning. Over and over in the poem, the shepherds twist expectations of music. In the tenth stanza, Strephon must cover his ears so that the music will not make him go insane. Instead of being cheerful, festive, or peaceful, music has become sorrowful and unwelcome. Klaius, in turn, admits in the sixth stanza that his music irritates other people and drives them away from him. Whether at work or at leisure, others do not want his music to interfere with their lives.

Of course, there is one music in the poem that is sweet, delightful, and perfect, and that is the music from Urania. Klaius says that her words bring music into existence.

Another prominent sense used by Sidney to convey the shepherds' internal reality is sight. All around them, the shepherds see a landscape that is overwhelming or dulled by their broken hearts. Despite having valleys, mountains, and forests around them, they see no beauty but in their memories of Urania. The mountains are intimidating and menacing, described as being savage and monstrous. In the middle of the poem, on the other hand, Strephon declares that he sees the mountains as having been reduced to low valleys. In the next stanza, Klaius describes seeing the dank air of the morning that threatens illness. Two stanzas later, he proclaims that he no longer desires to see the evening again. He would be just as happy not to see the nature that surrounds him because his perception is so changed by his sorrow. He sees nothing but danger and defeat.

The senses of smell and touch are present in the poem but with only one mention each. In the eighth stanza, Klaius notices the sun rising over the mountains, but rather than take in the beautiful and inspiring experience, he senses an offensive smell—that of the flowers on the mountain, opening to the morning sun. To anyone else, this would be a pleasing scent that would only enhance the whole experience. To Klaius, however, the scent is repulsive because everything that was once beautiful is tainted and ruined by the torment of his soul. The sense of touch is important at the end of the seventh stanza, when Strephon describes feeling the deadly serene, which is moist air believed to make people sick. He admits that he once found the evening pleasant and comforting, but now he feels this air on his skin and it threatens instead of comforts.

"Ye Goatherd Gods" is interesting on many levels. The emotional state of the shepherds is not something that the poem explores all that deeply, but through the imagery, hyperbole, and sense descriptions, Sidney brings great breadth

to those emotional states' expression. The sense images are relatable to the reader, which makes it easier to feel what the shepherds feel. Seeing through their eyes, hearing through their ears, feeling with their skin, and even smelling through their noses allows the reader the unique opportunity to become the shepherds and participate in their heightened emotional state. Many poets try to achieve this effect by writing about love in a universal way, so that the reader connects with the speaker through the emotion, but Sidney instead accomplishes such a connection through the senses.

Source: Jennifer Bussey, Critical Essay on "Ye Goatherd Gods," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2009.

Robert E. Stillman

In the following excerpt, Stillman examines Sidney's sources for "Ye Goatherd Gods," arguing that the poet's borrowings become a part of the overall theme of the sestina.

Astrophil boasts to Stella: "I am no pick-purse of another's wit." In general, both for himself and for his creator, his boast holds good. It is almost always more profitable to approach Sidney's poetry from the vantage of specific traditions than specific "sources." He covers his tracks unusually well. "Ye goat-herd gods" is an exception to this rule. It is deservedly the best known of *The Old Arcadia*'s poems, and, not surprisingly, it is the eclogue most frequently written about. Although some of this criticism has been helpful—Empson's and Kalstone's in particular—Sidney's sestina has suffered both by its treatment outside of the original context for which it was written and by an oversight which has allowed its most important "source" to go unrecognized. (We are actually discussing "motives" for writing since Sidney's debts are an integral part of the poem's meaning.) In "Ye goat-herd gods" he deviates from his usual methods of composition for a special purpose: the doubleness of his borrowings itself becomes a theme in a double sestina about the twin subjects of poetry and justice. Sidney acts the part of a pick-purse in order to clarify his critique of the two major traditions within the pastoral romance.

I

It has long been recognized that Sidney modelled his double sestina in part upon the fourth eclogue in Sannazaro's *Arcadia*. The similarities between the two songs are numerous and striking, ranging from the likeness of their poetic forms (both are double sestinas) to the resemblance of their subject matter (both are amorous complaints). What has escaped the attention of Sidney's critics is that "Ye goat-herd gods" has a more important model in a song included in Gaspar Gil Polo's pastoral romance, *Diana Enamorada*. Gil Polo's work is a continuation of Montemayor's *Diana*, one which operates as an overtly moral and didactically simplistic criticism of Italianate pastoral. He had little taste for the licensed indulgence of Sannazaro's brand of epicurean pastoralism, and nothing but scorn for the repetition of that epicureanism in Montemayor's romance. Sannazaro's shepherds are given the freedom to indulge their passions in seeking contentment. Gil Polo's are forced to moderate their desires according to the demands of reason. In one, nature is license; in the other, it is law. The two models for "Ye goat-herd gods" stand at opposite ends of the pastoral sheepcote.

> **"BY MERGING URANIA WITH ASTRAEA, SIDNEY IS ABLE TO COALESCE INTO A SINGLE IMAGE THE ACTION OF POETRY AND JUSTICE AS A KIND OF HARMONY."**

At the conclusion of the first book of *Diana Enamorada*, Tauriso and Berardo sing a complaint which begins "Pues ya se esconde el sol tras las montañas." The dramatic situation is almost identical to the one in Sidney's sestina. Like Strephon and Klaius, Gil Polo's shepherds are both in love with the same woman, a woman who scorns them, and, again, like Strephon and Klaius, they are described as being "commonly wont to go togither in company, and sing in emulation the one against the other" ("tenían costumbre de andar siempre de compañía, y cantar en competencia"). As is true of Sidney's shepherds, their appearances in the romance are confined to the sets of poems found at the end of each book. Even the setting is the same; "Pues ya se esconde el sol" is sung during the evening just as "Ye goat-herd gods" is.

Gil Polo's poem is not a sestina. Although written largely in ottava rima, it is best described

as a polymetrical song since it contains a variety of other stanzaic types. What we find Sidney setting out to do in "Ye goat-herd gods" is to superimpose a rhetorical device employed by Gil Polo upon Sannazaro's sestina form. The elaborate network of syntactic parallels which is incorporated into the paired stanzas of Sidney's sestina and which is responsible for a large portion of the poem's strangely haunting music, as one shepherd echoes the complaints of the other, is a device borrowed from "Pues ya se esconde el sol." Just as Strephon and Klaius do, Tauriso and Berardo give vent to their agonized passions and hopeless devotion in matched alternating stanzas, and, again like Sidney's shepherds, Gil Polo's never speak directly to each other. Their laments are self-contained.

. . . What happens in Gil Polo's poem and in Sidney's is that two solo laments are intertwined with one another in such a way as to increase our awareness of the painful monotony suffered by the lover in the prison of his desires. Sidney succeeds in generating more intensity in "Ye goat-herd gods" than is produced in either of his models because he combines in an entirely unprecedented fashion the built-in repetitive devices of the sestina form, doubled for double effect, with the rhetorical symmetry of syntactic parallelism. It is this creative synthesis which is chiefly responsible for the poem's unique power, and which ultimately explains its meaning.

II

"Pues ya se esconde el sol" is the most important model for "Ye goat-herd gods" not only because of the similarities of its dramatic situation and rhetorical structures, but because Gil Polo's thematic intentions resemble Sidney's. Like Strephon and Klaius, Berardo and Tauriso exemplify "constant faith and true love" ("fe constante y amor verdadero") at the same time that their behavior provides a warning against the ferocity of uncontrolled passion. This is not to suggest that "Ye goat-herd gods" has the didactic simplicity of Gil Polo's song. It does not. By making a series of alterations in his model, Sidney incorporated into his double sestina an altogether new set of complex symbolic meanings.

Sidney does not follow Gil Polo in drawing careful distinctions between his shepherds; Tauriso is bold and passionate, Berardo is timid and modest. The characters and behavior of Strephon and Klaius are made as uniform as the syntactic parallels between stanzas, principally as a means of reinforcing our awareness of the painful monotony of the lover's psychological state. Strephon and Klaius are gentlemen in disguise as shepherds, not real shepherds like Berardo and Tauriso. At the beginning of their sestina, they address the forest gods, nymphs, and heavenly deities, not their sheep. It is no surprise that they should occupy a considerably more exalted plane of experience. At the conclusion of Gil Polo's poem, Berardo and Tauriso provide alternate reminiscences of their beloved Diana as she dallies with her husband. Sidney's sestina ends with parallel accounts of the beloved, but the vision of Strephon and Klaius is of an entirely different kind. In spite of her "alta perfición," Diana is a real woman living in a real world; her absence has no consequence for anyone besides the shepherds. (In any case, as we discover, she is only hiding behind the next bush.) The Urania whose absence Strephon and Klaius lament is not a woman to be dallied with, nor is she the kind of lady a bush is likely to conceal. She is not a lady at all, but a complex literary image. Her absence from Arcadia is symbolic of the discontent and injustice reigning throughout the state at the close of the romance's fourth book.

Not only is Urania, as the muse of astronomy, an image of heavenliness—a heavenliness which has vanished from Arcadia—she is also, as other critics have noted, Venus Urania, the object of idealized love. After seeing Pyrocles and Musidorus descend into lust as they cuddle with the princesses in the grove and bedroom of Book III, we have no difficulty in understanding her absence. The celestial Venus, as Panofsky writes, "dwells in the highest, supercelestial zone of the universe, i.e., in the zone of the Cosmic Mind, and the beauty symbolized by her is the primary and universal splendour of divinity." These commonplace Renaissance associations with Urania are evoked by Sidney's sestina, but they cannot account for all or even the most important of her symbolic functions. Venus Urania *dwells* in the cosmic regions; Sidney's Urania has *departed*, presumably to them, leaving in her wake "eternal evening" and "spoiled forests, / Turning to deserts our best pastured mountains." What Sidney has set out to do by bestowing this role upon Urania is to merge her with Astraea, the goddess of justice, whose departure from the world signalled the beginning of the iron age. No reader of pastoral romance could miss the connection. As Ovid writes at the conclusion of his description of the four ages of man:

victa iacet pietas, et virgo caede madentis
ultima caelestum terras Astraea reliquit.

(Piety lay vanquished and the maiden Astraea,
last of the im-
mortals, abandoned the blood-soaked earth.)

The link which Sidney establishes between the muse and the goddess is not an arbitrary one. As Frances Yates points out, the female deity whom Astraea most resembles is the "Virgo Caelestis . . . associated with Urania"; and according to Bernard Silvestris, a medieval commentator, some writers refer to Venus Urania as Astraea, others as natural justice. The readiness with which both could be associated with Virgo, the sixth sign of the zodiac, made the conflation even easier. The frontispiece of Riccioli's astrological treatise, *Almagestum novum* (1651), contains a picture of Astraea as Urania.

Strephon and Klaius's mistress is called Urania rather than Astraea for one reason: because the subject of the eclogue is not justice but "everlasting justice," the cosmic power which Sidney invokes in the opening sentence of the fourth book of *The Old Arcadia*, and which reappears to restore Basilius to life at the romance's conclusion. As the narrator points out immediately before they sing, tying the sestina to the events of the prose world, "the general complaints of all men called in like question their particular griefs." It is fitting that Strephon and Klaius should lament the absence of justice in the opening complaint of the fourth eclogues. By doing so, they give expression to one of *The Old Arcadia*'s central themes, for it is Basilius's unjust abdication of his responsibilities as duke which ultimately accounts for the catastrophic events of the romance, events that culminate in the public and private misfortunes of the fourth book. Philanax had urged Basilius to let his people "see the benefits of your justice daily more and more." When Strephon and Klaius make their laments, Pyrocles and Musidorus are in prison for unjust acts of their own, and the Arcadian state is a chaos of contending factions. It is in order to escape the surrounding turmoil that Strephon and Klaius withdraw with the other shepherds from "the clamorous multitude" to "the western side of a hill." Their laments are made in isolation from the mainstream of narrative events, an isolation reinforced by the fact that, as in the previous set of eclogues, none of the *Arcadia*'s main characters joins in the songs. In three separate myths, the absence of Urania, the banishment of Philisides from Samothea, and the death of Basilius (this too is mythic), Sidney creates an extended dirge on the loss of justice in the individual and the state. (Personal injustice, as it appears in *The Old Arcadia*, is intemperance.) As Agelastus makes clear in his elegy for the duke:

Justice, justice, is, now, alas, oppressed;
Bountifulness hath made his last conclusion;
Goodness for best attire in dust is dressed.

The sense of loss is universal.

III

It is possible to treat the justice theme in "Ye goat-herd gods" as an unrelated addition to Sidney's borrowings from Sannazaro and Gil Polo only as long as the poem is approached as a statement of the need for justice rather than as a gesture to obtain it—but it is as a gesture that its poetic action must finally be understood. For the fact of greatest importance about "Ye goat-herd gods" is not that Urania has gone away but that Strephon and Klaius, struggling to obtain quiet of mind, "tarry in Arcadia" in expectation of her return. Sidney informs us that "they bare it out as well as such evil might be." As their faithful devotion to her "strait commandment" indicates, Strephon and Klaius are speaking pictures of constancy in misfortune. But more than that, they are shepherds bent upon using song in order to achieve relief, to undo misfortune. It is the paradox of their condition that they must seek contentment by abandoning it. As Strephon laments at the outset of their second song, "I joy in grief, and do detest all joys": "I turn my mind to all forms of annoys, / And with the change of them my fancy please." At the extreme of despair (their loss is also extreme), despair begins to achieve the appearance of constancy. The complexity of the stanzaic forms employed in Strephon and Klaius's laments provides the best indication of the mastery which they are attempting to achieve over their passions.

