Poetry for Students

Volume 31

POETRY
for Students

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POETRY
for Students

Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Poetry

VOLUME 31

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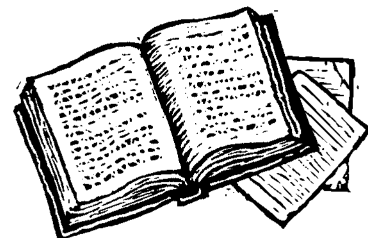

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Just a Few Lines on a Page

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 *PfS* 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.

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

612–630 BCE: Sappho is born in Lesbos, Greece.

500s BCE: Sappho's "Fragment 2" is composed.

550–580 BCE: Sappho dies of unknown causes.

1642: Edward Taylor is born in Sketchley, Leicestershire, England.

1729: Edward Taylor dies of failing health in old age on June 24, in Westfield, Massachusetts.

1807: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow is born on February 27, in Portland, Maine.

1813: Walt Whitman is born on May 31, in West Hills, near Huntingdon, Long Island, New York.

1841: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "The Wreck of the Hesperus" is published.

1881: Walt Whitman's "A Noiseless Patient Spider" is published.

1882: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow dies of peritonitis on March 24, in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

1892: Edna St. Vincent Millay is born on February 22, in Rockland, Maine.

1892: Walt Whitman dies of a stroke on March 26, in New Jersey.

1894: Jean Toomer is born Nathan Pinchback Toomer on December 26, in Washington, D.C.

1898: Federico García Lorca is born on June 5, in Fuentevaqueros, Granada, Spain.

1902: Ogden Nash is born Frederick Ogden Nash on August 19, in Rye, New York.

1911: Elizabeth Bishop is born on February 8, in Worcester, Massachusetts.

1913: Robert Hayden is born on August 4, in Detroit, Michigan.

1914: Randall Jarrell is born on May 6, in Nashville, Tennessee.

1915: Margaret Walker is born on July 7, in Birmingham, Alabama.

1922: Jean Toomer's "Storm Ending" is published.

1923: Denise Levertov is born on October 24, in Ilford, Essex, England.

1923: Edna St. Vincent Millay is awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for *The Harp-Weaver and Other Poems*.

1923: Wisława Szymborska is born on July 2, in Kórnik, Poland.

1935: Federico García Lorca's "Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías" is first published in Spanish and will be published in English in 1937 as "Lament for the Death of a Bullfighter."

1935: Mary Oliver is born on September 10, in Maple Heights, Ohio.

1936: Federico García Lorca is executed c. August 19, in Viznar, Granada, Spain.

1938: Ogden Nash's "The Hippopotamus" is published.

1939: Edward Taylor's "Huswifery" is published.

1940: Elizabeth Bishop's "The Fish" is published.

1942: Margaret Walker's "Lineage" is published.

1944: Eavan Boland is born on September 24, in Dublin, Ireland.

1945: Randall Jarrell's "Losses" is published.

1950: Edna St. Vincent Millay dies of heart failure after a fall on October 19, at her home, Steepletop, in Austerlitz, New York.

1954: Edna St. Vincent Millay's "An Ancient Gesture" is published.

1956: Elizabeth Bishop is awarded a Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for *Poems: North & South — A Cold Spring*.

1965: Randall Jarrell dies on October 14, in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

1966: Robert Hayden's "Runagate Runagate" is published.

1967: Jean Toomer dies on March 30, in a nursing home in Doylestown, Pennsylvania.

1970: Denise Levertov's "A Tree Telling of Orpheus" is published.

1971: Ogden Nash dies of heart failure on May 19, in Baltimore, Maryland.

1979: Elizabeth Bishop dies on October 6, in Boston, Massachusetts.

1979: Mary Oliver's "The Black Snake" is published.

1980: Robert Hayden dies on February 25, in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

1984: Mary Oliver is awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for *American Primitive*.

1990: Eavan Boland's "Outside History" is published.

1993: Wisława Szymborska's "Some People Like Poetry" is first published in Polish and will be published in English in 1996.

1997: Denise Levertov dies on December 20, at her home in Seattle, Washington.

1998: Margaret Walker dies of cancer on November 30, in Chicago, Illinois.

Acknowledgments

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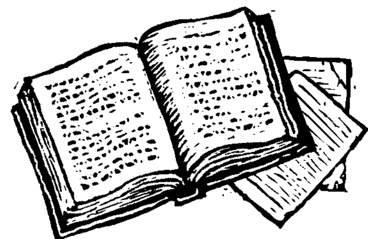
An Ancient Gesture

EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY

1954

Edna St. Vincent Millay was called the greatest lyric poet of the twentieth century by her admirers. "An Ancient Gesture" was one of her last poems, appearing in print after her death in the collection *Mine the Harvest* (1954). Significantly, the poem uses the myth of Penelope and Ulysses, as from Homer's *Odyssey* (in which he is called Odysseus), to investigate the relationship between men and women. Millay was drawn to classical literature, which she could read in the original languages. She was particularly influenced by classical lyric poetry and by the Renaissance and nineteenth-century lyric. "An Ancient Gesture" turns the myth from Homer upside down, focusing on Penelope's grief in her marriage rather than on her role as the perfect wife. The poem, spoken probably by a housewife in Millay's era, offers a meditation on Penelope's tears at her husband's absence, in ways the tears of all women, and then compares and contrasts them to the tears of men, as from the person of Ulysses.

This poem has been anthologized in recent years for its feminist theme and skilled lyric evocation of grief. Millay wrote it at the end of an illustrious and famous career, by which time her poetry was well known and loved from her numerous reading tours and radio broadcasts. She became the first woman to win a Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1923, but by the late 1930s she was in disfavor with the modernist critics who rejected her sources in earlier lyric traditions. Such critics admired poets such as T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound



Edna St. Vincent Millay *(The Library of Congress)*

who were experimenting with intellectual poetry in free verse; they found Millay to be a sentimental woman writer lacking depth. Though *Mine the Harvest*, her last collection, was praised after her death, her poetry was neglected until the 1990s, when her reputation was revived by feminist critics. "An Ancient Gesture" can also be found in a current edition of *Collected Poems: Edna St. Vincent Millay* (1981) or in *Selected Poems: Edna St. Vincent Millay* (1991).

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Edna St. Vincent Millay was born in Rockland, Maine, on February 22, 1892, the eldest daughter of Cora Buzzell and Henry Tolman Millay. She was given her middle name in honor of St. Vincent's Hospital, in New York City, where her uncle's life had been miraculously saved. Henry Millay was a salesman and a gambler. Cora, who was a free spirit and had literary ambitions herself, had three daughters in four years, with Norma and Kathleen following Edna. She taught the girls poetry and music when they were small. Cora finally sent Henry away when he could not support them, then moved to Rockport, Maine, and found work as a practical nurse, raising the children alone. Cora was absent a lot, and the girls were unusually independent, writing poems and stories and putting on plays. They grew up on the wild Maine coast, a landscape that appears often in Millay's poetry. The Millay girls were rebellious and uninhibited under their mother's liberal guidance and naturally became artists and free women of the Jazz Age.

When Millay attended high school in Camden, Maine, her talent began to shine. She was editor of the school magazine and appeared in plays. Inheriting her mother's dreams of a literary career, she began to win prizes for poems and essays, such as from *St. Nicholas* magazine, for children's writing. The family was too poor for the girls to attend college, but Millay submitted her most famous poem, "Renascence," to a contest in 1911 when she was nineteen; she was assured by the editor of the book to result, *The Lyric Year* (1912), that she would win, but she won fourth place instead. The publicity surrounding the volume of poems was in her favor regardless, since most critics decided she had deserved to win.

The pretty red-haired young poet was assisted by a philanthropist, Caroline Dow, to attend Vassar College, then a women's school, where Millay became popular, writing and acting in plays and engaging in numerous affairs, fancying herself a Sappho (the storied ancient Greek poet from Lesbos). In the year of her graduation, 1917, her first volume of poetry, *Renascence, and Other Poems*, was published, making her instantly famous. She moved to Greenwich Village and lived the life of an avant-garde artist in the 1920s, becoming an actress with the Provincetown Players and having affairs with other artists and radical intellectuals. To support herself she also wrote fiction for magazines under her great-grandmother's name, Nancy Boyd. In 1919 she wrote, directed, and acted in her own play, *Aria da Capo*, an antiwar piece that won acclaim.

In 1920, Millay published *A Few Figs from Thistles*, full of flippant poems about free love, making her the spokeswoman of a rebellious younger generation. In 1921, *Second April*, a more sober collection of lyric poems, appeared. From

1920 to 1922, she joined the American expatriates in Paris and Europe, publishing fiction for *Vanity Fair* as well as her poems and plays. In 1923, *The Harp-Weaver, and Other Poems* won her the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. Millay settled into a nonpossessive marriage with the Dutch coffee importer Eugen Boissevain the same year. He willingly took second place to her and her career, taking care of her delicate health on their farm, Steepletop, in Austerlitz, New York.