What at one stage of the argument Sidney allows us to perceive as a struggle for justice, he reveals at another as a search for contentment, a search in which poetry plays an important part. In short, while Strephon and Klaius strive to obtain relief (after all, this is why they sing), Sidney demonstrates by means of Urania's symbolic association with Astraea that they are also pursuing justice. The two pursuits are one. They are linked so closely in order to make us identify contentment as justice. This process can be made more clear.

Viewed from a slightly different perspective, Sidney's identification of contentment and justice can be seen as an act of literary criticism. Contentment is the central value of Italianate pastoral. In his *Arcadia*, Sannazaro creates a landscape in which the power of song and the freedom to indulge one's passions guarantees that "al mondo mal non è senza rimedio." No such freedom is provided by rigorous pastoral moralists such as Gil Polo, for whom the very notion of relief is dangerous. What Sidney sets out to do in "Ye goat-herd gods," therefore, by redefining pastoral contentment in moral terms as justice, is to reconcile differing sets of values from writers at opposite ends of the pastoral spectrum. In the process, he creates a unique, more inclusive version of his own. The doubleness of his borrowings from Gil Polo and Sannazaro is a signal of that attempted reconciliation.

The fact that Sidney's sestina is a gesture as well as a statement, an effort to obtain justice, not merely to bemoan its loss, is an indication of the degree to which the power of poetry is itself a subject of the song: How much can the poet actually accomplish? Again, we are confronted by doubleness as Sidney incorporates into its design a picture of the dangers of uncontrolled "fancy," and an illustration of the power of the imagination to provide the relief which justice brings.

Strephon and Klaius suffer the poet-lover's worst tragedy: a frustration of desire resulting in the transformation of the natural world into a subjectively conceived landscape echoing with despair. Unsatisfied passion has forced them to live among "monstrous mountains" and valleys filled with "foul affliction." Even music sometimes appears within that landscape to compound their sufferings. Toward the end of the poem, Strephon curses "the fiddling finders-out of music," and Klaius fears that he will "grow mad with music." Far from receiving explicit support as a means of supplying relief, song appears in much of the sestina's rhetoric as simply another especially perilous form of torture.

There is a different and ultimately truer perspective from which to view the sestina's poetic action, one that is incorporated into its symbolic structure. The key to "Ye goat-herd gods" lies in its repeating end-words. The six nouns are arranged in a carefully delineated pattern of matched opposites: "mountains" contrast with "valleys," "morning" with "evening." The arrangement of the first stanza reinforces these contrasts, just as it makes clear that although "forests" and "music" are not similarly opposed, they take their place within a more comprehensive balancing scheme. It is crucial to note that the only end-word which does not correspond to a physical object or to an exclusively natural phenomenon is "music," and it is music which is found in the sestina's first stanza, mediating between the opposing worlds of space ("mountains," "valleys," "forests") and time ("morning," "evening"). It assumes this position again in the central stanza of the poem and in the concluding coda, as a symbol of the potential power of song to achieve concord between the two opposing dimensions which constitute the totality of experience.

. . . This grandiose metaphysical gesture of *concordia discors* parallels the activity of the shepherds in attempting to achieve relief by balancing present agonies against past content, and at another stage of the allegory, in striving to achieve justice by making use of song to construct a portrait of Urania. The same mountains and forests which define throughout much of the sestina the limits of the lovers' mental landscape are employed in its final two stanzas, as the shepherds' music begins to take effect, in creating an image of the ideal beloved.

. . . It is possible to interpret these final stanzas as a triumph of poetic concord, a triumph of the poet's ability, by reconciling opposites in nature, to achieve contentment and a vision of absolute justice. It is preferable to interpret them as a prophecy of triumph that remains only potential, as a goal of the poet's immediate and continuing activity: "Our morning hymn this is, and song at evening." Potential carries with it the possibility of failure—always a real possibility in Sidney's world—the chance that the attempt to realize a subjectively conceived ideal will lead to the frustration of desire and to the agonizing condition in which music is madness.

The sestina's apocalyptic imagery serves a similar purpose. When Klaius laments, "Long since my thoughts chase me like beasts in forests, / And make me wish myself laid under mountains," the Actaeon myth is brought into contact with the Book of Revelation, as the shepherd joins "every bondsman, and every free man" who calls "to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb" (Rev. 6:15–16). When Strephon replies in the immediately adjacent verses, "Meseems I see

the high and stately mountains / Transform themselves to low dejected valleys," Sidney alludes to another eschatological passage, this time from Isaiah: "The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low; and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain" (Isa. 40:3–4).

The religious events are the vehicle, not the tenor, in Sidney's extended metaphor of everlasting justice. This is not a poem about the apocalypse or about man's fall from grace. It is not even what needs to be called a Christian poem. The apocalyptic passages are introduced to heighten our awareness of the profound injustice suffered by the individual and the state in Urania's absence. But they do something more than that as well. After the apocalypse comes the heavenly Jerusalem and divine justice. Like the anticipation of Strephon and Klaius for the return of Urania, these passages are instrumental in transferring the golden age from a past image recollected in the present into a myth of everlasting justice to be fulfilled in the future. *The Old Arcadia* contains its own prophetic fulfillment as justice is restored with Basilius's "resurrection" at the end of the fifth book. Sidney, too, can sing in a slightly higher key ("paulo maiora"). For a time, he follows in the messianic tradition of Virgil's fourth eclogue by creating his own prophetic allegory of man's aspiration for a golden age of piety and justice.

Examined in this light, Urania's symbolic character takes on new significance. She is not only, as the muse of astronomy, an image of heavenliness, and as Venus Urania, a representation of divine beauty, she is also, as a figure "whose parts maintained a perfect music," an ideal of celestial harmony. This much has already been pointed out by Sidney's critics. It is the implications of these facts that have gone unnoticed. By merging Urania with Astraea, Sidney is able to coalesce into a single image the action of poetry and justice as a kind of harmony. Of equal importance is his success in forging this link while revealing that both operate by means of a single process. Celestial harmony, like the music of the spheres which Urania's "least word" controls, is produced by *concordia discors*. The balance which makes good poetry can also lead to the contentment of a just life.

Sidney's borrowings from Gil Polo and Sannazaro now appear more purposeful. The elaborate system of syntactic parallels which he adopted from "Pues ya esconde el sol" and which he imposed upon Sannazaro's sestina form demonstrates its appeal as a useful means of establishing concord by making harmony out of the discordant passions of Strephon and Klaius in their struggle to achieve justice and contentment. At the same time, these borrowings are themselves an overt signal to the reader of Sidney's intention to reconcile the two most important trends in the history of pastoral romance. This is not simply a gesture of deference and good will. Because his version of pastoral is more inclusive than those of his predecessors, Sidney clearly implies, it is a better version. The reconciliation which takes place in "Ye goat-herd gods" is a way of demonstrating the superiority of this sestina and *The Old Arcadia* as a whole to the pastorals of Sannazaro and Gil Polo.

Source: Robert E. Stillman, "Poetry and Justice in Sidney's 'Ye Goat-Herd Gods,'" in *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*, Vol. 22, No. 1, Winter 1982, pp. 39–50.

Gary L. Litt

In the following excerpt, Litt offers an explanation, based on the study of rhetoric, regarding the characterization in "Ye Goatherd Gods."

Sidney's "Ye Goatherd Gods" is a masterful demonstration of formal and verbal artifice. The poem is virtually unmatched in rhetorical intricacy and complex manipulation of mood and environment, and deserves the praise and careful attention Empson, Kalstone, Ransom, and others have given it. However, the depth, charm, and accomplishment of the poem is even more considerable upon recognition of the complex characterization of the shepherds—an aspect of the work which has generally been ignored. This characterization is a culminating effect of the poem, for Sidney not only masters an unnatural and difficult form, but also presents a mini-drama in which there is subtle differentiation of Klaius and Strephon, a definite pattern of emotional and psychological movement, and an attempt to examine several Renaissance rhetorical and philosophical stances through the characters, styles, and thoughts of the shepherds.

For many years, despite my great admiration for "Ye Goatherd Gods," and Sidney's rhetorical



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brilliance in the poem, I was bothered by certain passages. Occasional lines and phrases seemed flat, awkward, or harsh; they gave the jarring sense of poetic wrong notes. I could not believe that a poet who could reach such peaks of verbal felicity in the poem would have Klaius mumbling his heartbrokenness in stale, unwieldy metaphors of molehills and mountains (l. 23). Furthermore, I was disturbed by certain grammatical and syntactical problems as Sidney allowed molehills to "fill the vales with cries instead of music" (l. 24), or as a shepherd bumbled his way through a line such as, "Curse to myself my prayer is, the morning" (l. 55). It would be easy to attribute such awkwardness to the difficulties of the form, but finally it occurred to me that Sidney might be giving the shepherds different rhetorical idioms in order to establish certain character distinctions between Strephon and Klaius. At first the idea seemed far-fetched, but, in fact, upon careful examination, the most bothersome passages seemed to be those spoken by Klaius.

In "Ye Goatherd Gods" Sidney uses imagery, diction, syntax, grammar, and metaphor to differentiate the shepherds in order to present two "types" of Renaissance character and style. These types provide a base against which the shepherds' emotional frustration at the loss of Urania can be measured and through which Sidney can explore the capacity of imagination, language, literary patterns, memory, and the pastoral setting to manage and compensate for archetypal loss—loss of love, life, harmony, justice, Eden.

The characterization of the shepherds is coordinated with brilliant structural development in the poem. Sidney slowly evinces the characters of Klaius and Strephon during the first eight stanzas. Yet, even while the two shepherds are being carefully distinguished, we see the dramatic psychological movement towards fragmentation and disintegration of those characters. Stanzas nine and ten present a violent alteration of the shepherds' personalities; this change of character is manifested in their alien thought processes and is emphasized by the breakdown of the syntactical and verbal parallelism of the poem. Finally, in stanzas eleven and twelve the remembrance of Urania returns some order and harmony to the world and their identities, though the memory alone cannot dispell their melancholy or the chaos of a fallen world. Furthermore, and this is more speculative, in the final stanzas Sidney may be forcing on us an examination of the two approaches to experience represented by Klaius (active, plain, passionate, natural) and Strephon (contemplative, rhetorical, melancholy, civilized), and, in my opinion, offering a judgment slightly favoring Klaius, who has a more direct, selfless approach to life.

Stanzas one and two establish the mood, the context of the lament, the environment (and words) for the sestina variation. Subtle differences already appear in the ways the shepherds respond to the environment and display their grief. Strephon speaks in a quiet, reflective mood as he calls up a scene of natural beauty and harmony in the invocation to his deities. Then in lines four through six, he gently modulates into an awareness of grief. Strephon is a creature of memory and carefully orchestrated moods. He savors contrasts and intensifies his grief by dwelling on them. His is a complex, multiple-perspectived view which is less immediate than that of Klaius, more aware of the past, the self-conscious present, and their relationship to the future. Klaius, on the other hand, responds impulsively, passionately. He seldom calculates for effect, shows little "literary" concern, displays slight awareness of anything but his present grief. The structural patterns of his laments emerge out of imitation of Strephon's lead. A creature of the present, he lives in a transformed environment of "woeful" valleys and "savage" mountains with little thought that there was ever another. He is mastered by his grief, which colors his perception of his environment.

These initial differences of response partially evolve out of the Renaissance character type each persona represents. Though both Strephon and Klaius are shepherds, the poem makes it clear that Strephon is a "literary" shepherd (such as Colin Clout?), having little to do with the actual mechanics of herding, and that Klaius, "every

morning" is "hunting the wild inhabiters of forests" (ll. 19–20). In actuality, we are dealing with the ancient archetypes of shepherd and hunter, and the Renaissance reader would anticipate, more readily than we do, differences of perspective, interest, and personality. We see the first of many of these differences in the invocation of each "shepherd." Strephon invokes one class of shepherd deities—goatherd gods (pans?), nymphs, and satyrs. Quietly absorbed by his immediate environment, Strephon turns to its attendant spirits and merrymakers. There is something low-keyed, unified, perhaps consciously literary in his choice. Moreover, beginning at such a level, he can rise more climactically to the summit of his grief. The group itself has numerous social, literary and, if it is not too early to raise this spectre, sexual associations.

Klaius, on the other hand, begins his invocation by intently praying to the Olympians—Mercury, Diana, Venus. For Klaius, however, they are not mere literary abstractions as Strephon's nymphs and satyrs must be, for in Klaius' concrete way, he is really addressing part of his environment, the planets Mercury and Venus, and the moon. It is this visual reality which appeals to Klaius, for if we look at the intellectual reality of his choice of deities (something Strephon would be aware of) we find a slight obtuseness, or, perhaps more accurately, a lack of calculation as to literary and intellectual implications. Addressing Mercury, the shepherd deity, is quite appropriate. But there is strain in linking Diana and Venus, chastity and sexual fertility, in this trinity, to complain about the loss of the virtuous Urania's love and presence. We can see what effect Klaius is after—he wants a deity for shepherds, for hunters, and for lovers; but here, as so often in the poem, Klaius reaches after an effect to follow and match Strephon's lead and is only partially successful because of his lack of calculation and rhetorical orientation. As a result, we are often left with an impression of relative roughness, occasionally even crudity, compared to Strephon's sophisticated and considered use of language and materials.