Millay wrote "The King's Henchman," an opera libretto for the Metropolitan Opera, in 1927, and *The Buck in the Snow*, a poetry collection published in 1928, was widely praised. Millay was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1929 and won the Helen Haire Levinson Prize for sonnets in 1931 for her poems in *Poetry* magazine. After a torrid love affair with George Dillon, a poet almost half her age, she wrote her sonnet sequence *Fatal Interview* (1931). *Wine from These Grapes* (1934) was a mature, philosophical collection of poems, but a 1936 translation of Charles Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil* with George Dillon won mixed reviews. The manuscript of *Conversation at Midnight*, a philosophic discussion in poetry, was lost in a hotel fire and had to be rewritten, to be published in 1937. The poems in *Huntsman, What Quarry?* (1939) began to reflect the growing tension of another world war to come.

Millay wrote a total of four plays, one opera libretto, short fiction, and eleven collections of poetry (one of which was posthumous); she also acted in plays and won prizes and several honorary degrees, becoming famous for the reading tours and radio broadcasts through which she made her poems popular with a general audience. She championed such liberal causes as opposition to the Nicola Sacco-Bartolomeo Vanzetti ruling in 1927, and she urged America to fight Fascism with *Make Bright the Arrows* (1940) and "The Murder of Lidice" (1942). She agreed with critics that her political poetry was inferior. After receiving the Gold Medal of the Poetry Society of America in 1943, she had a nervous breakdown and was unable to write for two years. Millay's husband died in 1949, and she did not live long after, dying on October 19, 1950, after a fall down the stairs at her home in Austerlitz. *Mine the Harvest*, containing "An Ancient Gesture," was a posthumous volume of poems published in 1954. *The Collected Poems*, edited by her sister Norma Ellis, was published in 1956.

POEM TEXT

I thought, as I wiped my eyes on the corner
 of my apron:
Penelope did this too.
And more than once: you can't keep weaving
 all day
And undoing it all through the night;
Your arms get tired, and the back of your
 neck gets tight; 5
And along towards morning, when you think it
 will never be light,
And your husband has been gone, and you
 don't know where, for years,
Suddenly you burst into tears;
There is simply nothing else to do.

And I thought, as I wiped my eyes on the
 corner of my apron: 10
This is an ancient gesture, authentic, antique,
In the very best tradition, classic, Greek;
Ulysses did this too.
But only as a gesture,—a gesture which implied
To the assembled throng that he was much too
 moved to speak. 15
He learned it from Penelope . . .
Penelope, who really cried.

POEM SUMMARY

Stanza 1

Line 1 of "An Ancient Gesture" introduces a first-person speaker of the poem who appears to be a housewife wiping her eyes on her apron as she sheds tears. With the emotion, a thought comes that gives some relief and perspective.

Line 2 is the thought, that Penelope also cried. The line is a short, three-stress line, a direct declaration. Most of the lines have five stresses while varying in the number of syllables and length; the three-stress lines state the forceful conclusions. The speaker compares herself to the classical heroine, Penelope, the faithful wife of the Trojan War hero Ulysses. The apron is a homely touch that connects the epic past of Homer's famous *Odyssey* to the everyday present world. Penelope and the housewife both cry, and the spontaneity of the gesture is emphasized by the narrator's wiping her tears on the nearest available thing, the apron. The speaker no doubt did not expect to cry. She is probably in her kitchen, in the middle of her work, without a handkerchief. The significance of the comparison with Penelope unfolds in the later lines.

MEDIA ADAPTATIONS

- *Five American Women: Gertrude Stein, H. D., Edna St. Vincent Millay, Louise Bogan, Muriel Rukeyser* (2001), part of the Voice of the Poet Series, by Random House Audio, is a recording of the poets reading their own poetry. Paper text of the poems with commentary by editor J. D. McClatchy accompanies the cassettes.
- *Millay at Steepletop* is a 1968 documentary filmed at Millay's home in Austerlitz, New York, directed by Kevin Brownlow, including readings of poems, archival footage, and an interview with Millay's sister Norma.

Line 3 tells us that Penelope cried frequently and then emphasizes the difficulty or impossibility of weaving all day, with the action now being attributed to a second-person "you." The enjambment, or running on of the line, extends the thought to the next line. The poem gives the effect, through repetition of alternating long and short lines, of what weaving feels like. The speaker is weaving her thoughts as rhythmically as Penelope would throw the shuttle.

Line 4 explains the fatigue brought about when one weaves in the day and has to spend all night undoing it again. This refers to what Penelope did during her trying circumstances in the absence of her husband. While Ulysses was off getting glory and fame in the Trojan War, Penelope had to take care of their little son, Telemachus, as well as Ulysses's parents and the whole island of Ithaca, of which Ulysses was king. After her husband did not return on time from the war, other men began to pursue Penelope, wanting to marry her and take over the throne. She not only refused them and heroically waited for her husband but also wanted to protect the throne for her son. Like Ulysses, Penelope was clever and used tricks to survive. She told the suitors that she would choose a new husband only after weaving a shroud for her father-in-law, Laertes. They would see her weaving in the day, but she would undo it by night, so as not to finish. The speaker here identifies Penelope's ruse as a symbol of women's work in general by using the second-person pronoun "you," meaning anyone, or perhaps any woman. Aside from being hard, women's work often feels fruitless, repetitive, and hopeless.

Line 5 begins to build tension by telling how fatigue is experienced in the sore arms and tight neck. The concrete details remind the reader of what repetitive work feels like and of the worry that accompanies frustration and grief. It is a physical battle in a different way than war is. The long, swinging rhythms of the uneven five-stress lines continue to imitate the movements of weaving, while the stressed rhymes at the ends of lines 4, 5, and 6 suggest the counterrhythm of shortened and tensed muscles.

Line 6 increases the tension by adding more details. One breaks down by having to go on without rest or change. In being up all night under strain, one thinks the morning will never come. Even if the dawn is nearing, it is still dark, and it is hard to imagine light at the darkest point of night. Despair is natural under such circumstances. The repetition of the conjunction at the beginning of lines 3, 4, 6, and 7 allows for the adding of more and more reasons for Penelope's breaking down in a rhythmic recurrence, like with a loom that will not stop.

Line 7 builds toward the emotional breaking point, as it reveals the main reason for grief. The husband (Ulysses or the speaker's or "your" loved one) is gone. There is no helpmate or support in the difficult situation. Penelope did not know if her husband was dead or alive or whether she was doing right to wait. The speaker implies, by using Penelope as a mask or mirror for her own emotions, that she feels deserted in some way, though she does not specify the circumstances. It could be a physical desertion, like Ulysses', or emotional distance. In any case, the one left behind feels alone and overwhelmed.

In line 8, a short, three-stress line, the breaking point is reached: the subject being spoken of or to bursts into tears. The building of the longer lines as followed by the sudden release in a short line with the image of tears makes the reader feel the inevitability of the expression of grief, no matter how strong the person has been so far.

Line 9 is another three-stress line, with a different effect. This line replicates the quiescence achieved after a letting go. One could not

do differently than to cry. The tears come, and it is the only gesture that makes sense in such a moment.

The whole first stanza duplicates the mounting pressure and release of grief, recalling the original and natural gestures of a moment of profound sadness. Then comes a space between the first and second stanzas that invites reflection on these circumstances.

Stanza 2

Line 10 returns once again to the speaker and repeats her gesture of crying on the corner of her apron. This time, the stanza will unfold more of her thoughts about her emotion than emotion itself.

Line 11 affirms that crying when one is at the end of one's rope is an ancient and honest gesture. This is a positive declaration. The speaker is one who knows tradition; therefore, though she is alone, she has the consolation of those who came before.

Line 12 further explains that crying is respectable because after all, the ancient Greeks, too, cried. The Greeks have a certain authority, for they are the source of the Western traditions of poetry, philosophy, science, art, and wisdom. If they sanction the gesture, it should be nothing to be ashamed of. The end rhymes in lines 11, 12, and 15 in this stanza create a somewhat ironic or flippant tone in the speaker's voice that contrasts with the more somber tone of the first stanza.

Line 13 is a short, three-stress line that echoes line 2, except that it names Ulysses, the Greek hero, as also crying. Now the speaker seems to be pointing to the universal nature of tears and grief. It is not only women who cry. This brings a somewhat surprising turn to the poem. The poem begins with a domestic picture of a woman's tears, then broadens to consideration of the man's point of view. Greeks cry. Men cry. A hero cries. The woman's leaping thoughts about the tears she is shedding show a certain mental agility. In a matter of moments, she weeps and then begins to recover with a reflection about the significance of the gesture.

Line 14, however, brings another turn. It creates doubt about Ulysses, because he only cried as a gesture, as a rhetorical device.

Line 15 explains how Ulysses used the gesture of tears when he spoke to the crowd, implying that he was too choked up to offer words. This line refers to Ulysses' time among the Phaeacians, who took him in and gave him the means to get home to Ithaca. He did not reveal his identity directly to them but asked the bard to sing of the Trojan War. The poet sang of the glorious Ulysses, and Ulysses was seen weeping at the tale of himself and his comrades. This raised curiosity as to his identity, and then Ulysses revealed himself to be the war hero they sang of. He then narrated his further adventures and won the treasure and support of King Alcinous. Ulysses had a reputation for being a wily liar. He skillfully played a part, using his tears to manipulate the audience into praising him. He was loaded with honor and treasure by the Phaeacians, not only for winning battles but also for the hardship he had been through. The speaker here implies that for Ulysses, tears were a useful gesture for getting what he wanted. Unlike Penelope, whose heroic endurance went unrecognized, Ulysses was treated like a god.

Line 16 adds a further twist in a short, three-stress line that introduces a conclusion or insight: Ulysses learned this trick of crying from his wife, Penelope. She was the source of the gesture that won him a way to get home. The ellipsis at the end of the line invites reflection on this idea on the part of the reader. The speaker does not have to elaborate further; it is a subtle point that would be lessened by too much elaboration. Hammering home the point that it is possible for men to copy from women or learn from women would weaken the startling force of the suggestion.

Line 17 is a short, three-stress line that clinches the poem and the speaker's conclusion: Ulysses's tears were not the same as Penelope's, because she genuinely cried. This implies two things: one, that he saw the gesture of tears as powerful and used it for his own purposes, and two, that he did not really understand Penelope's reasons for the gesture.

The last stanza upsets the usual pathos, or appeal to compassion, of the story of the brave warrior off to battle and the faithful wife crying in his absence. It implies that Penelope underwent the greater hardship; her endurance and heroism, though unsung, were thus greater than her husband's. The last stanza also implies that Penelope, or women in general, are hidden leaders who illustrate the indomitable human spirit as much as men do. The speaker thus identifies with the long line of anonymous women heroes who stretch from antiquity to modern times.

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY

- Compare and contrast other modern poems about Penelope, such as Louise Gluck's "Ithaca" and Yannis Ritsos's "Penelope's Despair," to Millay's "An Ancient Gesture." How is the relationship between Penelope and Ulysses interpreted differently by each poet? Which interpretation do you think is most convincing and why? Write a paper explaining your response, choosing lines and images to support your point of view.
- Research the New Critics—mid-twentieth-century writers such as John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, and T. S. Eliot—and their ideas about what was good modern poetry. Then read some of Millay's poems and apply the standards of New Criticism. Why does Millay's poetry not appear to meet their criteria? Do you agree with their evaluations of Millay's work? Why or why not? Give a class presentation on the topic. Read some of Millay's poems aloud and discuss with the class whether you think they are old fashioned and sentimental, or whether they still have a place in our literature.
- Working with a group, research the definition and history of lyric poetry and famous lyric poets throughout history. Each person in the group should then choose a poem from a different lyric poet, reading it aloud and identifying its theme and lyric qualities. The final speaker should read a poem of Millay's. Have a roundtable discussion, comparing and contrasting Millay's lyric style with the styles of other lyric poets.
- With a partner, listen to recordings of several famous poets reading their own poems, including Edna St. Vincent Millay. What does the poet's own voice bring to the poem? How is poetry different heard aloud than read on the page? Try taking the same poems and reading them yourselves in different ways to bring out various effects; for example, read for the sound rather than the meaning, or read conversationally rather than dramatically. At the end of the experiments, write a report presenting your conclusions about how reading poems aloud changes the experience of understanding poetry, giving examples from the poems.

THEMES

Grief and Loss

Although the poem does not reveal exactly what the speaker is going through, the extended comparison with Penelope and Ulysses implies extreme hardship and long suffering. As the speaker wipes her tears on the corner of her apron, suggesting she is a modern housewife, she thinks that Penelope, the epitome of the classical wife, also cried. She gives the reasons only for Penelope's tears, but the reader imagines Penelope as reflecting the speaker's feelings and similar burdens. The archetype of Penelope is used to evoke the situation of a wife whose husband or loved one is absent—a personal loss, but more in that it puts the woman into a position of pressure and hopeless exhaustion, as forced to try to hold her world together by herself. She has no support or partner and must cope alone. The loss of the loved one and his help does not feel temporary; it is of such long standing that her grief gives way, and she weeps. The attendant doubt and worry are suggested by the aching back and neck, and the endless night in which Penelope must stay up, undoing her weaving in secret so that the suitors will not find out she is delaying, always hoping her husband is alive and will one day return. She does not know where he is or if he is coming back. She begins to think the light will never come.

The focus, then, is on the grief of the woman, though Ulysses, too, had to endure grief and loss

on his long journey home from the war. In Homer's version, he was tested, attacked, and imprisoned and eventually lost all his men before arriving home alone. The emphasis in this poem, however, is on Penelope's grief, which seems more genuine than her husband's in Millay's version of the story. Penelope's grief was so deep, it gave rise to the original gesture of wiping away the tears.

Endurance

Millay's poem captures the moment when holding on to something for a long time has led to exhaustion that gives way to letting go and weeping from frustration and helplessness. The weeping does not indicate ultimate defeat, however, for Penelope and the speaker wipe their tears away, indicating a readiness to resume their labors after the momentary breaking down.

Penelope's act of holding off the suitors until her husband's return has always been considered an act of extreme loyalty and virtue. It indicates the love she has not only for her husband and her son but also for her country. She is the queen who must care for everyone. The greedy suitors are only interested in the wealth, prestige, and power of the throne. They try to destroy the integrity of Ithaca. Penelope's courage and faith are indicated in the fact that she has wept more than once. She has upheld the house of Ithaca without relief for twenty years in the absence of Ulysses, but she has endured, even with an aching body and heart and constant threats. A weak person would have given in. Penelope is clever and resourceful and finds a way to manage an impossible situation. The speaker's implied comparison of her endurance to Penelope's suggests a trial of long standing, with no help or understanding available.

Ulysses, too, is a symbol of endurance, for he had to suffer first war, then the terrible journey home. It helps the speaker of the poem to think of this ancient story of hardship, to know that in giving way under unbearable stress she is preceded by great classical figures. The poem does not remind us of the happy ending of the tale, however, when Ulysses and Penelope are reunited thanks to their mutual determination to endure. The poem deals instead with the woman's doubt while waiting and the cost of her heroic endurance. As with the theme of grief, the poet puts emphasis on Penelope's acts of faith as the more important ones. If she had not found a way to keep Ithaca intact, Ulysses would have returned to nothing. The implication is that women are the unsung heroes of the world, absorbing in their very bodies the strain that men have created for them, perhaps unnecessarily, through ambition and conflicts.

Role of Women

Millay highlights the woman's role in maintaining order and continuity in society. Penelope is not the faithful sidekick in this version of the story but the true hero, whom Ulysses copies. This role reversal is revealed in the second stanza when the speaker contrasts the tears of husband and wife. Penelope's tears are shed in secret, for she has to be strong in public. Ulysses uses his tears before an audience to create an effect. She originates the gesture; he appropriates it.

In Homer's version of the story, Ulysses has the reputation of being a man of disguise. He not only is a strong warrior but also is endowed with cleverness, his main weapon in a tight spot. He often acts a part, as when he pretends to be a beggar after he gets home to test his wife's loyalty. In the *Iliad*, Homer's story about the Trojan War, Ulysses pretends to be mad to avoid having to fight. The speaker of Millay's poem probably remembers this fact about Ulysses and assumes that he learned the effect of tears from Penelope, how they could sway someone to pity. In the country of the Phaeacians, Ulysses makes sure he is seen weeping while hearing a song about the Trojan War to move his hosts to grant his request for passage home on one of their ships.

Millay's speaker intuitively feels that Penelope was the source of Ulysses' strength and wisdom, for she herself has felt what Penelope did. She, too, has wept with an unendurable burden to bear. Penelope and women in general, she suggests, are forced into being secret heroes without the recognition and reward that Ulysses and men in general gain. Their tears are not feigned. They come from genuine grief and frustration.

Another image of women's work in the poem is the loom, where weaving and unweaving leave Penelope exhausted. Her work, perhaps like the housewife's, feels meaningless and never completed. There is no satisfaction, no relief. The loom symbolizes the kind of invisible work of women that upholds family and country. It is hard and repetitive and unrewarding. It is also deceptive. Penelope's deception in her weaving could be compared and contrasted to her husband's deceptions. Women's entire lives may be

Illustration of Penelope at her loom (© Bettmann / CORBIS)

deceptions, in which they cannot reveal their true feelings or the reasons for their grief. They weep when no one is looking, for fear of being discovered.

STYLE

Classical Myth Motif

Millay studied Greek and Latin literature at Vassar and was attracted to it all her life. Like other twentieth-century poets, Millay at times uses classical myth as a motif, or central metaphor, to make a point. In "An Ancient Gesture," she compares the speaker's situation to the Greek story of Penelope and Ulysses, the queen and king of Ithaca, as from Homer's epic the *Odyssey*. This story recounts the years during which Ulysses wanders after the Trojan War, trying to get home to his family on the island of Ithaca. While Ulysses encounters all kinds of obstacles between Troy and Ithaca—supernatural forces, monsters, witches, and a trip to the underworld—Penelope has to deal courageously with obstacles at home, such as the aggressive suitors. In Homer's version of the story, the emphasis is on the adventures of the warrior, Ulysses, and his men in their ship, recounting all the wonders of the world they see. Ulysses is always homesick, and even in the arms of enchantresses and goddesses, he misses his wife. To the ancient Greeks, Penelope and Ulysses represented the perfect, harmonious married couple.