The shepherds' rhetoric in these two stanzas does not differ radically; yet, there are differences. Strephon has finer musical modulation: "Ye goatherd gods, that love the grassy mountains" (l. 1); and he uses more alliteration, placing it in closely linked and intertwined patterns, including internal rhyme: "Which to my woes give *still* an early morning,/ And draws the dolor on *till* weary evening" (ll. 5–6). Throughout the poem Klaius uses less alliteration and fewer figures than Strephon. (Sidney, in this matter of alliteration, as in others, allows only enough discrepancy between the two characters to indicate a difference of usage.) In addition, in line eleven Klaius perhaps displays a certain limitation of imagination or inspiration, being forced to repeat one of Strephon's lines in its entirety: "Vouchsafe your silent ears to plaining music."

Stanzas three and four intensify the development of character by considering the individual shepherd's relationship to society and by a glimpse into the psychology of each persona. The two stanzas also establish the verbal and syntactical parallelism of response suggested in the first two stanzas; this will dominate the form until stanzas nine and ten, when such parallelism is broken to suggest emotional chaos.

In stanza three, Strephon begins with a recognition of his social relationship. He is a "free burgess," citizen of the forests. He is linked to the community; his reference to sports (l. 14) and his musical reputation, "I, that was once esteemed for pleasant music" (l. 15), further underline a social orientation. Banishment, even self-imposed (l. 16), brings great pain for Strephon, but it also gives him the raw materials out of which he creates his mood, contrasts, songs.

Klaius is less socially oriented; he is a loner, a hunter who daily stalks the forest with autonomy and self-confidence. He has innumerable heirs from Natty Bump[p]o to Mellors. Klaius is his own world. He shows his independence, and, perhaps, egoism, in his variation on the theme of music. Strephon laments that he was "once esteemed" for music (l. 15). Klaius' parallel response begins, "I, that was once the music of these valleys . . . " (l. 21). Because of its curious ambiguity, there are several ways to interpret this statement, but all tend to emphasize Klaius' assertive independence. In terms of Klaius' music the passage suggests that he sees himself the only judge of its quality. Peer judgment and approval are unimportant to him; he *is* the music. In his isolation as hunter we can quite understand this perspective, but the ambiguity of the phrase suggests that Klaius sees himself as the essential harmonizing element of his environment. Like Wallace Stevens' jar, Klaius brings order and harmony to the wilds, perhaps to the world at large. However, this curious phrase about Klaius'

music might be less a philosophical or psychological riddle than an example of his rhetorical ineptness, for, if we pursue the meaning of this passage, we find Klaius mixing his metaphors (and senses) as his music turns into darkness (l. 22). This mixed metaphor is even more apparent since we have just seen Strephon delicately thread his way through a sentence fraught with syntactical and psychological complexities and yet keep his metaphor intact as he ends up not a poet-songster but a "screech owl" (l. 18). Klaius' syntactical and referential difficulties are further emphasized as he has molehills filling the vales with cries in lines twenty-three and twenty-four. By the end of stanza four, rather clear-cut distinctions exist between Strephon and Klaius in terms of their use of language, and the two are also beginning to diverge psychologically.

Klaius' rhetorical problems are not meant to condemn him, and, in fact, he is not anti-rhetorical or unrhetorical. He is simply not intellectually or verbally as facile as Strephon. Though he is a long way from the plain style, within the context of Strephon's rhetorical practice, Klaius seems to partake of elements of plain-style philosophy. His plainer, rougher idiom is appropriate for a hunter and might be seen as more sincere and direct. The plainer poet often gives the impression of being a little nearer to the truth, so Klaius' roughness is not necessarily a disadvantage in the poem. He is using a different idiom, speaking out of a different psychology and experience. Let us look a little closer at that psychology, and Strephon's, as the two figures emerge out of these early stanzas.

Stanzas one through four have deftly sketched the fundamental characters and psychologies of Strephon and Klaius through a combination of traditional character associations, responses to their environment, and rhetorical usage. Stanzas five and six begin to demonstrate how the behavior and thinking of the lovers, under the strain of grief, slowly become distorted and how Strephon and Klaius subtly meditate self-destruction in what might be seen as a traditional response to grief—a potential channel and sublimation which in this instance is not successful as relief.

Strephon's death meditations begin with the eminently poetic evocation of the swan song: "Long since, alas, my deadly swannish music/ Hath made itself a crier of the morning" (ll. 25–26). His life has become disjointed, and his focus, as we might suspect from an artist and "intellectual," is on his song and mind; the one has become a "deadly" honk, the other a barren desert. Stanza five reeks of despair, desolation, death. There are no more rational and ritualistic (artistic) channels left for Strephon's impulses of grief, and we can soon expect radical changes. We are nearly at the limits of the capacity of metaphor, ritual, language, tradition, perhaps art in general, to contain and structure grief. Strephon's mind, after one last attempt at verbal ordering, will break dangerously free of its conventional controls and will move into an orgy of transformations in stanza nine.

Klaius' life has also become disjointed and death oriented, but he lacks the conventional techniques for channeling his grief. Unlike Strephon, he does not dwell on the internal and psychological effects of his anguish on his music or self. His sorrow is intense and plain; his death-wish is expressed in terms which emerge out of his immediate experiences with the environment. In fact, nearly all he says in this stanza is in direct response to an external environment. His songs alienate the people; he hates night and day (expressed in plain terms with a simple repetition in line thirty-four of "hate"). In his unnatural "passive" condition his thoughts chase him like beasts, as he draws the material for his simile from a simple reversal of his normal hunting activity. We, of course, see an image of Acteon and his fate in line thirty-five, but Sidney's point is, I believe, that Klaius does not see the correspondence, for he is writing out of his own experience, not literary tradition and associations. Finally, the stanza ends with a direct and simple death-wish; the active and proud Klaius would like to be "laid under mountains" (l. 36) . . . .

Source: Gary L. Litt, "Characterization and Rhetoric in Sidney's 'Ye Goatherd Gods,'" in *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, Vol. 11, No. 1, Spring 1978, pp. 115–24.

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Heninger explores the literary kinship of Sidney and Spenser and how their works together contributed significantly to, and even altered, the course of English literature.

Maclean, Hugh, and Anne Lake Prescott, eds., *Edmund Spenser's Poetry: Authoritative Texts, Criticism*, Norton, 1993.
Maclean and Prescott gather together the major and minor works by Spenser, complete with commentary guiding the reader through each selection. The book also includes a lengthy section consisting of articles by scholars and critics.

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Young

ANNE SEXTON

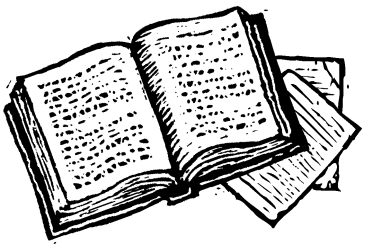
1962

"Young" by Anne Sexton was originally published in her anthology *All My Pretty Ones* in 1962. It was included in her posthumous *Complete Poems*. Both works are out of print, but "Young" is widely available on the Internet and in collections such as *The Complete Poems: Anne Sexton*, published by Mariner Books in 1999.

Sexton is famous as being among the confessional poets of the 1960s, whose works were based on the revelation of the secret truths of their lives. She began to write poetry as part of a program of therapy recommended by her psychiatrist and went on to win a Pulitzer Prize for her work. She was also granted an honorary Ph.D. and the right to teach poetry at the university level despite her lack of formal education beyond high school. The content of her poetry is deeply influenced by her mental illness (depression) and by the system of symbolic interpretation of dreams developed in psychoanalysis, which she learned in the course of her therapy. It is often difficult for the reader, as it was for Sexton herself, to know where the facts of her life leave off and her poetic creativity begins. "Young" is one of Sexton's early poems in which she explores the sources of her desperation in seemingly ideal circumstances, a problem that plagued her throughout her life and career.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Anne Sexton was born Anne Gray Harvey on November 9, 1928, in Newton, Massachusetts.





Anne Sexton *(Time Life Pictures / Getty Images. Reproduced by permission.)*

Her father owned a successful wool producing firm so she was raised in comfortable, upper middle-class circumstances. For a brief time during her adolescence Sexton's great aunt Anna Ladd Dingley, called Nanna, lived with the family and made a tremendous impression on her. After graduating high school, Sexton broke an engagement to elope with Alfred Sexton (known as "Kayo"), who also became a successful businessman. After working as a fashion model while still in high school, she settled into a suburban life as a wife and mother, as was expected of a woman of her time and class. She did not start to write or to undertake any form of higher education until she started undergoing psychiatric treatment for depression. After a brief committal to a mental institution, Sexton began to see the psychiatrist Martin Orne, by whom she was treated from 1955 to 1963. Orne recognized some creative potential in her and advised her to start writing poetry as part of her treatment. She began by taking an adult education course offered at Tufts University. She was lucky to begin her study of poetry with the poet John Holmes, in whose class she met her lifelong friend and fellow poet Maxine Kumin, with whom she collaborated to produce several children's books. In 1957, she studied with the important confessional poet Robert Lowell (in whose class she met the poet Sylvia Plath, with whom she had a close working relationship until Plath's death in 1963). She also met the poet W. D. Snodgrass while attending the Antioch Writers' Conference in the same year.

Sexton benefited from the fashion in the 1960s for so-called confessional poetry, as well as from the patronage within this school of her teacher Robert Lowell and her mentor W. D. Snodgrass. Once she started writing, she received almost immediate publication in such prestigious venues as the *New Yorker*, *Harper's* magazine, and the *Saturday Review*. She quickly published two anthologies, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960), which dealt directly with her mental health issues, and *All My Pretty Ones* (1962), which included "Young." Critics warmly

embraced confessional poetry, as indicated by the Pulitzer Prizes awarded Lowell in 1947, Snodgrass in 1960, and Sexton herself in 1967, for her anthology *Live or Die*. Sexton explored themes in her work particular to women's identity and place in society, at a time when these were still rare and startling themes in literature.

As Sexton's reputation grew, she was invited to teach poetry workshops at Boston University, Oberlin College, and Colgate College. She was awarded numerous honorary degrees, including a Ph.D. from Tufts University. She also occasionally led workshops at high schools and in mental institutions. After a life filled with multiple suicide attempts, Sexton killed herself on October 4, 1974, by running her car in her closed garage. Although some have suggested that her suicide was linked to her poetry falling out of favor, her last book, *The Awful Rowing Toward God*, which was published only a short time before her death, still drew favorable critical attention. Her daughter, Linda Gray Sexton, an important poet in her own right, oversaw the publication of her mother's last book, *45 Mercy Street* (1975), as well as her letters and her collected poems.

POEM SUMMARY

Sexton's "Young" consists of a single sentence extended over twenty-three lines of verse. It takes the form of a reminiscence of a summer evening in the narrator's childhood. It is spoken in the voice of a first-person narrator, but this speaker should not be simply equated with the author herself. Although this voice seems to mediate Sexton's memories and experiences, the reader must not lose sight of the fact that the speaker is a fictive creation of Sexton's and is in no way bound to report the objective reality of Sexton's life.

The narrator ranges over memories of the subjective perception of a particular evening of her youth. She begins by emphasizing a more than natural barrier of time between her present and past. The memories themselves consist of vivid sensory impressions and end with an unresolved questioning of cosmic powers before finally stressing the physical changes of puberty the narrator was experiencing at that time.

Lines 1–4

The title of the poem, "Young," already suggests that the poem takes place during the narrator's youth, the period between childhood and adulthood. The poem begins by expanding on the time separating youth and adulthood, blowing it up to mythological proportions. It would not be unusual to begin a poem with a phrase such as "a thousand years ago" as hyperbole for "a long time ago," achieving a heightened effect through exaggeration. It would mean 'in a part of my life that now seems distant and detached from my present.' Sexton fully suggests that sense of distant time, but what she actually writes instead suggests something more than temporal separation. The passage of time seems to be equated with a series of decisions made, each one of which helped to make the barrier between childhood and adulthood more than did the mere passing of time. Although the text presents a memory, memory itself is called into question since a season is said to last as long as memory lasts. This is a clue that the words being used here are a tool of poetic creativity rather than simple reporting. Perhaps she wishes the reality of time to be different than it is.

The poem describes a typical experience of middle-class American childhood, the summer break from school. The relative wealth of the family involved is suggested by the size and extravagance of their house. The summer break at one time functioned to allow farm children to be freed from school to help with farm work, but for suburban children the break was marked as a time of idle play, whose lack of measured time, in contrast to the rigid calendar of the school year, made it seem endless. This naturally suggests the sort of unreal stretching out of time that seems to exist in the poem.

Lines 5–8

The narrative voice moves on to a description of what the narrator remembers seeing and feeling. She presents the earth and sky as cosmic powers that are burying her. After this experience she recalls her parents' bedroom windows, particularly the light spilling out of them into the evening darkness. The fact that the narrator's parents have separate bedrooms develops the theme of the family's affluence. But it also might suggest strife within the family, which was in fact the reason Sexton's parents had that arrangement.

Lines 9–12

More to the point is the contrast between the two parents' windows. On a summer night in Boston the air would still be heavy with the day's heat

and humidity. But Sexton transfers these qualities to the light spilling out of the mother's window. The language of the passage suggests something unpleasant, as if the narrator's mother, or her relationship with her mother, is running down a drain.