Penelope is indeed the archetype of the faithful wife in Homer's epic, praised by the ghost of Agamemnon in the underworld, for instance, as the opposite of his own murdering wife, Clytemnestra.

Penelope is not only virtuous and loyal but also clever in her strategy to hold off the suitors. Millay retells the story, however, as an example of how someone experiences intense grief, comparing the spontaneous tears of the speaker to Penelope's weeping from loneliness and long suffering. Millay presents a new perspective by implying that Penelope was as much a hero as Ulysses, perhaps more so.

Other modern poets, such as William Butler Yeats (in "Leda and the Swan"), William Carlos Williams (in "Venus over the Desert"), Denise Levertov (in "Hymn to Eros"), Ezra Pound (in "Pan Is Dead"), and Rainer Maria Rilke (in *The Sonnets to Orpheus*), have used classical stories, figures, and motifs in a modern context, drawing from the rich and abundant source material of Greek and Roman mythology in ways that reflect modern concerns. Millay took herself seriously as a poet and took advantage of the right of all authors to tap into the common Western and classical traditions to reinvent them for her time.

Twentieth-Century Modern Poetry

Although many critics fault Millay for not having been in step with the developments of modernism, with its ambiguity, objectivity, numerous intellectual references, and ironic tone as represented by such poets as Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, her poems have several characteristics of the twentieth-century poetry of her day. For instance, her poems embrace modern subject matter and detail, directness, and openness to changing poetic form. She was heavily influenced by classical themes and by European Renaissance and romantic literature, and yet, like other modern poets, she viewed old traditions from new angles. She thus used her poetry to comment on social events and situations of the day, such as in her free-verse poem "Apostrophe to Man" (1934), a pessimistic piece about the failures of the human race, anticipating the mood of W. H. Auden in his famous poem about the outbreak of World War II, "September 1, 1939."

In "An Ancient Gesture," an old story is given a new and feminist interpretation in which the woman's story (Penelope's) is favored, while the man's fame (Ulysses') is exposed as exaggerated. Despite the historical distance of millennia, Penelope and Ulysses seem to mimic a modern marriage in which the wife is neglected at home, while the husband is unavailable. The sense of irony here, so characteristic of modern poetry, underlies the simple, lyric quality of the woman's lament. The more old-fashioned elements—the classical allusions, the lyric repetition and rhyme—are at odds with the modern diction. The vocabulary and feeling thus create an informal and contemporary mood. Myth is used to probe a psychological state, and grief is given a contemporary description. Millay's style puts her in company with other modern poets who combined older poetic elements with modern irony, such as Robert Frost, Carl Sandburg, Amy Lowell, Edwin Arlington Robinson, and Elinor Wylie.

Looseness of form is apparent in the semifree verse of the two uneven stanzas. Free verse is widely used in modern poetry, where the lines can be any length, and there can be rhyme, but usually no regular rhyme scheme or meter is evident. Free verse is often fashioned to match speech rhythms. In "An Ancient Gesture," most lines have five stressed syllables, with varying numbers of unstressed syllables. Some lines are shorter, however, with three stresses, while one line has six. The repetition of words and phrases and certain rhyming end words (for instance, at the ends of lines 2 and 9; 4, 5, and 6; 7 and 8; 11, 12, and 15; and 14 and 17) give the poem a song-like quality, though it is irregular. At the same time, the diction makes it sound conversational rather than formal.

Personal Lyric

The fact that Millay's poetry was popular on the radio and in public readings was due in large part to its direct lyric quality. Lyric poetry is an ancient genre, popular from classical times through the present in almost every culture. The term *lyric* is rooted in song, originally referring to words sung to an accompanying lyre, a stringed instrument. A lyric poem is short and musical rather than narrative or dramatic, expressing emotions or thoughts. A personal lyric represents the first-person subjective experience of one speaker. The speaker may or may not have the feelings of the poet, but the poem is the representation of a speaking person's thoughts on a particular subject, for instance, love. Millay was influenced by Renaissance lyrics, by the lyric poetry of Alfred Tennyson, John Keats, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and by French and classical poets. Famous personal lyrics include Tennyson's "Now Sleeps the Crimson Petal," Keats's "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer," and Edgar Allen Poe's "To Helen."

In "An Ancient Gesture," the speaker comes in directly only in the first line of each stanza. The rest of the poem develops the parallels of Penelope and Ulysses as extended metaphors from which to draw inferences about the speaker's feelings. The reader does not get an objective allusion to the story of Penelope; it is obviously filtered through the speaker's perspective. She uses her own instance of crying into her apron to interpret the Greek story, and conversely, we must use this interpretation of Penelope to guess the speaker's situation and how she feels about it. It is merely suggested by the first stanza that the speaker may be a modern housewife overcome with grief for an absent husband or lover. The second stanza suggests that the speaker's partner may not be completely sincere in the relationship.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Vassar College

Caroline Dow, head of the National Training School at the YWCA in New York City, heard Millay recite the poem "Renascence" in 1912. She consequently encouraged Millay to apply for a scholarship to Vassar College and helped her with expenses. Though poor among wealthy students at Vassar, Millay held her own as a social leader as bolstered by the artistic fame that preceded her. She attended Vassar from 1913 to 1917, when it was a prestigious women's college, an elite institution that rigorously trained wealthy young women in the liberal arts. It was an education equal to that of the best men's colleges at a time when most women's colleges had been founded as seminaries for teachers. At Vassar, Millay got the intellectual training she longed for, preparing her for her vocation as a poet and allowing her to meet many of the leading male poets and intellectuals of the day.

Millay was independent and popular at Vassar, writing and acting in her own plays, such as "The Princess Marries the Page" (1917), and winning prizes for her poetry. She was a triumph in a Vassar pageant celebrating women's intellectual progress in dressing as the French poet Marie de France, prophetic of her own career as a love poet. It was from her Vassar education, which included study of the sonnets of the Renaissance writers and French lyric poets, that Millay's love of classical literature became a lifelong pursuit. These were important formative influences, as was the moral emphasis that Vassar women develop a social conscience. In turn, Millay's acting at Vassar set the stage for her later participation in the Provincetown Players and her career as a playwright. In 1921, for Vassar's sixtieth anniversary, she wrote the play "The Lamp and the Bell," celebrating female friendships. It was at Vassar that she began referring to herself as Sappho, after the famous classical lyricist.

Greenwich Village, 1917–1920

After college, Millay lived a bohemian life in Greenwich Village, in New York City. The village was bounded by Washington Square and nearby New York University, and it was filled with both college graduates and Italian immigrants. There were parties every night, with artists and intelligentsia speaking furiously about art and politics. The villagers were largely liberals and avant-garde artists who had rejected their middle-class backgrounds.

MacDougal Street housed the Liberal Club and Provincetown Playhouse, and Millay was a member of both. At the Liberal Club, she met Floyd Dell, the editor of the leftist magazine called the *Masses*. Other members of the club were John Reed, Eugene O'Neill, and Susan Glaspell. Dell introduced Millay to radical ideologies such as socialism and pacifism. He also tried to interest her in Freud and psychoanalysis, but she rejected Freud. Her play *Aria da Capo* (1919), which she directed and acted in with the Provincetown Players, highlights a theme of the futility of war that she learned from her liberal friends. Millay was also exposed to the painting of John Sloan, of the Ash Can School, depicting street people. Her poem "MacDougal Street" similarly praises the local Italian street culture. She had begun to lose her Christian faith at Vassar, and in the village she learned a universal love of humanity, which became her personal faith.

In the village, the poets argued over traditional poetic forms versus the new experimental techniques of imagism and free verse used by Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot. Two of Millay's lifelong friends, Arthur Davison Ficke and Witter Bynner, were poets who, like Millay, looked to tradition for inspiration. They wrote sonnets and used rhyme and were against the program of the imagists. For this loyalty to the past, Millay was severely criticized by modernist poets and critics.

Millay counted herself as a new woman and a feminist, having met and admired such feminists as Inez Milholland, her later husband's first wife. Fidelity was not expected, and she embraced a

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **Ancient Greece:** Most Greek women have no rights or independent status. They must submit to men, though women can wield unofficial power through their character or creativity, as Penelope does in Homer's *Odyssey*.

  1950s: In the Western world, women have the right to vote, to be educated, and to control their own lives, although they still face social pressure when choosing to go beyond being a homemaker. Few women gain public recognition for their work comparable to that gained by men.

  Today: Diversity of domestic lifestyle is socially accepted, and women have equality and recognition in most professions and the political process, though they may be underpaid or underrepresented.

- **Ancient Greece:** Most ancient Greek poets are men, with a few exceptions, such as Praxilla, Korinna, and Sappho of Lesbos. Although these women poets are famous in their day, even winning prizes over men, their poems eventually lose favor and are not preserved.

  1950s: The twentieth century sees more women publishing poetry in the Western world, but they are seldom taken as seriously as male poets and have more difficulty being accepted into the official literary canon.

  Today: Women of all ethnic groups are more fairly represented in the poetry canon and win the same prizes and honors men do. Feminist studies reintroduce neglected women poets of the past.

- **Ancient Greece:** Lyric poetry comes after the age of Homer, with his long tales and formal epic verse style. The classical lyric poets experiment with short, direct songs about love and life, as accompanied by a lyre.

  1950s: Lyric poetry is appreciated predominantly as a classic genre composed by the Greeks, romantics, and Elizabethans. Serious contemporary poetry moves toward intellectual and philosophical verse in experimental forms.

  Today: Lyric poetry remains a versatile genre used by serious poets as well as popular artists. Some song lyrics are taken seriously as poetry and printed in literature anthologies, such as songs of the Beatles, Bob Dylan, and Leonard Cohen.

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hedonistic lifestyle in her poems, especially in the famous collection *A Few Figs from Thistles* (1920). Her call to burn the candle at both ends in "The First Fig" became the motto of her generation. The notoriety and popularity that Millay gained in Greenwich Village gave her the successful momentum that she needed. In the 1920s, she won prizes for her poetry, went to Paris to write for *Vanity Fair*, and won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1923 for *The Harp-Weaver, and Other Poems*, becoming the first woman to earn that honor.

Europe in the 1920s

Millay, like many American expatriates, found Paris an exciting and stimulating atmosphere. She traveled as a liberated woman on her own and lived in Paris from 1920 to 1921, mingling with the bohemians of the Left Bank. She was eagerly sought out by many suitors and artists. The critic Edmund Wilson, who had done much to help Millay's career, was in love with her and followed her there but had to give up his suit. He eventually estranged Millay by writing a novel, *I Thought of Daisy* (1929), that portrayed her through the character Rita Cavanaugh.

In Paris, Edna alternated reclusive periods of writing in her hotel with the uninhibited party life of Paris and travel to exotic places such as Rome, Vienna, Albania, and England with various lovers. This period of travel cemented her love of French poetry, which she later turned to account in a translation of Baudelaire, *Flowers of Evil* (1936),

19th-century illustration of Penelope and Ulysses *(© Leonard de Selva / Corbis)*

and made her into an international citizen, which proved important to her poetry during the coming war years.

1920s–1940s U.S. Politics

In Greenwich Village, Millay had not been interested in politics, though she wrote for the pacifist cause. Then, in 1927, she participated in protests in Boston over the Sacco and Vanzetti case. Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti were two Italian immigrants, admitted anarchists, who were tried for acts of terrorism. It is generally acknowledged they were not given a fair trial and were executed more for their politics than for what they might have done. There were riots all over the world on their behalf, and many intellectuals, including George Bernard Shaw, H. G. Wells, Bertrand Russell, John Dos Passos, and Dorothy Parker, took up their cause. Millay wrote the poem "Justice Denied in Massachusetts," which was printed in the *New York Times*. She was in a crowd of protestors arrested in Boston, and she continued to write letters and articles protesting the injustice. Indeed, the case woke her political conscience.

In 1932 Millay began a series of radio broadcasts that brought her poetry to the general public. The threatening world picture in the 1930s and 1940s intensified her desire to use her writing and speaking for political causes. *Conversation at Midnight*, published in 1937, was a poetic dialogue between seven men of differing philosophies. It was a symposium on current points of view, from Catholicism to agnosticism, from hedonism to Communism, that reflected the clashing ideologies igniting the growing hostilities in the world. Her collection *Huntsman, What Quarry?* (1939) contained some political poems, such as "Say That We Saw Spain Die."

In 1940, Millay began writing propaganda encouraging the United States to enter World War II, marking a complete renunciation of her earlier antiwar position. Americans were reluctant to get into another European war, so she used her fame and popularity to mobilize public opinion against Fascism. She read poems on the radio, including "There Are No Islands, Any More" and other poems collected as *Make Bright the Arrows* (1940). "The Murder of Lidice" (1942) tells about the Nazi extermination of a town in

Czechoslovakia. Millay knew that this was inferior poetry and that she had compromised her artistic integrity but felt that the pressure of the times called for action. She had a nervous breakdown in 1944 after the critical censure for her political involvement and was unable to continue writing for two years.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

Edna St. Vincent Millay's career as a poet was launched with a single prize-winning poem, "Renascence," written when she was nineteen and published in the anthology *The Lyric Year* in 1912. Poets like her contemporaries Louis Untermeyer and Sara Teasdale welcomed her to the literary scene as a girl genius, a mystic in the tradition of the great romantic poets. In a 1923 review of her work published in *American Poetry since 1900*, Untermeyer points out her early promise, speaking of her "lyrical mastery" and "spiritual intensity," calling her a "belated Elizabethan" but censuring the bohemian flavor present in her 1920 collection *A Few Figs from Thistles*. He is disappointed in its flippancy and "facile cynicism" but happy at her return to her lyrical mode in *Second April*.

The early estimates of Millay's work are almost always favorable, though it is said that she exaggerates emotion. Her lyric mastery is often cited, although it is sometimes lamented that she looks back toward earlier traditions in poetry rather than forward. Maxwell Anderson, in a review of *Second April* in *Measure: A Journal of Poetry*, states that she has "an almost flawless sensitiveness to phrase" and that she finds the right "homely image" to fit her meaning. Harriet Monroe, editor of *Poetry*, remarks in a 1924 assessment, a decade after Millay's emergence and after her Pulitzer Prize in 1923 for *The Harp-Weaver, and Other Poems*, that Millay is perhaps "the greatest woman poet since Sappho." The eminent critic and Millay's friend Edmund Wilson did much to secure her reputation as a fine poet. He praises her in a 1926 *New Republic* review for her "deeply moving rhythms," her "music," her "singular boldness, which she shares with the greatest poets," and her "literary proficiency."

In 1929 Millay was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters, and in 1931 she received the Helen Haire Levinson Prize for sonnets for *Fatal Interview*. In the 1930s, however, critics were not so appreciative. They had been waiting for the girl genius to grow up, as they put it. Louise Bogan, for instance, says in a 1935 review in *Poetry* that Millay runs away from her own artistic maturity in *Fatal Interview* but embraces it in *Wine from These Grapes*. She praises Millay's "power over meter and epithet" but warns her against "mere lyrical prettiness."

The 1930s saw Millay rise in public popularity, as she read to large audiences on tours and over the radio, while at the same time beginning her fall from critical grace. She was pronounced out of date and imitative by the New Critics, who promoted instead the rigorous thought and experimentation of male poets like T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, and William Carlos Williams. John Crowe Ransom argues in *The World's Body* (1938) that Millay is not up to the masculine intellectual effort of male poets. He suggests that she is sentimental and feminine, not to be taken seriously. In the 1940s, criticism intensified with the publication of her political poetry. In the *Kenyon Review* in 1945, Herbert Marshall McLuhan calls Millay "a purveyor of cliché sentiment. She is an exhibitionist with no discoverable sensibility of her own." It was during this period of perceived failure that Millay had a nervous breakdown and was unable to write. She died in 1950.

In a review in the *Nation* of her posthumous collection *Mine the Harvest* (1954), in which "An Ancient Gesture" appears, John Ciardi finds "flashes of power" in the collection but laments Millay's lack of intellectual investment. Her poems are too "self-dramatizing," he states. Writing after the publication of Millay's *Collected Poems* in 1956, Paul Engle in the *New York Post* lauds her as "one of the great makers of sonnets in this century"; but still, as Sandra M. Gilbert points out in her article "Female Female Impersonator: Millay and the Theatre of Personality," in *Critical Essays on Edna St. Vincent Millay*, the poet was largely left out of anthologies and studies of twentieth-century poetry during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.

Norman Brittin's 1982 study of Millay's poetry, *Edna St. Vincent Millay*, signaled renewed interest in her work; Brittin hails her as the finest American lyrical poet of the twentieth century. Critics of the 1990s began to view her contribution to American poetry in terms of feminism; Suzanne Clark, in her essay in *Millay at 100: A Critical Reappraisal*, finds Millay to be a genius at "masquerade," using personae to critique social

roles. She is also praised by critics such as Jo Ellen Green Kaiser, in her essay in the same volume, as an important feminist poet who courageously worked against the male modernist tide. Millay's place in the twentieth-century canon has been restored, and she is now anthologized and appreciated.

ULYSSES LOSES HIS SOLID HEROIC STATURE AS A SAVIOR OF CIVILIZATION IN THE POEM, WHILE PENELOPE CAPTURES THE STAGE AS A MOTHER OF CULTURE."

CRITICISM

Susan Andersen

Andersen holds a Ph.D. in literature and teaches literature and writing. In the following essay on "An Ancient Gesture," she explores the critical reaction to Millay's work and examines Millay's use of Penelope as a symbol for a feminist tradition in poetry and culture.