The other window, the one belonging to her father, is treated quite differently. As a simple matter of fact, a modern reader might expect the windows of the house to be closed to keep in the cool conditioned air. But, assuming a setting for the poem around 1940, when Sexton would have been twelve years old, air conditioning would have been quite rare, regardless of social status, so the unexpected thing is not that the window is only partially closed but that it is not entirely open. Its being closed even halfway is significant and must be meant to communicate to the reader associations with closing: exclusion or concealment. It is also half-closed like an eyelid, and the window itself is presented anthropomorphically as an organ of sight. It represents, of course, her father's sight. This relates to the old idea that "the eyes are the windows of the soul." Though partially closed as in dozing, this eye is not sleeping but seeing a parade of sleeping people go before it. This startling idea could have many possible implications for the poem. One is that it is looking into a dream, and that everything that is to be seen outside is a dream. In that case the poem is not truly describing memories at all but is a dream or is being presented as a dream.

Lines 13–17

The narrator next describes her childhood house as being clad in clapboards that are whitish and waxy. By this point in her poetic career, Sexton had absorbed the principles of psychoanalysis through her reading of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939). She would certainly have known of the standard meanings of symbols used in dream analysis as expounded by Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). Among these symbols is the regular substitution of a house for a woman's body. Furthermore, the description in the poem of the house's color and feel is suggestive of a dead body. This notion is reinforced by the earlier imagery of being buried by the earth and sky. Significantly, too, the speaker is outside of the house, as if she is rejecting her own body. The house may refer to the girl's body changing at puberty—the narrator is dying to childhood and being reborn to womanhood. However, these symbols also suggest that she feels dead when she ought to be alive to the joys of growing up.

The narrator now more vividly suggests the setting of the poem on a summer night. The exaggeration of the first line returns, this time applied to setting rather than time, describing the plants and animals characteristic of a summer night, but in a somewhat fantastic vein.

lines 18–23

The final part of the poem more firmly establishes its setting in terms of the narrator's age and develops the themes of transformation, as well as introducing a new and final theme of the search for meaning. The narrator recalls a transitional time of life, on the border between childhood and adulthood. This change is presented in physical, bodily terms, stressing that she has not yet become biologically mature. Interestingly, there is no looking ahead to what the results of this might be. She does begin to question the cosmic powers for answers she does not possess, but these unstated questions seem not to relate to the future but merely to her present condition. The use of the past tense here suggests that she might have believed in the protection of these powers when she was young but no longer does so now. The final line of the poem stresses the angular awkwardness of an adolescent girl's body, not only through a description of her long, gangly limbs, but with an unexpected and awkward rhyme.

THEMES

Time

Sexton biographer Diane Middlebrook has pointed out that the theme of the separation of Sexton's identity from that of her parents recurs again and again in her work, presented in many different ways and from many different viewpoints. "Young" is one of the most important and best-received works in which she deals with this issue. In "Young," the response to the crisis of growing up under the difficult circumstances Sexton envisions, in which the parents are distant, abstract, and threatening, rather than nurturing and supporting, is to try to put a stop to things by halting time, a supremely childish wish. The length of time between the memory and the remembering in "Young" stretches forever, over millennia, longer than can be remembered, and consists not merely of an unimaginable

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY



- Imagine that you are a young woman coming of age in the late 1940s and early 1950s, facing the same challenges that Anne Sexton faced because of her gender. What are your options in terms of living an independent life? Will you need to depend on a spouse for financial support? Are you expected to bear and raise children? Write a short story describing your circumstances and how you choose to respond to them. Consider your fictional responses. How are your actions informed by your knowledge and experience of the twenty-first century?
- Research local programs in your area that use art therapy, including poetry, in the treatment of mental illness. Present some of your findings, along with examples of the therapeutic art produced, in an oral report.
- Experiment with confessional poetry. Write a poem that deals with ideas and thoughts, perhaps memories, that you find uncomfortable or even painful, but which are nevertheless important to you.
- The confessional poet Sylvia Plath was a classmate and colleague of Sexton. Read her poem "Electra on Azalea Path," which addresses her relationship with her father, who died when she was eight years old. Write an essay in which you both critique the poem and explain how it helped you to understand confessional poetry in general and "Young" in particular.

series of years but of unnumbered choices and opportunities passed by. Sexton treated her poetry and her psychotherapy as alternative modes of fictive expression, and they fed and interacted with each other so that it is difficult, if not pointless, to try to disentangle them. This is demonstrated in the numerous audio recordings of her therapy sessions that her psychiatrist Martin Orne made available to Middlebrook (but which have not been completely transcribed and published). In one therapeutic session, Sexton experimented with some of the very same literary or fictionalizing motifs she used in "Young":

> I have frozen that scene in time, made everyone stop moving. I thought I could stop this all from happening. That's what I want to believe—when I'm in that hard place—that's not what I believe now, just when I'm that child in trance. I can't grow up because then all these other things will happen. I want to turn around and start everything going backward.

In the same way, in "Young" time stops and stretches out forever, freezing her at the moment of transition between child and adult so that she does not have to deal with her problems with her parents or with growing up.

Isolation and Rites of Passage

According to the anthropologist Arnold van Gennep, whose ideas were fashionable in America in the 1960s, rites of passage, such as the initiation that young people undergo in many cultures to transfer from the status of children to that of adults, typically have three phases. These phases are, first, a separation in which the individual is isolated from society; second, an actual moment of transition from one status to another; and third, a reintegration into society on the basis of the newly attained status. The purpose of such initiations, although they are not uniformly performed at the time of biological puberty, is to transfer the individual from an innocent childhood to the world of adulthood so that marriage becomes possible. Sexton's "Young" can be read in light of these ideas, and perhaps was even written under their influence. The narrator of the poem is hovering outside of society (her home), poised at the moment of transition from child to adult. But the actual reintegration does not happen in the poem. It seems to be held in abeyance, as if the time of that summer night is being drawn out in line with the extension of time suggested at the beginning of the poem.

Astrology

The pseudoscience of astrology contends that it is possible to predict the future from observing the position and movement of celestial bodies (sun, moon, planets); its logic was probably based on the fact that it is possible to accurately predict the regular motions of the celestial bodies themselves. It was developed in Babylon (modern Iraq), not



Scenic starry night sky above trees (© Russell Kord / Alamy)

before the sixth or seventh century BCE, although it is often claimed to be much older. While it always met with a minority skeptical response, it became an important and prestigious body of learning, acknowledged and used by physicians, philosophers, and poets down to the time of the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century. It lives on even today as an element of a counterculture that can be used to deny Western science, logic, and social norms; as a motif in literature, art, and music; and in the twentieth century, in brand names and advertising.

Sexton hardly deploys the full apparatus of astrological symbolism in "Young," but she does use some elements of it. She presents the stars as anthropomorphic entities, that is, sharing human characteristics such as wisdom and sight. They are adjuncts to God who aid him in his role of administering the universe (the Biblical heavenly host: e.g., Genesis 2:1 and Psalm 33:6) and taking care of the fate of human beings. They can be interrogated about the future. In general, Sexton uses the stars and God in the poem to talk about uncertainties in a familiar, comprehensible way.

STYLE

Confessional Poetry

The fashion for confessional poetry began in the late 1950s with the publication of Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959), which the critic M. L. Rosenthal described as confessional. Within a few years, confessional poetry became a school exemplified by such popular poets as W. D. Snodgrass, who was Sexton's mentor (although he resisted the categorization of confessional as too limiting), as well as by Sexton herself and her colleague Sylvia Plath. The poetry was said to be confessional in part because of its subject matter. The themes that interested these poets were precisely those that an earlier generation of American poets (as well as the sensibilities of American society at large) would have kept secret and would have been ashamed to parade in public. But Snodgrass confessed the effects of divorce on his family, Plath her suicidal impulses and her hatred of her father. Sexton's poems also deal with her own death wish and with child abuse and other difficult themes. But besides the secret subject matter or the confession of what might

otherwise be repressed and concealed, a more important aspect of confessional poetry was its apparent origin in the poet's real experience. This seemed like an important breakthrough in poetry, establishing a new level of importance and validity for the work of the confessional poets. Their poems were thought to be genuine because they directly reported the life circumstances of the poets, unmediated through any dense referential use of poetic tradition and technique, as though the poet's life spoke for itself. In this sense Sexton's complete lack of formal education and unfamiliarity with poetry (at the time she started writing) seem positive advantages.

Although "Young" is not among Sexton's most confessional poems in the sense of revealing taboo material, it certainly fits the general requirements of the genre (set form or type of literature). "Young" presents itself as a straightforward recitation of Sexton's memories at the end of her childhood, the moment of transition to puberty and the beginning of maturity. The poem's verisimilitude, or seeming truthfulness, is strengthened by its composition and concrete sensual images such as the heat of American summer evenings, the seemingly endless length of the summer break to school children, and the awkwardness of a girl's body going through an adolescent growth spurt.

It eventually became apparent to critics that confessional poetry was not entirely what it seemed to be. Confessional poetry is still poetry and is therefore an entirely constructed world that exists in language rather than reality. Language is a necessarily metaphorical description of experience, far removed from experience itself. The "I" that speaks in "Young" is not Sexton but a fictional character created by Sexton. She is reporting not experiences but at most memories created by experiences. Those uncertain memories are selected, edited, and transformed by the poet. It is precisely that process of poetic creation that lends meaning to poetry. If it were even possible to represent actual experience through language, without the authorial "interference" that makes meaning, it would not be poetry, but something else. Sexton's biographer Diane Middlebrook suggests that far from genuinely reporting experience, her poetry allowed Sexton to indulge in her propensity to fictionalize herself and to create poetry that would impress critics and audience as fresh and new even if its genuineness was also fabricated. Middlebrook writes,

> Cultivation of her recently discovered talent had literally remade Anne Sexton as a person, turning her into someone self-created in the first-person voice of her poetry.... She spent hours... trying to write poems that didn't sound like poems she had already written.

Once it was realized that the confessional element in the poetry was as much created as any other literary effect, confessional poetry lost its steam as a movement and its popularity declined.

Certainly the confessional nature of "Young" vanishes upon closer inspection. It deals with themes expressed in a complex metaphorical language comprehensible only through an appreciation of Sexton's work as a whole, and not clearly accessible through a simple reading of the poem's language. Its ultimate themes, too, far from being confessional, have only a metaphorical or symbolic relationship to any actual experience of Sexton's life. In short the very idea of confessional poetry, so powerful at the time, was a misunderstanding of the ordinary poetic character of the works involved.

Psychoanalysis and Symbolism

Numerous images in "Young" are symbolic; that is, they represent a concept or idea. For example, the house may represent the speaker's transformation into womanhood and the windows her relationship with her parents. One of the lasting achievements of renowned psychiatrist Sigmund Freud's creation of psychoanalysis at the turn of the twentieth century is the idea that the symbolic structure of literature is based on the nature of the unconscious mind. Literature therefore can be interpreted to reveal a deeper personal meaning expressed in the same metaphorical language as dreams and other revelations of the unconscious mind such as slips of the tongue. These ideas still had tremendous currency in the 1950s and 1960s and were readily absorbed by Sexton through her reading of Freud during the early stage of her own psychiatric treatment. She conceived of her own poetry being written in the metalanguage of Freudian dream symbolism and often mentioned that she herself did not understand what she wrote until she read a poem after publication and applied the principle of dream interpretation to it.

Another psychoanalytical idea that bears on "Young" is transference. Transference is the

patient's building up of an artificial relationship with her therapist based on transferring to him feelings that genuinely exist for some important authority figure in her life, most often a parent. This allows the quick creation of the trust necessary for a therapeutic relationship. Sexton famously told her psychiatrist Martin Orne that she realized she had undergone transference, that is, the transference to her therapist of her feelings for her father, when she read back over her old poem "Eden Revisited" and saw that it symbolically revealed the transference. This is very likely also part of the explanation of the most difficult passage in "Young." In the poem, her father (or rather his symbolic organ of sight) is said to be able to see a sort of parade of sleeping people. This would make much more sense if it applied to Orne, who, as a psychiatrist, made a regular habit of looking into the sleeping dream life of his patients. So Sexton may be conflating the figures of father and therapist in a classic transference.

Free Verse

The traditional hallmark of poetry is meter or the rhythm of the language. "Young" has no particular meter and reads no differently from prose. This technique is called free verse and is common in modern poetry, which after World War I began to experiment with ways of making poetry unconfined by tradition. The only traditional poetic devices Sexton employs are a parallel repetition in lines 7 to 8 and the suggestion of rhyme in the last two lines. Both purposefully seem jarringly out of place, as though meant to suggest the awkwardness of adolescence described in the poem.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Second-Wave Feminism

The original feminist movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, sometimes called first-wave feminism, was aimed at making the legal status of men and women equal. In the United States, this was accomplished before Sexton's birth, with women securing the right to vote, the right to own property, and many other reforms. Second-wave feminism sought to secure equality in the social as well as the legal sphere and so sought to change the prevailing social relations between men and women. This movement challenged the notion that women, particularly upper middle-class women like Sexton, were expected to find fulfillment in their lives entirely through the raising of their children and the support of their husbands by maintaining the household. The failure of this paradigm in Sexton's own life was one of the subjects of her own written notes about her therapy (as reported by Middlebrook, her biographer):

> I realize, with guilt, that I am a woman, that it should be the children, or my husband, or my home—not writing. But it is not—I do love my children but am not feminine enough to be all lost in their care. It wears me—I do not have the patience. (How can you really know what I mean—you have never been worn down by a nagging child?)