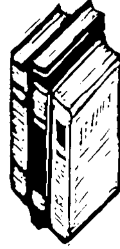
Edna St. Vincent Millay was unofficially the "Poet Laureate of the Nineteen Twenties," as declared by Vasudha Radhu in *The Golden Vessel of Great Song: Edna Millay's Lyrical Poetry*, as well as a respected feminist voice for liberated woman. By the time of her death in 1950, however, Millay had been swept aside as largely insignificant to the trends of American poetry. "An Ancient Gesture" was one of Millay's posthumously published poems. While it deviates somewhat from the traditional lyric form that the modernist poets scorned her for using, it retains the personal force present in her lyric voice and poetry since the beginning of her career. The figure of Penelope the weaver in "An Ancient Gesture" can be seen as a symbol not only for woman's trials in general but also for the trials of the woman artist in a man's world.

Jane Stanbrough's reading of "An Ancient Gesture" in *Critical Essays on Edna St. Vincent Millay* stresses the poem as a symbol of "women whose dreams are denied, whose bodies are assaulted, whose minds and spirits are extinguished." Debra Fried, in a rebuttal to Stanbrough published in the same volume, asserts that Millay demonstrates not the vulnerability of women but their strength. As an artist, Millay used the strict sonnet form to show not confinement but mastery; she aimed to wrestle her materials into submission, as with her sonnet "I will put Chaos into fourteen lines."

"An Ancient Gesture" uses images of both strength (physical endurance) and frustration (Penelope doing and undoing her work in secret) to make the reader feel the speaker's trying position. The poem yields somewhat contradictory readings, both of a woman's life and of the woman as artist. Does Penelope's cry of grief symbolize heroic endurance or victimization? Penelope, the constant weaver, can be seen as a hero, a symbol of woman's creativity as well as a source of culture and tradition.

Nina Kossman includes "An Ancient Gesture" in the Oxford anthology *Gods and Mortals: Modern Poems on Classical Myths*. In her introduction to the volume, Kossman points out that the "venerable tradition of donning a Greek mask is often used by poets in order to speak of things they would have found difficult to approach." Penelope's grief is archetypal, a primal or model grief, and as such magnifies and justifies the speaker's position. The speaker appears to be an ordinary woman in the first line, but her grief feels extraordinary, especially in that she links it to something deep and ancient, to Penelope's grief. Kossman explains that "myths echo the structure of our unconscious." The speaker thinks of Penelope spontaneously in a moment of emotion. She does not throw out an intellectual reference to the Greek myth but, rather, has a heartfelt and personal connection to Penelope, as though the storied woman were someone she knew intimately.

Kossman points out that modern poets who use myths frequently give a new twist to the old story. In the *Odyssey*, the emphasis is on the heroism of Ulysses. In her essay in *Critical Essays on Edna St. Vincent Millay*, Sandra M. Gilbert remarks that in "An Ancient Gesture" the most significant change in the myth is that the poem "questions the epic posturings of one of history's primordial heroes." Ulysses loses his solid heroic stature as a savior of civilization in the poem, while Penelope captures the stage as a mother of culture. Ulysses copies her gesture. As Gilbert shows, the criticism implied of the hero Ulysses in this poem is deeper than a woman's criticism of



WHAT DO I READ NEXT?

- *A Life of One's Own: Three Gifted Women and the Men They Married* (1973), by Joan Dash, is a study of famous independent women and the marriages that supported them. Millay's marriage stood out as unusual for the early twentieth century, as Millay was both the breadwinner and the public figure, while her husband was the caretaker. The other two women featured are Margaret Sanger, who championed birth control, and Maria Goeppert-Mayer, who shared with two others the 1963 Nobel Prize in Physics.
- T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land, and Other Poems* (1940) helps to put Millay's work in perspective, showing the contrast of the more intellectual and heavily ironic stream of twentieth-century poetry. Eliot, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1948, was considered the model for modernist poets by the New Critics, who rejected Millay's personal lyrics.
- *A Private Madness: The Genius of Elinor Wylie*, by Evelyn Helmick Hively (2003), is a study of Millay's poet friend Wylie (1885–1928), who wrote four novels and four volumes of poetry in the tempestuous twenties. Wylie wrote a similar kind of lyric poetry that tapped the same traditional sources of Renaissance and romantic sonnets that Millay used. Millay defended Wylie to the public over her controversial life. This study gives a feel for the life Millay and Wylie shared in the 1920s as they strove to be recognized female poets.
- Mary McCarthy's famous novel *The Group* (1963) describes a group of Vassar girls and their lives between the two world wars. One of the characters, Lakey, is widely believed to be modeled on Millay. In any case, the Vassar culture that Millay came out of a generation earlier than McCarthy did is portrayed in candid detail.
- *Aria da Capo* is Millay's one-act play written for the Provincetown Players in Greenwich Village; she directed and acted in the play in 1919, and it was first published in 1920. It is a morality play against war and human aggression in the form of a harlequinade. Still popular and anthologized, it shows one of Millay's many gifts, for she was poet, playwright, and performer.

the opposite sex. The emphasis on Ulysses' absence and failure to return to relieve his wife and people hints at a deep disillusionment with human history that had overtaken Edna Millay, as it did many of her post–World War I generation. In 1928, and again in an expanded version in 1934 in *Wine from These Grapes*, she published a sonnet sequence called "Epitaph for the Race of Man" predicting the end of the human race, comparing it to the lumbering dinosaurs that became extinct.

Gilbert links that pessimism about the hopeless state of humanity with "An Ancient Gesture." Penelope's story suggests that woman is trapped in an unjust world made by man, yet she is loyal and dutiful, upholding and defending that world with every ounce of her strength. Though brilliant and clever like Ulysses, so full of promise, the human race in "Epitaph for the Race of Man" seems weak and unable to tame itself, to outwit its own destruction. The modern speaker's grief in "An Ancient Gesture," like Penelope's ancient grief, suggests that not much has changed in thousands of years. The speaker's frustration feels personal but is part of the inherited condition of her world. Ulysses was a famous warrior, but he failed as a king and husband, the poem implies, as men have failed everywhere to create a peaceably livable world.

This reading, of larger social and spiritual implications forming an important background of Millay's personal lyric, became obvious only to later critics of her work, especially feminist critics. Yet there have always been sensitive readers who have tried to exonerate her from the constant attacks she sustained at the hands of the New Critics for writing what they called personal and sentimental poetry. For instance, James Gray, writing in *Edna St. Vincent Millay* (1967), affirmatively states that "the theme of all her poetry is the search for the integrity of the individual spirit."

The speaker of "An Ancient Gesture" presents Penelope's struggles as different from Ulysses' but no less courageous and spiritually demanding. Gray argues that Millay had both male and female mental characteristics, suggesting that she was therefore fit to describe "the psychological distance between man and woman," which he feels is her "original contribution to the literature of the love duel." The usual emphasis in the Greek myth is on Penelope and Ulysses as the ideal married couple, in tune with and ever devoted to each other. "An Ancient Gesture" points out the great gulf between Penelope's world and Ulysses'. She gives everything she has with sincerity, while he acts his part, manipulating his way to fame. This indeed was the reputation of Ulysses, the clever trickster, and in the *Odyssey* the goddess Athena rewards him for his wit. Millay does not think clever wit is enough to make a just world. Her poems on the Sacco-Vanzetti case ("Justice Denied in Massachusetts") and on Nazi atrocities ("Murder of Lidice") and her sonnet sequence "The Epitaph for the Race of Man" lament that humans have failed to live up to their potential, as Norman Brittin notes in his book *Edna St. Vincent Millay*. In the century she knew, with two world wars and a Great Depression, the manipulators seemed to be at the helm.

Gray points out that Millay often uses a woman speaker who is performing a common task, such as we imagine the speaker of "An Ancient Gesture" to be doing. Since she wipes her tears with an apron, the reader assumes she is probably in the kitchen, cooking or cleaning. This homely or personal activity, says Gray, "becomes symbolic of the urgent need to keep the forces of life alive in threatening circumstances." Penelope's loom is the perfect image for both woman's life and woman's art. Penelope appears to be weaving a shroud for her father-in-law like a dutiful wife. Her loom, however, symbolizes an artistic and political act. Her practice of weaving and unweaving to hold off the suitors from herself and the throne of Ithaca demonstrates her creativity on many levels. Her exhaustion and grief at the circumstances demanding this creative juggling act cause her to weep, and yet, to wipe away the tears and continue with fortitude.

Millay's biographer Nancy Milford reports an interview between Elizabeth Breuer and Millay in 1931 in which the latter said, "I work all the time.... And I think of my work all the time." Like Penelope, she often stayed up all night and exhausted herself. Millay further admitted, "I am a very concentrated person as an artist.... The nervous intensity attendant on writing poetry, on creative writing, exhausts me, and I suffer constantly from a headache." While she often wrote of the differences between men and women as people, Millay did not think a woman poet should be treated differently from a male poet: "What you produce, what you create must stand on its own feet, regardless of your sex" (quoted in Milford). She did not like being characterized as a woman artist in a separate category by male critics, because this implied that she was inferior. However, she "made a point of refusing to explain or to defend her choices," as Milford states. Rather, she kept writing, working at her poetic loom.

Millay was suspect to critics because of her great popularity with the public, but she earned the money that supported her family (including her husband, mother, and sisters at times) with her performances on stage and radio. At the same time, she conversed with the leading artists of the day, won the first Pulitzer Prize ever offered a woman poet, and was aware of the high expectations that people had for her work. She was distressed by bad reviews. She also increasingly felt the need to use her position to speak out on behalf of social issues. Her nerves were sensitive; she had breakdowns. Could not Penelope's exhausting art and persona juggling suggest Millay's own struggle to uphold her poetic integrity against the largely male and aggressive modernist critics who explicitly linked her style with feminine weakness? The New Critic Allen Tate, who praised W. B. Yeats and Ezra Pound as the norm for true poetry, declares in a 1931 *New Republic* review that Millay's poetry is outdated and virtually dead. He finds her unworthy of the first rank of poets for producing shallow and imitative

verse. Gilbert Allen writes with hindsight in *Critical Essays on Edna St. Vincent Millay* (1993) that Millay's poetry rests on principles that are different from those of high modernism, and he asserts that this does not make it inferior.

Suzanne Clark, in her essay "Uncanny Millay," included in *Millay at 100: A Critical Reappraisal*, sees the poet's personal lyric, with its often exaggerated emotion, as a series of theatrical masks for her bardic voice. Recordings of Millay's powerful readings do suggest the bardic tradition of song. Bards were ancient singers and seers in oral traditions who sang to prophesy and to preserve culture. Modern poets like Yeats and Dylan Thomas copied this style. Millay herself no doubt thought of Sappho as the originator of this type of song; she frequently uses the ancient figure in poems ("Sappho Crosses the Dark River into Hades") and was often compared to Sappho by the public. Sappho is indeed credited with inventing the personal lyric in the seventh century BCE. She, too, was copied and imitated by men until her poems went out of fashion and her reputation was debased.

The artist's secret strain, revealed in the poem, is at odds with Millay's lyric style. Like the rhythm of Penelope's loom, Millay's poetry is singing, ecstatic, focused on the beauty or emotion of a moment, as in "God's World" or "Afternoon on a Hill.""An Ancient Gesture" continues this lyric ease in capturing a telling moment: the wiping away of tears of grief, a universal act performed even thousands of years ago by the storied Greeks. At the same time, the poem splits that primal gesture of wiping tears into male and female traditions. The female act is spontaneous, and the speaker does not call it a gesture, a word that can imply habitual response, a learned act of communication. Ulysses, to the contrary, has appropriated the response as a gesture for his own purposes—and that is also an ancient act.

Millay was celebrated in her own time for creating a new tradition of emancipation in women's poetry (as noted by Milford). Her sister and mother also published poetry. "The Harp-Weaver" is a poem about the sacrifices her mother made so that Millay could become a poet; as she said in an interview, "Mother gave me poetry" (quoted in Milford). In her art, Millay uses female archetypes—Sappho, the little girl mystic, the femme fatale, the broken-hearted woman—to portray the many-sided feminine self. Gilbert claims in "Female Female Impersonator: Millay and the Theatre of Personality," included in *Critical Essays on Edna St. Vincent Millay*, that Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Adrienne Rich, and Denise Levertov all followed Millay's legacy of feminine self-dramatization. By claiming Penelope as a moral and artistic mother in this poem, originator of the ancient gesture, Millay both creates and continues feminist, rather than feminine, traditions with her art.

Source: Susan Andersen, Critical Essay on "An Ancient Gesture," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2010.

Delmore Schwartz

In the following essay, Schwartz, a literary figure typically associated with "the New York intellectuals" of the 1940s, discusses how Millay's work was a product of her time. In Schwartz's view, this fact perhaps accounts for both her popular success and her "essential failure."

Miss Millay belongs to the ages. Posterity, which is an anachronism, may prove this strong impression an illusion. But we shall now know about that. Meanwhile Miss Millay has written a good many poems . . . which make her a great poet to most readers of poetry. These readers consider Edgar Allan Poe, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Blake, and Shakespeare great poets also; and if they read Poe, Longfellow, and Miss Millay, rather than Blake and Shakespeare, what else can be expected? How else can these readers sustain their view of what great poetry is? . . .

Miss Millay belongs to an age as well as to the ages. She is dated in a good sense. Like Scott Fitzgerald, H. L. Mencken, Sinclair Lewis, [and] prohibition, . . . she belongs to a particular period. No one interested in that period will fail to be interested in Miss Millay's poems. . . . Her lyrics were used by the period, and she was made famous by their usefulness; but now they are inseparable from the period, and they will always illuminate the liberated Vassar girl, the jazz age, bohemianism, and the halcyon days of Greenwich Village. Who can forget the famous quatrain in which a lady's candle burns at both ends, and will not last the night, but gives a lovely light? How could this point of view have been stated with greater economy of means or more memorably? Yet not all that is memorable is admirable. . . .

Miss Millay has perhaps been defeated by her very success. *Fatal Interview* . . . is probably her best book, but there is nothing in it which represents an advance in perception or insight over her first book, which was published in 1917. To

compare the two books is to see how all that is good in her work, all that is of permanent interest, is circumscribed by the period in which she became a famous poetess.

Consider, as an example, the view of love which recurs without exception in these lyrics and in many of Miss Millay's sonnets; in one of her best-known sonnets, "What lips may lips have touched and how and why / I have forgotten," Miss Millay compares the female protagonist of the poem to a tree and "the unremembered lads" who were her lovers to birds. Is this not the eternal feminine of the day when woman's suffrage was an issue and not yet an amendment? If one has a weakness for visualizing images, then the dominant image of the poem certainly presents the female and the lads in unfair proportions. Elsewhere some lovers are assured that a love affair is not any the less true love because it has been rapidly succeeded by several more love affairs, an assurance which might come gracefully from Catherine the Great, let us say, but which is not really the kind of attitude that makes great poetry. Is it not, indeed, just as shallow as its opposite, the squeezable mindless doll whom Hemingway celebrates? Yet just such attitudes explain Miss Millay's popular fame at the same time as they exhibit her essential failure. The late John Wheelwright remarked that Miss Millay had sold free love to the women's clubs. Yes, this has been at once her success and her failure; and one should add that another attribute of this kind of famous authoress is that of inspiring epigrams.

When we look closely at Miss Millay's poetic equipment—her images, diction, habits of style, and versification—we find the same twins of success and failure. Her diction especially is poetic in the wrong sense: the candles, arrows, towers, scullions, thou's, lads, girls, prithees, shepherds, and the often-capitalized Beauty and Death are words which come, not from a fresh perception of experience, but from the reading of many lyric poems.... If there is an alternative, it is perhaps to be seen flickering in the poems in which Miss Millay draws upon what she has actually looked at on the New England coast or in the Maine woods....

But if Miss Millay had cultivated and searched out the actuality of this experience instead of using it as a stage set, she would not be the first text of all the girls who are going to write poetry; she would not have depended upon attitudes which are as characteristic of literate youth as the sophomore year; after her second volume she would have abandoned the obvious and banal poses she has struck in the face of love and death. She would not be the most famous poetess of our time, and she might have composed a body of poetry characterized by the nonesuch originality—however often warped, thin, fragmentary, exotic, or ingrown—of Marianne Moore, Leonie Adams, Louise Bogan, and Janet Lewis.

Source: Delmore Schwartz, "The Poetry of Millay," in *Nation*, Vol. 157, No. 25, December 18, 1943, pp. 735–36.

Harriet Monroe

In the following excerpt, Monroe contends that Millay is "the greatest woman poet since Sappho."

Long ago... I used to think how fine it would be to be the greatest woman poet since Sappho....

I am reminded by that old dream to wonder whether we may not raise a point worthy of discussion in claiming that a certain living lady may perhaps be the greatest woman poet since Sappho....

[The] woman-poets seem to have written almost exclusively in the English language. Emily Bronte, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, Emily Dickinson—these four names bring us to 1900....

Emily Bronte—austere, heroic, solitary—is of course the greatest woman in literature. Not even Sappho's *Hymn to Aphrodite*... can surpass *Wuthering Heights* for sheer depth and power of beauty, or match it for the compassing of human experience in a single masterpiece. But *Wuthering Heights*, though poetic in motive and essence, classes as a novel rather than a poem.... As a poet, she has not the scope, the variety, of Edna St. Vincent Millay, whose claim to pre-eminence we are considering....

"Renascence" remains the poem of largest sweep which Miss Millay has achieved as yet—the most comprehensive expression of her philosophy, so to speak, her sense of miracle in life and death—yet she has been lavish with details of experience, of emotion, and her agile and penetrating mind has leapt through spaces of thought rarely traversed by women, or by men either for that matter.