These simple facts of her life seem to disturb Sexton more than any psychoneurotic symptoms. Her poetry was an escape from that kind of life, which she felt was eroding her identity. In this regard, Sexton was a participant in second-wave feminism.

The Culture of Psychotherapy

The concept of modern psychotherapy, in which a patient has a private consultation with a therapist on a regular basis over an extended period of time, and the content of each session is essentially a discussion between the patient and therapist about the former's problems, is relatively recent. It goes back little further than Sigmund Freud's invention of psychoanalysis at the turn of the twentieth century. The concept has, however, been adopted by a wide range of psychotherapies, and especially in the post-World War II United States, it became a standard paradigm of treatment. Sexton began psychiatric treatment for what today might be called postpartum depression following the birth of her daughter Linda in 1955 and was soon hospitalized for showing suicidal tendencies. Though no definitive diagnosis was ever made, Sexton continued to suffer long bouts of depression and made several suicide attempts over the years before succeeding in 1974. Sexton's poetry very much grew out of her therapeutic environment. Her psychiatrist Martin Orne recommended that she begin to write poetry as another way of expressing the material that was discussed during their therapeutic sessions, thereby helping her more fully to understand and come to grips with her psychological problems. Before this, Sexton had never shown any special interest in

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **1950s–1960s:** Social norms cast women in the role of wife and mother.

  Today: Women find fulfillment in a variety of careers and ways of life.

- **1950s–1960s:** Before the confessional poets, poetry rarely dealt with controversial personal issues, and such themes in the poetry of Sexton and others seem shocking.

  Today: Secrets of poets' lives are routinely spilled out on the page with little public reaction.

- **1950s–1960s:** Therapeutic techniques such as hypnosis are commonly used by psychiatrists in an attempt to reach a less repressed level of patients' minds, which psychiatrists believe to be more communicative about patients' problems.

  Today: Techniques such as hypnosis have been increasingly discredited because of the possibility that they lead to the formation of false memories and actually obstruct psychotherapy.

poetry, but she was impelled to write by the process of psychotherapy.

Although "Young" is not her most intensely therapeutic poem, it certainly deals with matters directly related to her therapy, namely her troubled relationship with her parents, especially going back to her early adolescence, the temporal setting of the poem. Its therapeutic quality is also part of the confessional nature of Sexton's poetry because in it she reveals what might otherwise have been kept secret between herself and her therapist. Conversely, Orne created controversy when, even though it was many years after her death, he made available to Sexton's biographer Diane Middlebrook hundreds of tapes of Sexton's therapeutic sessions, which, strictly speaking, ought never to have been revealed because of the patient's privacy rights in therapy.

Sexton' poetry was firmly rooted in her therapeutic experience. Although Orne was not a psychoanalyst, the popular psychology of the 1950s was Freudian, that is, based on the ideas of Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis and modern psychology. At the beginning of her therapy, Sexton immersed herself in Freud's writings and especially in popularizations of Freud's work. As a result, once she started to write poetry, Sexton expressed many of her ideas in symbols important to Freud's understanding of the human mind. She also interpreted her own work using Freudian literary criticism, applying techniques to literary texts that were originally intended to reveal hidden meaning in the symbolism of dreams and other psychological phenomena. Using these techniques, she found new meanings in her own poems that she had not consciously understood when writing them. She told Orne, "You would be surprised to know how little I understand of my own poems." Part of the reason for this was that she wrote her poetry in a sort of trance state similar to the trances induced in her therapy by hypnosis or drugs such as sodium pentathol, during which she would write down poetic images that appeared in her imagination.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

The initial reviews of Sexton's *All My Pretty Ones* were mixed. None make direct reference to "Young," which was originally published in that volume. James Dickey, in his review for the *New York Times Book Review* doubtless has this poem in mind, however, among others, when he unfavorably characterizes the book as a soap opera, a collection of meaningless and unrelated vignettes.

The same tendencies have been noted and interpreted more favorably as a probing examination of American suburban life, as by Jo Gill in her *Anne Sexton's Confessional Poetics*.

More recently, "Young" has not fared any better in attracting critical attention. Only superficial mention is made in general studies of Sexton's verse, and that only rarely. Diana Hume George in *Oedipus Anne: The Poetry of Anne Sexton* (1987) calls "Young" "perhaps Sexton's best single childhood poem," and sees it as crystallizing the "moment before sexuality will change everything." In *Anne Sexton: A Biography*, Diane Middlebrook identifies "Young" as part of a series of poems from throughout Sexton's career that deal with the poet's disturbed relationship with her father. These poems include, besides "Young," "The Bells," "The Moss of His Skin," "The Truth the Dead Know," "All My Pretty Ones," "Ghosts," "The House," "Wallflower," "And One for My Dame," "Flee on Your Donkey," "Consorting with Angels," and "In the Beach House," as well as many of the poems in *Transformations*, particularly "Briar Rose (Snow White)," and especially her play *45 Mercy Street*. This approach has not been followed by later critics, however, who, as Gill observes in her *Anne Sexton's Confessional Poetics*, believe it does not make a satisfactory distinction between the author and her narrative voice. This point, however, does not affect the coherence of Sexton's poems, which constantly return to the same theme.



FOR SEXTON, CONFESSION, WHETHER IN VERSE OR IN THERAPY, WAS AN EXERCISE IN FICTIVE CREATION."

CRITICISM

Bradley A. Skeen

Skeen is a classics professor. In this essay, he considers whether or not "Young" is truly confessional.

As a poet, and indeed as a person, Sexton was primarily concerned with telling stories. Diane Middlebrook begins her book *Anne Sexton: A Biography* with an account of Sexton's press interviews, in which Sexton was usually asked to explain how she began writing poetry. Every time, she answered that question using many of the same facts and even many of the same phrases, as if she were improvising on a prepared script and changing it to suit the needs or expectations of the audience. Most interesting, however, was the form the story took. The story she told in answer to the question was based on the fairy tale of Snow White. The wicked queen became Sexton's mother, her poisoned apple the pressure of society for her to conform to a conventional life as a wife and mother in the Boston suburbs. The poisoned sleep became her suicide attempts, from which she was awakened not by the kiss of a handsome prince but by psychotherapy and its manifestation in poetry. Living "happily ever after" was her career as a poet. Sexton often said that when she wrote something down, she remembered what she had written rather than the original idea or memory on which it was based.

The inability to distinguish between memories of actual events and memories of ideas, fantasies, or other kinds of narratives is known as confabulation. Sexton certainly seems to have had a propensity in this direction. She reported to her psychiatrist Martin Orne many facts and events she supposedly remembered about her family that his investigations showed had no basis in reality. She seemed rather to report narratives that she had created as if they were recollections of true events. In some cases she seems not to have been aware of what she was doing. But in other cases she was fully aware that what she said in therapy was entirely fictional. In 1957, she wrote a fifteen-page typescript called the "Personal Record." This text has never been published, but Middlebrook summarizes and quotes extensively from it. Sexton produced her record to help keep straight for herself what she considered to be true and what she considered to be fabrications (she called them "truth crimes") in what she was telling Orne. This began when she made up a story about being molested by a family friend at the beach and was amazed that Orne accepted it as the truth. In her "Personal Record" she says the following:

> I am nothing, if not an actress off the stage. In fact, it comes down to the terrible truth that there is no true part of me.... I am a story-maker.... I know that often people in analysis will tell these great stories about ... their father etc. and that they are fictitious but are a childhood fantasy.

WHAT DO I READ NEXT?



- Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), published during the height of Sexton's career, articulates the second-wave feminist case against the life of a suburban housewife, which Sexton found so limiting and oppressive.
- *Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters* (1977), edited by Sexton's daughter Linda Gray Sexton, is a collection of Sexton's letters that reveals much about her life and its connection to her work.
- *Eggs of Things*, written in 1963 by Sexton and her friend and fellow poet Maxine Kumin, is the first of a series of children's books the two of them collaborated on.
- Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, first published under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas in 1963 and posthumously under her own name in 1966, describes a female college student's battles with depression and her eventual hospitalization. It is generally believed to closely reflect Plath's own experiences and is the most important confessional novel.
- Sexton's mentor W. D. Snodgrass released *Selected Poems: 1957–1987* in 1987. It is an anthology of what he regarded as the most important poems of his career.

This shows that Sexton considered her therapeutic sessions to be as much a form of creative expression or performance as her poetry was. Moreover, she had admitted as much directly to Orne during one of their sessions. Again, Middlebrook quotes extensively from audio tapes of Sexton's therapeutic sessions supplied to her by Orne: "I couldn't make all this up or I don't exist at all! Or do I make up a trauma to go with my symptoms?" To a highly unusual degree, therapy and poetry served the same purpose for Sexton, allowing her to create the narratives that obsessed and fulfilled her, as far as she was able to know fulfillment.

Sexton treated the theme of the separation of her identity from her parents in many of her works, using many different metaphors and guises, as Middlebrook observes. In her own life this transition was very difficult because of her disturbed relationship with her parents. In some respects the treatment of the theme in "Young" is more straightforward than in some of her other poems, in which it is deeply allegorical and symbolic. But "Young" is not truly the revelation of personal secrets in the simple sense suggested by the label *confessional poetry*. In fact it is highly contrived. It is a fictive narrative like any other poem, which at best can be said to have a relationship with the actual events of the poet's life. Just as Sexton's psychotherapy was the inspiration of her poetry, she used her therapy as another platform to create fictional narratives that were not simple statements of her life history but were metaphorical and analogical explorations of her feelings about that history. So the unusually detailed knowledge of Sexton's therapy that is available does not throw light on the problem of finding confessed truths in her poetry. Instead, it reveals that her poetry and therapy together were a tangled web of fictive narratives that completely obscured her real life, that were both in some sense perhaps an effort on Sexton's part to supply herself with a life history different than the one she lived.

Bearing in mind, then, that the narrative world of "Young" is not truly confessional and cannot be directly compared to Sexton's personal life but rather is a product of artistic creation like any other poem, it is possible to look at the poem on its own terms. This reveals not confession but creation, and indeed, the word *poetry* comes from the ancient Greek word meaning creation. "Young" is not a report of Sexton's life but of a life that Sexton created. The narrator of the poem presents herself as recalling the onset of adolescence, the time when one leaves behind the innocence of childhood and begins to assume a new identity or sense of self. The adult speaker is thus articulating the second major separation of the child's identity from that of her parents as her body becomes physically mature and her sense of independence develops. The first separation occurs in infancy and earliest childhood when the infant must create a separate identity from the condition of absolute physical and emotional dependence of the newborn on its parents. The small child forms a sense of identity primarily through building relationships with the caregivers. But now the narrator of "Young" is attempting to describe the loss or death of that identity, and the transformation of

that identity or the birth of a new and unknown identity that is not yet formed. The poem seeks to isolate a particular period of time as its language evokes the language of children. Its phraseology is often highly exaggerated and fabulist, as though a fairy tale is being told. But unlike a fairy tale, there is no moral, no happy ending. The poem asks questions for which it provides no answers. Ultimately, though, the experience of the adult makes the final tone of the poem wistful and almost mournful. The adult narrator is perhaps revisiting memories from the end of childhood precisely because her adult self still has not figured out any of the problems or questions about life that the adolescent also asked and had expected would be answered as she grew from childhood to adulthood. In the final sense, the poem's adult speaker seems no more enlightened than the child. It indeed seems as if in some sense time in that person's world stopped on that summer night and she has never been able to move beyond it.

How does the narrator recognize what we might call separation from the parents? First, her physical location. She is positioned outside the house, apart from her family. Moreover, it is nighttime—a time of day traditionally in poetry associated with mystery or the unknown. It is fairly clear that the speaker remembers her childhood as one in which she felt no lack of material comforts but felt isolated nevertheless, but this is the judgment of the adult, looking back and imposing truth upon her childhood. The adult narrator also characterizes her relationship with her parents as distant and dim. There is something threatening about the cones of light spilling out of her parents' 'eyes,' rather like the searchlights looking for escapees in a prison movie. As children often do, the child the narrator used to be was seeking to escape and find, perhaps, solace and comfort in nature, hoping that this could be the place she could go with all her unanswered questions. Readers recognize that the child the narrator remembers feels and understands as an adult that there was little meaningful communication within the family (notice her mother and father have separate bedrooms), and the grown speaker also sees that the child she was attempted to fill this need by seeking a meaningful connection elsewhere, with the earth and the sky, in other words with the cosmos or the divine. The adolescent thus acted on her impulse by separating herself physically from her parents. The narrator recalls how she evoked and solicited wisdom, which she obviously did not receive from her parents, from the heavens and from death.

"Young" stands in a self-contained world created by Sexton, which does not confess Sexton's inner life and past history but is built on those foundations like any other poem. "Young" was first published in her collection *All My Pretty Ones*, whose title comes from a line of William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in which the character MacDuff learns of the death of his children and refers to them as "all my pretty ones" (act 4, scene 3, line 216). Sexton's poem is not about her childhood but is perhaps about a childhood that she might have had, a childhood that died without being realized.

W. D. Snodgrass, Sexton's patron and a leading confessional poet, never liked that term, not only because he considered it too limiting a conception of his poetry but because in the end the concept was not useful. Every poet reveals himself as he writes, so that is not an especially distinguishing criterion, and every poet fictionalizes herself and her experience, the confessional poets no less than any others. Although the term seems destined to be attached to Snodgrass, Plath, Sexton, and the other confessional poets because they constitute a closely knit school bound by ties of time, subject matter, style, and personal connections between the poets, critics soon lost their enthusiasm for reading their poetry as truly personal confessions of secret truths. Sexton created in "Young" a moment in a young woman's life, but it is not a moment of Sexton's own life. For Sexton, confession, whether in verse or in therapy, was an exercise in fictive creation.

Source: Bradley A. Skeen, Critical Essay on "Young," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2009.

Diane Middlebrook

In the following excerpt, Middlebrook considers how The Complete Poems *reflects the course of Sexton's life.*

When Anne Sexton's posthumous *Complete Poems* came out four years ago, poet Katha Pollitt summarized the negative judgment many critics arrived at in their reviews: "the sheer quantity of inferior work does tend to dull one's response to the gems. One puts down this enormous book with the nagging feeling that all along a slim volume of verse was trapped inside it." Contemporary poets tend to be assessed by the carat: prized for glitter, durability and for



SEXTON'S *COMPLETE POEMS* YIELDS MOST WHEN READ AS IF IT CONTAINED A NARRATIVE: AN ACCOUNT OF A WOMAN CURSED WITH A DESIRE TO DIE. WHY IS SHE DIFFERENT FROM OTHER WOMEN? WHERE DID THE CURSE COME FROM?"

scale that permits resetting in an anthology. As Pollitt says, "the gems are there" in Sexton, too.

Yet the appearance of a complete poems also presents an opportunity to pose questions about a writer whose entire body of work is the necessary critical context. How are the gems related to surrounding poems? Is the un-gemlike work inferior as art, or does it represent different artistic goals? Sexton's method of writing, which she referred to as "milking the unconscious," often produced a loosely-structured poetry dense with simile, freaked with improbable associations. In a poem addressed to James Wright, Sexton herself acknowledged she knew the effect offended certain tastes: "There is too much food and no one left over / to eat up all the weird abundance" ("The Black Art"). Weird: uncanny, magical, unconventional. While some of Sexton's most admired poems work, like little machines, on well-oiled armatures of rhythm or rhyme (such as "All My Pretty Ones," "The Starry Night," "Wanting to Die"), others equally powerful depend on manic or despairing or ecstatic cascades of association ("The Furies," "O Ye Tongues") that flow like an open spigot. The gems, or closed forms, tend to be early; the looser style, later. In this collection, the reader can watch Sexton evolve her second style as a way of exploring a changing relation to her subject matter.

Sexton's *Complete Poems* is a compilation of the eight books she saw into print, plus an edited collection of work left in manuscript at the time of her death. . . . The early poetry (*To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, 1960; *All My Pretty Ones*, 1962) holds up very well. But as this volume shows, Anne Sexton made bolder exploration of her lifelong subject—her experiences of madness—in later work, beginning with the volume *Live or Die* (1966). Mining the realm of the unconscious as she had been taught by both psychotherapy and contemporary writing, after 1962 Sexton became increasingly preoccupied with the psychological and social consequences of inhabiting a female body.

Because Sexton's writing seems so personal she is often labeled a "confessional" poet and grouped (to her disadvantage) with poets such as [Amy] Lowell, [John] Berryman, [Theodore] Roethke, and [Sylvia] Plath. But Sexton resisted the label "confessional"; she preferred to be regarded as a "storyteller." To emphasize that she considered the speaking "I" in her poetry as a literary rather than a real identity, Sexton invariably opened her public performances by reading the early poem "Her Kind." These are the first and last stanzas:

> I have gone out, a possessed witch,
> haunting the black air, braver at night;
> dreaming evil, I have done my hitch
> over the plain houses, light by light:
> A woman like that is not a woman, quite.
> lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind.
> I have been her kind.
>
> . . .
>
> I have ridden in your cart, driver,
> waved my nude arms at villages going by,
> learning the last bright routes, survivor
> where your flames still bite my thigh
> and my ribs crack where your wheels wind.
> A woman like that is not ashamed to die.
> I have been her kind.

No matter what poetry she had on an evening's agenda, Sexton offered this persona as a point of entry to her art. "I" in the poem is a disturbing, marginal female whose power is associated with disfigurement, sexuality, and magic. But at the end of each stanza, "I" is displaced from sufferer onto storyteller. With the lines "A woman like that . . . I have been her kind" Sexton conveys the terms on which she wishes to be understood: not victim, but witness and witch.

Sexton's *Complete Poems* yields most when read as if it contained a narrative: an account of a woman cursed with a desire to die. Why is she different from other women? Where did the curse come from? A story line with a beginning, middle, and end takes shape in *Complete Poems* as Sexton systematically exhausts a set of culturally acceptable explanations for the condition of her kind. These are, first, a psychiatric explanation; later, a sociological explanation; and finally a spiritual explanation . . . .

As I have been suggesting, I find Sexton a startlingly original and valuable artist. But Sexton

differs from members of this group in two important ways that make it difficult to rank her among these other writers. First, she was not an intellectual. Sexton had only a high school education; she got her training as a poet in workshops. Though she had a quick mind and read widely, her thinking was intuitive rather than systematic. She did not identify herself with a literary tradition, she did not measure herself in terms of precursors, she did not acquire a critical language by which to classify and discriminate. Hers is not a poetry of ideas—aesthetic, political, philosophical, or historical.

Second, she stopped writing the kind of short lyric that remains coin of the realm in American poetry: the lyric of perfect economy composed according to an exacting formal standard, whether in meter or free verse. Critics still praise Sexton's early work for its control of the materials of disorder by means of formal effects she dismissed as "tricks." Manuscripts of early poems reveal that Sexton often began by setting herself a design problem: a stanza template with rhyme positions designated "a, b, c," etc.; then she would write a poem into the mould. She continued this practice, with good results, through 1962: her workshop years . . . .

Sexton's later style developed out of the demands of her subject matter: accounting for madness. The exploratory, associational method she devised gave priority to the implacable structure of unconscious processes. This method is most successful in such poems as "O Ye Tongues," "The Jesus Papers," "The Furies," "The Death of the Fathers," "The Death Baby," *Transformations*—works where the traces of a narrative adumbrate a boundary of reference within which to rationalize the flow of association. For much of Sexton's *Complete Poems*, the horizon or story line is, of course, autobiographical, focused on Sexton's attraction to death. Sexton's *Complete Poems* might be described as a psycho-narrative in verse, to which each poem is a contribution.

Moreover, the type of poem Sexton evolved was probably an inevitable creation in mid-century American poetry. It articulates the dilemma of a female recipient of certain ideas about women's place in the social order; it invests this dilemma in a single persona, a performing voice. The contemporary writings of Sylvia Plath and Adrienne Rich offer perhaps the closest analogues to Sexton's work, since their own dilemmas were equally privileged and middle class. As young *women* all three had embraced prevailing ideologies about women's roles. All three of them seem to have been excessively susceptible to highly conventional expectations, tormented by questions about whether they were "good" daughters, students, mothers, wives. As young *artists* they had to gain recognition in a prestige system condescending to women, and the conflicts they experienced between the roles of woman and artist fueled their development. In fact, the gender specificity of much of their poetry helps us see how specifically "masculine" were the concerns of peers such as Lowell, [W. D.] Snodgrass, Berryman, [Richard] Wright, Roethke, [Allen] Ginsberg—who struggled to attain spiritual authority in the postwar consumer society littered with unusable masculine stereotypes.

But for Plath and Rich, the male-identified literary tradition eventually suggested models for transcendence uncongenial to Sexton. Both Plath and Rich essentially revised, for women's use, the poetics of romanticism which centers the poem in a visionary ego. Plath adopted the voice of a maenad; Rich evolved a powerfully personal voice of informed social criticism.

Sexton's voice remained unembarrassedly domestic. She tested notions about self and God against feelings schooled in repression, and her poems do not transcend, they explore this repression. Sexton's art celebrates word-magic, buffoonery, regression, "milking the unconscious," as inexhaustible sources of resistance to the deadly authority of the stereotypes constraining adult women's lives. Sexton's artistry was to achieve a mode of expression for this particular female consciousness, expression at once intimate and theatrical. Her audiences, mostly women, responded to that voice as the manifestation of a condition they had previously felt to be wholly personal and interior. Suddenly, poetry had expanded to acknowledge a whole new citizenry: the middle-class American woman beginning to seek liberation from confinement in domestic roles. As American poetry slowly incorporates a feminist consciousness, Sexton's work seems uncannily ahead of its time. It seems bound to endure at least as long as the social and psychological dilemmas that inspired her . . . .

Source: Diane Middlebrook, "Poets of Weird Abundance," in *Parnassus: Poetry in Review*, Vols. 12–13, Nos. 1–2, 1985, pp. 293–315.

Greg Johnson

In the following essay, Johnson presents a critical overview of Sexton's works, including "Young," and career.

At the heart of Anne Sexton's poetry is a search for identity, and her well-known infatuation with death—the cause of her rather notorious fame, and the apparent reason her work is often dismissed as beneath serious consideration—has little to do with this search; in her best work, in fact, it is most often an annoying irrelevancy, however potent it seems in its occasional command of the poet's psyche. Quite simply, Sexton's poetry is a poetry of life, and if her work is "confessional" at times, or even most of the time, this does not mean that the poet's confessions (the word itself is misleading) necessarily describe experiences ridden with guilt or pain. This is where Sexton's poetry diverges so dramatically from that of Sylvia Plath, of whom she is frequently seen as a kind of epigonic follower. Plath mythologizes death with great power and succinctness, and places herself at the center of a myth whose message is "blackness—blackness and silence"; her vision is brutally nihilistic, and she embraces it willingly. Plath's struggle is that of the mythmaker—primarily artistic rather than personal, since the personal self is mercilessly pared away in her poetry (as are all other selves) in deference to the controlling myth. Anne Sexton, on the other hand, speaks longingly and lovingly of a world of health, of childlike wholeness—a world toward which she struggles valiantly and against insuperable odds. To understand her poetry as a record of this struggle, and as a testament to its value and importance, is to appreciate its special relevance to the contemporary world, a world of increasing disjunction between personal and social selves and one whose chaotic, literally "maddening" effect on the individual mind Anne Sexton manages to convey with that blend of craft and vulnerability that is her special magic.

Unlike Plath, and certainly unlike Robert Lowell—with whom her name is also frequently and pointlessly linked—Sexton is a Primitive, an extraordinarily intense artist who confronts her experience with unsettling directness, largely innocent of "tradition" and privately developing an idiom exactly suited to that experience. As Louis Simpson remarked after the publication of her first book, "This then is a phenomenon . . . to remind us, when we have forgotten in the weariness of literature, that poetry can happen." The



IN HER ATTEMPT TO COUNTER THE TRUTH THE DEAD KNOW WITH A GENTLER, MORE HUMANIZING TRUTH, SEXTON SEEKS OUT TWO MAJOR SOURCES OF COMFORT: RELIGIOUS BELIEF AND DOMESTIC LOVE."

reader's sense of the direct and seemingly spontaneous quality of Sexton's earliest volumes—*To Bedlam and Partway Back* (1960), *All My Pretty Ones* (1962) and *Live or Die* (1966)—can partially be explained by noting that she first began writing poetry, at the age of twenty-eight, as a form of personal therapy, a way of formalizing past traumas and of coping with an increasing sense of disorientation in her conventional role of suburban wife and mother. Her emotional instability, including her suicidal impulses, contributed to the immediacy, rawness and power of much of the poetry. This kind of therapy no doubt helped the poet in her personal life, but what is heroic in Sexton's case, and particularly relevant to her readers, is the earnestness and scrupulosity with which she mastered her craft, developed her highly original voice, and set about the task of communicating her experience to others. That Anne Sexton herself later succumbed to the "weariness of literature"—her later work, on the whole, is distinctly inferior to her early poetry, and verges at times on self-parody—and finally to her own destructive impulses, does not diminish the value and irresistible power of her finest achievements, which speak to us in a voice by turns inspired and beleaguered, joyful and aggrieved, lost in the confusions of self but found, ultimately, in her masterful articulation of her experience as a whole, a complex experience which serves as a painfully truthful mirror of the age.

Sexton's first two volumes have much in common, both in their multi-faceted handling of the identity theme and in their adherence to rather strict poetic forms. In both there is a constructive relationship between the deeply painful, inchoate materials—experiences in a mental institution, the loss of the poet's parents, and

unceasing struggle to define her own selfhood—and the restraining, masterful form of the poems themselves. There is little sense that the poet is arbitrarily forcing her experiences into rigid, inappropriate shapes, primarily because she convinces us that she has pierced to the core of those experiences to discover shapes inherent in them; the formal, measured quality of the verse not only indicates the poet's necessary caution in dealing with her turbulent materials, but also establishes a crucial distance from which she may safely view her continuing struggle and present it to her readers in palatable form. Yet the controlled, meditative voice of these early poems is frequently mingled with an openly vulnerable, "confessional" voice, one which conveys genuine, childlike experiences of pain and terror. The poems are neither songs of innocence nor experience, but continually oscillate between conflicting states of mind, admitting continued disorientation while simultaneously creating an impressive poetic order.

An important difference between the first two books should be recognized, however. *To Bedlam and Partway Back* comprises an ordering of a specific, urgent experience—the descent into madness and a partial return—while *All My Pretty Ones* broadens from this painful but rich experience to consider more general themes of loss (especially the loss of parents) and upon an explicit need to define the poet's self in terms of the world. Although Sexton's books describe an ongoing personal development and flow naturally one into the other, each of the early volumes has a distinct identity and merits separate discussion. As Geoffrey Hartman has noted, *To Bedlam and Partway Back* is not merely a collection of poems but "truly a *book*," and there is ample evidence that Sexton organized the volume with meticulous care. The shorter lyrics in Part One deal with a cluster of obsessive themes, all related to the poet's search for identity, while the pair of long, meditative poems in Part Two achieve a tentative but emotionally satisfying resolution . . . .

By far the majority of poems in *To Bedlam and Partway Back* explore the poet's identity in terms of other women. There are poems about being buried alive ("The Moss of His Skin"), paralysis within a marriage and its "pantomime of love" ("The Farmer's Wife"), the literal paralysis of the goddess Diana, changed forever to a laurel tree and noting in despair that "blood moves still in my bark bound veins" ("Where I Live in This Honorable House of the Laurel Tree"). In one of the most moving of these poems, "Unknown Girl in the Maternity Ward," Sexton dramatizes the relationship between a mother and her daughter with a typical mingling of tenderness and a hopeless sense of estrangement. The mother can only consider her child a "fragile visitor," her "funny kin," and the reason is the mother's lack of her own selfhood, since she is, after all, "unknown." . . . .

In seeking to define her own identity through poetic fictions about other women, and about relationships between women, Sexton merely sees her own identity as inferior and finds that genuine relationship is unavailable. Later volumes will explore the causes behind her failure to "connect" meaningfully with others, but in *To Bedlam and Partway Back*, her failure leads directly into madness. Although she pictured herself, wryly, as "a secret beatnik hiding in the suburbs in a square house on a dull street," any pride she might have taken in her role as poet seems cancelled by this image of herself as a misfit, someone who did not live in that "good world" she envied her great aunt and could not create for herself. One senses that Anne Sexton felt herself forced into poetry, that her inability to find satisfaction in a conventional role made the pose of a "secret beatnik," a rebel—in the sense that both poetry and madness are forms of rebellion—her only means of survival. Unlike Emily Dickinson, who felt that "Much Madness is divinest Sense" and whose extreme self-sufficiency (however "mad" it might have appeared to her Amherst contemporaries) was the sign of a fully realized identity, Sexton desperately needed the approval of others: "I want everyone to hold up large signs saying YOU'RE A GOOD GIRL." Her belief that she had failed to be "good," and that she had no way of finding a "good world," led to a madness that was not divinest sense but hellish chaos, a threatened disintegration of selfhood.

This linking of madness with evil, with the inability to be "good," recurs in Sexton's poems dealing with her experiences in mental institutions. She continues to lament her sense of loss and disorientation: "They lock me in this chair at eight a.m. / and there are no signs to tell the way" ("Music Swims Back to Me"). In the first stanza of this poem she pictures herself as an orphan seeking the way home . . . These lines, like Ophelia's mad speeches, blend irreality and the absence

of sequential thought with a terrifying, sane intuition; immersed in a surreal, abandoned world, the speaker nonetheless understands her need to escape, to find "sign posts" back toward health.

Does Sexton imagine any way out of this impasse, any way to escape the debilitating terrors of a consciousness plagued by a conviction of its own evil? One possibility is to replace self-loathing with an open acceptance of evil—even admitting the likelihood that she is "not a woman." What is remarkable, however, is not this admission itself but the lively, almost gleeful tone in which it is uttered:

> I have gone out, a possessed witch,
> haunting the black air, braver at night;
> dreaming of evil, I have done my hitch
> over the plain houses, light by light:
> lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind.
> A woman like that is not a woman, quite.
> I have been her kind.
>
> ("Her Kind")

"A woman like that is misunderstood," Sexton adds wryly, but the poem is a serious attempt to understand such a woman—her sense of estrangement, her impulse toward death—by internalizing evil and giving it a voice: a chortling, self-satisfied, altogether amiable voice which suggests that "evil" is perhaps the wrong word after all. Sexton's witch, waving her "nude arms at villages going by," becomes something of value to the community, performing the function Kurt Vonnegut has called the "domestication of terror." Unlike Plath's madwoman in "Lady Lazarus"—a woman at the service of a private, unyielding anger, a red-haired demon whose revenge is to "eat men like air"—Sexton's witch is essentially harmless. Although she remains vulnerable—"A woman like that is not afraid to die"—she rejects anger in favor of humor, flamboyance, self-mockery. She is a kind of perverse entertainer, and if she seems cast in the role of a martyr, embracing madness in order to domesticate it for the rest of the community—making it seem less threatening, perhaps even enjoyable—it is nevertheless a martyrdom which this aspect of Sexton accepts with a peculiar zest.

Poems like "Her Kind and "Music Swims Back to Me" help create the famous, fatally glamorous mask of Anne Sexton—part lovable witch, part helpless madwoman—for which she became famous, and which is often discussed as if it were the only self present in Sexton's poetry. Denise Levertov, in her well-intentioned, somewhat patronizing remarks on Sexton's suicide, suggested that Sexton was "too intensely troubled to be fully aware of her influence or to take on its responsibility. Therefore it seems to me that we who are alive must make clear, as she could not, the distinction between creativity and self-destruction." But Sexton did take on a personal responsibility for the interest her work aroused—she sent cheerful, supportive letters, for instance, to the countless victims of mental illness who wrote to her—and much of her poetry, from the first volume onward, expresses anguish over her destructive impulses, with an awareness that they are threatening to her poetry as well as to her personal well-being.

Part Two of *To Bedlam and Partway Back* contains only three poems, but they are long, reflective works which attempt to take stock of the poet's progress, to state a rationale for her kind of poetry, and especially to acknowledge lifelong conflicts that have prevented a healthy development of self. These goals are directly addressed in the volume's longest and finest poem, "The Double Image." Here the poet gathers all her themes into a single autobiographical narration, seeking that "certain sense of order" through a careful, measured recounting of her seemingly chaotic and random experiences. Like many of Sexton's more somber, reflective poems, "The Double Image" is addressed to her daughter, establishing the crucial dynamic between the poet's desire for an affectionate, healthy relationship with the child, and her yearning toward the madness that threatens to separate them. The poem's tender, carefully modulated voice is firmly aligned on the side of health, but the poet remains aware of her continued vulnerability. She sees her madness as an unknown, demonic force, an "ugly angel" whose voice enchants the poet—much like the "disquieting muses" in Plath's analogous narrative. After giving way to madness and losing her child, Sexton has returned as a "partly mended thing," still unable to assume a healthy identity . . . The poem's title refers to Sexton's mother and daughter, seen as potent forces pulling her simultaneously in two directions. Sexton's mother (certainly a cold, uncaring figure in this poem) represents "the stony head of death," while the final lines speak of the daughter's inestimable value for the poet's present self, not only as a symbol of the life-force but as a hopeful foreshadowing of her own developing selfhood . . . .

In Sexton's second volume, *All My Pretty Ones* (1962), she broadens her scope from consideration of the specific, urgent experience of madness to consider more universally comprehensible forms of loss. Sexton's parents died in 1959, and though she insisted at the time that she would not write poems about them, she later changed her mind. The first part of this volume contains "The Truth the Dead Know,""All My Pretty Ones" and "Lament," poems dealing with her parents' deaths and among the finest she ever wrote. Not surprisingly, the ostensible theme of bereavement is mingled with an examination of the poet's continuing struggle toward identity. In that strange, bitter elegy, "The Truth the Dead Know," Sexton seems to eschew the common rituals of mourning: "Gone, I say and walk from church, / refusing the stiff procession to the grave"; she prefers, instead, to "cultivate myself" and to avoid such a powerful intimation of mortality as the death of both parents within a few months. The poem ends, however, by emphasizing not her own refusals but those of the dead, and into her voice creeps something like envy . . . .

A far gentler, more nostalgic poem like "Young" recalls the poet's innocence as a "lonely kid" whose relationship to her mother was not yet perceived as a "funnel"; and in "Old Dwarf Heart" she create a separate, mythical self—again resembling Plath's disquieting muses—who insists upon "the decay we're made of": "When I lie down to love, old dwarf heart shakes her head." Sexton can never escape this destructive self ("Where I go, she goes"), which is perceived as having originated in a vicious Oedipal "tangle," but the loss of her parents does give her a kind of grim new beginning, and the rest of the volume explores various avenues of escape.

In her attempt to counter the truth the dead know with a gentler, more humanizing truth, Sexton seeks out two major sources of comfort: religious belief and domestic love. Her early cluster of religious poems, forming Part Two of *All My Pretty Ones*, initiates a theme that will recur throughout her work—especially in her posthumous volume, *The Awful Rowing Toward God* (1975)—but she seemed to find little solace in her religious ponderings; at times, in fact, they only increase her sense of guilt. In "With Mercy for the Greedy," addressed to a Catholic friend who tried to convert the poet, Sexton says with childlike sincerity: "I detest my sins and I try to believe / in the Cross. I touch its tender hips, its dark jawed face, / its solid neck, its brown sleep." Unlike Emily Dickinson, who saw herself locked in a battle of wills with God the Father, a Puritan Nobodaddy who threatened her own sense of self, Sexton was drawn toward the image of a gentle, redemptive Christ, a God who was palpably human. But she concludes, ruefully, "Need is not quite belief," and explains, with typical Sexton wryness, "I was born doing reference work in sin . . . " In Part Three, which consists of a single poem, "The Fortress," Sexton insists that the love between herself and her daughter has greater redemptive power than any religious belief. The poet has a sense of her own value, however fleeting, in her protectiveness toward her daughter: "What ark / can I fill for you when the world goes wild?" Although she knows that "Life is not in my hands" and cannot promise that her daughter will find happiness, the poem emphasizes their tender domestic alliance, the "fortress" their togetherness forms against the "bombs" of experience.

In one of the volume's most impressive poems, "Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound," Sexton makes an ordinary boat ride into the occasion of an optimistic, even transcendent spiritual vision . . . .

With two accomplished volumes behind her, with a blossoming career and innumerable devoted readers, she summoned the courage to bluntly question the value of living—to decide whether, in fact, the pain of life does not outweigh its rewards. In "The Black Art" she insisted: "A woman who writes feels too much, / those trances and portents!" Her decision to explore fully those excessive feelings, to relate her mysterious "trances and portents" to her central concerns of identity, poetry and survival, helped her toward *Live or Die* (1966), winner of a Pulitzer Prize and the finest achievement of her career. The volume's title represents an ultimatum; the poems themselves, arranged in chronological order and reading, as Sexton herself noted, like a "fever chart," show the poet moving toward a stark confrontation with her suicidal impulses and with her "portent" that life as a whole—not only for her, but perhaps for everyone—is simply not worthwhile. And yet, as one astute reviewer, Thomas P. McDonnell, noted at the time *Live or Die* was first published, Sexton gives us more than "impulses": "(this) is not a poetry of spasmodic revelation or of occasional incident transformed from similitude to artifact: in its continuing

wholeness one perceives the suggestion of a journey." It was a journey, as *Live or Die* makes clear, upon whose outcome rested her life itself, and one she approaches with great courage and her developed artistic powers. Carl Jung, discussing the obstacles to personal growth, notes that venturing into "obscurity and darkness" is absolutely essential in the quest for a new stage of development, a higher individuation of self. For Anne Sexton, there were two kinds of "darkness"—her madness, which represented personal defeat; and that agonizing uncertainty about her life and her identity which could only be eased through poetry and whose resolution—even if temporary—could represent significant progress toward mental stability and a secure sense of self. In *Live or Die*, Sexton has greatly matured as woman and as poet: she does not glorify madness, setting herself apart from the rest of humanity, but rather perceives it as an ignoble escape and, most of all, as a colossal waste of time. The most fearsome "obscurity and darkness," Jung suggests, lies in a sane, ego-centered approach toward personal problems, not in a surrender to the chaotic promptings of the id. In her third volume Sexton recognizes this truth, and the recognition helps produce some of her finest poetry . . . .

In "Wanting to Die," Sexton notes that her own body, her essential physical self, is only a "bad prison" that should be emptied of breath, of life. Through poetry she sought liberation from this cruel and unnecessary prison, a liberation that could come only through a compassionate acceptance of her own flawed but redeemable self. Thus her emphasis in *Live or Die* is not upon "confession," with its implication of guilt, but upon compassion for herself and for all those who have influenced her personal existence. Seeking out the origin of her illness in childhood traumas and inadequate relationships with her parents, she is not interested in assigning blame but in bringing to light the dismal facts themselves; there is a new, strong impulse to face past realities and to assess their impact on the present. If this produced only a partial liberation, at least it represented an *earned* freedom that could directly affect the poet's life—acting as a form of therapy—and intensify the honesty of her art as well . . . .

After *Live or Die*, Sexton's personal evolution began to seem increasingly frenetic and directionless. In her later volumes she assumes various effective guises—the witty lover of *Love Poems* (1969), the ribald folklorist of *Transformations* (1971), the religious seeker of *The Awful Rowing Toward God* (1975)—but never again does she achieve the immediacy and fullness of *Live or Die*, a book that shows her largest, most personal issue examined with her utmost energy and clarity. In a sense, her later books are elaborate footnotes to that volume, developing ancillary themes and exploring areas of existence which become important once Sexton has made her crucial decision to live. And, as many critics have noted, she began to abandon the careful craftsmanship so evident in the early volumes, producing a large number of poems but letting their quality suffer a noticeable decline. Increasingly uncertain about the direction of her career, Sexton began to rely on the familiar, melodramatic voice of her earlier work, frequently repeating herself and no longer seeming able, or willing, to hone that voice through a rigorous attention to form, or to deepen its implications through fresh or surprising insights. As an artist, in short, she seems to stop growing. As a result, the American literary myth that a writer is only as good as her last book has been extremely damaging to Sexton, as expressed in the form of harsh or dismissive reviews of her last volumes. The recently issued collected edition of her work, however, should force readers to take another look, and especially to rediscover the value of Sexton's important earlier work.

In a letter written a few weeks before her death, Sexton remarks upon the famous closing poem of *Live or Die:*

> I do not know how I feel about such an old poem as "Live" in *Live or Die*. The poems stand for the moment they are written and make no promises to the future events and consciousness and raising of the unconscious as happens as one goes forward and does not look backward for an answer in an old poem.

A typically breathless, headlong statement, one which contains—with the advantage of hindsight, we can see it easily—a veiled warning, as well as a surprisingly harsh contempt of "old poems" representing experiences that are past, dead, no longer available to the poet (and, it would seem, no longer interesting to her). On the surface, it also suggests an unwillingness to *learn* from experience, to assimilate past insights into the vulnerable present consciousness as talismanic reminders, if not as forms of positive moral instruction. But actually the statement is

consistent with Sexton's poetry as a whole, and merely states once again the darker side of her belief: one cannot go backward, and the poet can "make no promises" that artistic resolutions can remain valid beyond the experience of a particular poem. "Experiment escorts us last," as Emily Dickinson wrote, and Sexton shared this frightening awareness of the uncertain, friable nature of personal evolution, of the pitfalls lying in wait at every turn of experience. What remains for us, after her death, is to admire her spirit in facing that experience, to rejoice in her momentary triumphs and to recognize, in the poems themselves, her ultimate survival.

Source: Greg Johnson, "The Achievement of Anne Sexton," in *Hollins Critic*, Vol. 21, No. 3, June 1984, pp. 1–13.



INTENSIVE SCRUTINY OF HER ILLNESS INTRODUCED HER, HAPHAZARDLY BUT USEFULLY, TO THE THEORY OF PSYCHOANALYSIS, TECHNIQUES OF ASSOCIATION, AND AN ARENA IN WHICH TO DISPLAY HER VERBAL CUNNING. EQUALLY IMPORTANT, IT FREED HER FROM CONFINEMENT IN THE FAMILY."

Diane Wood Middlebrook

In the following excerpt, Middlebrook relates how Sexton discovered language to be therapeutic and thus began a career as a poet.

. . . Sexton began writing poetry at home. Following her hospitalization for suicidal depressiveness in 1956, Sexton's two young children had been removed to the care of grandmothers; Sexton found herself with no occupation but psychotherapy and convalescence. Her doctor suggested that she use her free time to improve her education. "One night I saw I. A. Richards on educational television reading a sonnet and explaining its form," she told an interviewer. "I thought to myself, 'I could do that, maybe; I could try.' So I sat down and wrote a sonnet. The next day I wrote another one, and so forth." She measured progress by changes in the furniture supporting her work. At first she used a card table "because I didn't think I was a poet. When I put in a desk, it was in our dining room.[. . .] Then I put up some book shelves—everything was tentative."

This "tentative" rearrangement of the household was symbolic of Sexton's changed relation to domestic life in 1957. Postpartum depression following the birth of Sexton's first daughter, Linda, led in 1954 to her first psychiatric hospitalization. On her own birthday in 1956 she had made the first of many suicide attempts. And though family members were initially reluctant to acknowledge how serious Sexton's psychological problems had become, they were generous with support once she entered regular treatment. Husband Kayo's father, George Sexton, paid for Sexton's psychotherapy; after Sexton's second major breakdown, in 1955, Kayo's mother took infant Joy into her home for three years, while Anne's sister Blanche periodically cared for Linda. Anne's mother, Mary Gray, paid for regular housekeeping, and Kayo took over the shopping and cooking when Anne could not manage.

Working alone at home, free from other responsibilities, Sexton found writing an effective therapy. "My doctor encouraged me to write more. 'Don't kill yourself,' he said. 'Your poems might mean something to someone else someday.' That gave me a feeling of purpose, a little cause, something to *do* with my life." "I was quite naive. I thought he knew everything. Of course, he wouldn't know a good poem from a bad poem, but luckily I didn't think of that."

Sexton marked her development as a poet, rather than convalescing mental patient, from the evening she enrolled in a poetry workshop offered by the Boston Center for Adult Education. The teacher was John Holmes, a member of the senior faculty at Tufts University, who supplemented his income by offering instruction in writing to the "nontraditional" types who enroll in adult education courses. Holmes was warm and unintimidating as a teacher. What Sexton derived from the class, however, was not simply how to tell a good poem from a bad poem. Attempting to characterize this period of her life for an interviewer, Sexton drew an analogy between Holmes's poetry class and the mental hospital.

> I started in the middle of the term, very shy, writing very bad poems, solemnly handing them in for the eighteen others in the class to hear. The most important aspect of that class was that I felt I belonged somewhere. When I first got sick and became a displaced person, I thought I was quite alone, but when I went into

> the mental hospital, I found I wasn't, that there were other people like me. It made me feel better—more real, sane. I felt, "These are my people." Well, at the John Holmes class that I attended for two years, I found I belonged to the poets, that I was *real* there, and I had another, "These are my people."

Working out the implications of this association between the hospital and class provides a way of understanding some of the social significance of Sexton's art.

Until diagnosed as mentally ill, Sexton had been regarded by her exasperated family as childish, selfish, incompetent. Her mother-in-law remembered the shock with which she first watched Sexton throw herself, pounding and screaming, on the floor because she was enraged at being asked to do an errand. Later, Sexton's anger sometimes threatened the safety of her young children; Linda Sexton indicates that the poem "Red Roses" (in the posthumously published *45 Mercy Street*) recreates such an incident. But in the hospital, removed from the dynamics of family life, Sexton assumed another identity. As a madwoman she was a member of a distinct social class. Even the forms of her suffering, symptomatic of the disease she embodied, were not unique but generic. Most important for her later development, in the hospital she was given a hearing by therapists trained to decode her symptoms and clarify their function in her life. And she found herself in a social group that used language in a special way, to communicate indirectly.

Years after this first hospitalization, Sexton described the discovery—"I thought I was quite alone, but [. . .] I found I wasn't"—to a psychiatrist friend:

> It is hard to define. When I was first sick I was thrilled [. . .] to get into the Nut House. At first, of course, I was just scared and crying and very quiet (who me!) but then I found this girl (very crazy of course) (like me I guess) who talked language. What a relief! I mean, well . . . someone! And then later, a while later, and quite a while, I found out that [Dr.] Martin talked language. [. . .] By the way, [husband] Kayo has never once understood one word of language. [*Letters*, p. 244]

By "language," Sexton seems to mean forms of speech in which meaning is condensed and indirect and where breaks and gaps demand as much interpretation as what is voiced. Schizophrenics use language this way, and so do poets: "figurative language" is the term Sexton might have used here, except she meant to indicate that the crucible of formation was urgent need. Being permitted to communicate in "language" made her feel "real"—unlike the speech transactions of family life, which made her feel doll-like:

> Someone pretends with me—
> I am walled in solid by their noise—
> or puts me upon their straight bed.
> They think I am me!
> Their warmth is not a friend!
> They pry my mouth for their cups of grin
> and their stale bread.

Psychotherapy following hospitalization, further developing the sense of liberation achieved in the hospital, provided Sexton with a form of education. Intensive scrutiny of her illness introduced her, haphazardly but usefully, to the theory of psychoanalysis, techniques of association, and an arena in which to display her verbal cunning. Equally important, it freed her from confinement in the family. Demonstrably unfit for the occupation of housewife and mother, Sexton turned to other work. And because she had the good fortune to live in Greater Boston, she found her way, merely by enrolling, into another social group that spoke "language": "I found I belonged to the poets, that I was *real* there."

Boston in the late 1950s was full of poets. "Being a 'poet' in Boston is not so difficult," Anne Sexton wrote Carolyn Kizer in February 1959, "except there are hoards of us living here. The place is jammed with good writers" (*Letters*, p. 56). Such abundance offered numerous advantages to the apprentice. Many well-known writers taught workshops that carried no academic prerequisites. In few places outside Boston might a professor of poetry like I. A. Richards have found an audience for lectures on the sonnet, or a TV station to air them. Both the teacher and Sexton's fellow students at the Boston Center for Adult Education reflected the exceptional literacy of Greater Boston. In John Holmes's class Sexton met Maxine Kumin, a Radcliffe graduate who had decided after some years of motherhood to return to serious writing. Kumin's career was to flourish in tandem with Sexton's, each eventually receiving the Pulitzer Prize in poetry.

It was part of Sexton's transformative good luck, I think, that she found both the instruction and, later, the academic credentials she needed without passing through the advantaged but in important ways—for poets—repressive educational systems that shaped the early work of her Boston cohorts, Adrienne Rich and Sylvia Plath. Rigorous academic training of the period led young poets to imitate the masters of the

British tradition, particularly the metaphysical poets and the intensely intellectual modernists. The early writings of both Plath and Rich indicate that they were excellent students, striving for correctness in these modes. As strong poets, and like men who became strong poets under the same academic influences, Plath and Rich survived this academic phase by growing out of it; in their characteristic mature work, the mannerisms of their early models have disappeared. In the realm of the university, however, not only were their literary models intellectual men, but their teachers and lovers were too, and the best women students tended to marry them and then vanish into the underclass of academic life.

Sexton avoided this common predicament of her contemporaries, paradoxically, by marrying young. Having no further academic ambitions after finishing high school, she went on to the Garland School in Boston, where girls were taught home management. She eloped within a few months. Her struggles to mature during the early years of marriage and motherhood took place almost completely within an extended family; her husband was frequently absent on business, and both parents and in-laws were important, frequently intrusive, presences. The illnesses from which she suffered throughout her adult life burgeoned in this context of censorious parental scrutiny. Problematic as her family relations were, however, they formed a different universe of concern from the one she entered as an apprentice to poetry and did not impede her development once she found her way out of the house. She turned from sufferer into poet, a social role different altogether . . . .

Source: Diane Wood Middlebrook, "Housewife into Poet: The Apprenticeship of Anne Sexton," in *New England Quarterly*, Vol. 56, No. 4, December 1983, pp. 483–503.

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This book presents a collection of photographs Furst took of Sexton beginning from the time he met and befriended her in April 1974, shortly after one of her failed suicide attempts, until her death in October.

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This work is the first monograph on the confessional poets as a group, written just as their movement began to fragment.

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This anthology not only collects the most important of Sexton's essays but also contains extensive interviews with her.

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.

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.

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.

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."

Antimasque: See *Masque*

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.

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.

Art for Art's Sake: See *Aestheticism*

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.

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.

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*

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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*

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.

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.

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

Feet: See *Foot*

Feminine Rhyme: See *Rhyme*

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 particular 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*

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.

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.

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*

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.

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.

Humours: See *Humors*

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*

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.

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).

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.

Negro Renaissance: See *Harlem Renaissance*

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*

New Negro Movement: See *Harlem Renaissance*

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.

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.

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.

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.

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."

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.

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.

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.

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

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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*

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.

Social Realism: See *Socialist Realism*

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 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.

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

Tanka: A form of Japanese poetry similar to *haiku*. A *tanka* is five lines long, with the lines containing five, seven, five, seven, and seven syllables respectively.

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.

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.

Third Person: See *Point of View*

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.

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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J

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L

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N

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Nirvana is here, nine times out of ten. (Spring-Watching Pavilion) V18:198
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O

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On your head like a crown (Any Human to Another) V3:2
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Or does it explode? (Harlem) V1:63
Or help to half-a-crown." (The Man He Killed) V3:167
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or last time, we look. (In Particular) V20:125
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or nothing (Queen-Ann's-Lace) V6:179
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ORANGE forever. (Ballad of Orange and Grape) V10:18
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P

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R

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Ride me. (Witness) V26:285
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S

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spill darker kissmarks on that dark. (Ten Years after Your Deliberate Drowning) V21:240
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T

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They say a child with two mouths is no good. (Pantoun for Chinese Women) V29:242
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They'd eaten every one." (The Walrus and the Carpenter) V30:258–259
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Till Love and Fame to nothingness do sink (When I Have Fears that I May Cease to Be) V2:295
To every woman a happy ending (Barbie Doll) V9:33
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To strengthen whilst one stands." (Goblin Market) V27:96
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield (Ulysses) V2:279
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To wound myself upon the sharp edges of the night? (The Taxi) V30:211–212
Turned to that dirt from whence he sprung. (A Satirical Elegy on the Death of a Late Famous General) V27:216

U

Undeniable selves, into your days, and beyond. (The Continuous Life) V18:51
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Until Eternity. (The Bustle in a House) V10:62
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W

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Were toward Eternity—(Because I Could Not Stop for Death) V2:27
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When you have both (Toads) V4:244
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Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me! (My Last Duchess) V1:166
Which for all you know is the life you've chosen. (The God Who Loves You) V20:88
which is not going to go wasted on me which is why I'm telling you about it (Having a Coke with You) V12:106
which only looks like an *l*, and is silent. (Trompe l'Oeil) V22:216
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Wind, like the dodo's (Bedtime Story) V8:33
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With gold unfading, WASHINGTON! be thine. (To His Excellency General Washington) V13:213
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With what they had to go on. (The Conquerors) V13:67
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Y

Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know (Ode on a Grecian Urn) V1:180
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You may for ever tarry. (To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time) V13:226
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