For in the lightest of her briefest lyrics there is always more than appears. In [*A Few Figs from*

Thistles], for example, in "Thursday," "The Penitent," "To the Not Impossible He" and other witty ironies, and in more serious poems like "The Betrothal," how neatly she upsets the carefully built walls of convention which men have set up around their Ideal Woman, even while they fought, bled and died for all the Helens and Cleopatras they happened to encounter! And in *Aria da Capo*, a masterpiece of irony sharp as Toledo steel, she stabs the war-god to the heart with a stroke as clean, as deft, as ever the most skilfully murderous swordsman bestowed upon his enemy. Harangues have been made, volumes have been written, for the outlawry of war, but who else has put its preposterous unreasonableness into a nutshell like this girl who brings to bear upon the problem the luminous creative insight of genius?

Thus on the most serious subjects there is always the keen swift touch. Beauty blows upon them and is gone before one can catch one's breath; and lo and behold, we have a poem too lovely to perish, a song out of the blue which will ring in the ears of time. Such are the "little elegies" which will make the poet's Vassar friend, "*D.C.*" of the wonderful voice, a legend of imperishable beauty even though "her singing days are done." Thousands of stay-at-home women speak wistfully in "Departure" and "Lament"—where can one find deep grief and its futility expressed with such agonizing grace? Indeed, though love and death and the swift passing of beauty have haunted this poet as much as others, she is rarely specific and descriptive. Her thought is transformed into imagery, into symbol, and it flashes back at us as from the facets of a jewel.

And the thing is so simply done. One weeps, not over *D. C.*'s death, but over her narrow shoes and blue gowns empty in the closet. In "Renascence" the sky, the earth, the infinite, no longer abstractions, come close, as tangible as a tree. *The Harp-Weaver*, presenting the protective power of enveloping love—power which enwraps the beloved even after death has robbed him, is a kind of fairy-tale ballad, sweetly told as for a child. Even more in "The Curse" emotion becomes sheer magic of imagery and sound, as clear and keen as frost in sunlight. Always one feels the poet's complete and unabashed sincerity. She says neither the expected thing nor the "daring" thing, but she says the incisive true thing as she has discovered it and feels it.

Miss Millay's most confessional lyrics are in sonnet form, and among them are a number which can hardly be forgotten so long as English literature endures, and one or two which will rank among the best of a language extremely rich in beautiful sonnets. . . .

Beyond these, outside the love-sequence, the "Euclid" sonnet stands in a place apart, of a beauty hardly to be matched for sculpturesque austerity, for detachment from the body and the physical universe. Other minds, searching the higher mathematics, have divined the central structural beauty on which all other beauty is founded, but if any other poet has expressed it I have yet to see the proof. That a young woman should have put this fundamental law into a sonnet is one of the inexplicable divinations of genius. . . . If Miss Millay had done nothing else, she could hardly be forgotten.

But she has done much else. Wilful, moody, whimsical, loving and forgetting, a creature of quick and keen emotions, she has followed her own way and sung her own songs. Taken as a whole, her poems present an utterly feminine personality of singular charm and power; and the best of them, a group of lyrics ineffably lovely, will probably be cherished as the richest, most precious gift of song which any woman since the immortal Lesbian has offered to the world.

Source: Harriet Monroe, "Edna St. Vincent Millay," in *World Literature Criticism Supplement*, Vol. 24, No. 5, August 1924, pp. 260–67.

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Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar, eds., *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women: The Traditions in English*, 2nd ed., Norton, 1996.

An expanded selection of Millay's works in this edition includes the play *Aria da Capo* and "An Ancient Gesture," remedying the former neglect of her work in anthologies. Millay is set within the tradition of the most enduring women writers from antiquity to the twentieth century.

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Wilson's novel, originally published in 1929, is set in the 1920s and is full of portraits of real people he knew in Greenwich Village, such as John Dos Passos and his first love, Millay. The preface and afterword are by Neale Reinitz.

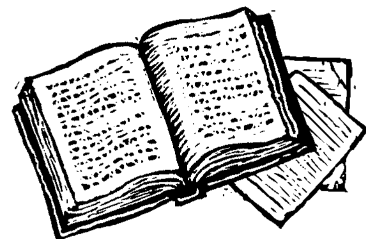
The Black Snake

MARY OLIVER

1979

Although Mary Oliver has earned a reputation as a nature poet, her work extends beyond simple descriptions of natural beauty to venture into larger philosophical questions about life. In “The Black Snake,” Oliver contemplates the connectedness of all creatures, the inevitability of death, and the optimism of life for itself. This poem first appeared in Oliver’s 1979 collection *Twelve Moons*, a volume that firmly established her poetic voice. According to Anthony Manousos, writing in *American Poets since World War II*, in *Twelve Moons* Oliver “explores natural cycles and processes, equating them with what is deepest and most enduring in human experience.” As in many of her other volumes, the poems of *Twelve Moons* often feature an individual animal who moves Oliver to a meditation on some aspect of human life.

Oliver clearly continued to value “The Black Snake” in the years following its initial publication, as she included the poem, along with several others from *Twelve Moons*, in her 1992 book *New and Selected Poems*. The poem has been widely anthologized and is well known among those familiar with Oliver’s work. For readers approaching Oliver for the first time, “The Black Snake” offers an excellent introduction to this important poet’s views on life, death, and the connectedness of all living things.



Mary Oliver *(AP Images)*

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Mary Jane Oliver was born in Maple Heights, Ohio, a suburb of Cleveland, on September 10, 1935. Her father was Edward William Oliver, and her mother was Helen M. Vlasak Oliver. Raised in Ohio, Oliver spent considerable time as a young woman at the home of the recently deceased poet Edna St. Vincent Millay, working as a personal assistant to Millay's sister. She first met the woman who would become her life partner and literary agent, the artist Molly Malone Cook, at the Millay home. Oliver attended Ohio State University for one year and later transferred to Vassar College, where she spent the 1956–1957 academic year.

Oliver's first book of poetry, *No Voyage, and Other Poems*, was published in 1963. Jeannette E. Riley, in an essay in *Twentieth-Century American Nature Poets*, notes that many of the poems in this volume "often rhyme and often are heavy-handed in their messages." Nonetheless, the collection announces many of the themes that Oliver would continue to address in the following decades, including inner and outer landscapes, nature, and mortality. In 1964, Oliver moved to Provincetown, Massachusetts, with Cook, where she has maintained a home ever since.

Oliver's second collection, *The River Styx, Ohio, and Other Poems*, appeared in 1972. The poems in this collection deal extensively with loss and are often meditations brought on by her travels through the ruined Ohio countryside. The allusion to the mythological River Styx, the boundary between the land of the living and the land of the dead, signals the content of the book effectively. In the same year, Oliver won a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship to pursue her craft.

In 1979, in addition to publishing a chapbook of twelve poems, Oliver produced *Twelve Moons*, which includes her poem "The Black Snake." It was with this collection that Oliver found her authentic voice, according to Riley; in these poems, she began a new chapter in her writing about nature. She was awarded a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship in 1980 and an American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Achievement Award in 1983. Also in 1983, Oliver published *American Primitive*, for which she won the 1984 Pulitzer Prize. This collection, as well as the many honors bestowed upon Oliver in the years since, established her firmly as an important American poet. The following years saw her publish many significant volumes, including *Dream Work* (1986) and *House of Light* (1990). During the 1980s, Oliver taught at Case Western Reserve University, in Cleveland. In 1991, she was the Margaret Bannister Writer in Residence at Sweet Briar College, in Virginia.

By the 1990s, Oliver had achieved both critical and popular acclaim, and she was quickly becoming one of the best known and loved poets in the United States. Her 1992 *New and Selected Poems* won the National Book Award for that year. "The Black Snake" is included in this volume. During the 1990s, Oliver published a total of eight books of poetry and essays and held the Catharine Osgood Foster Chair for Distinguished Teaching at Bennington College, in Vermont, a post she held until 2001. Throughout the 2000s, Oliver continued to publish regularly. With Cook's death in 2005, Oliver entered a period of profound grief, as is evident in the volume *Thirst: Poems* (2006). As a tribute, Oliver published a collection of Cook's photographs

accompanied by her own text called *Our World* in 2007. Her 2008 volume of poems, *Red Bird*, was critically well received and continues her ongoing interrogation of the nature of all things.

POEM SUMMARY

Lines 1–4

"The Black Snake" is a poem of twenty-four lines divided into six quatrains, or stanzas of four lines each. In the first quatrain, Oliver immediately places the reader in a situation already under way: a snake suddenly darts out onto a highway just as a truck approaches. Oliver uses a word in line 2 to describe the quickness of the snake's approach to the road; this implies that the driver of the truck could not have avoided the collision. The truck runs over the snake and kills it. A word that she uses in the third line suggests an allusion to a very famous poem by William Stafford called "Traveling Through the Dark," about a driver who is unable to swerve his car out of the way to avoid hitting a deer. Oliver contemplates that this is a way creatures die. She italicizes the word "death" in the fourth line to emphasize it.

Lines 5–8

In the second stanza, Oliver reports that the snake is dead on the road, his body in a circle, and without use. She compares the body of the dead snake to the black rubber covering of a bike wheel by way of a simile, a comparison of two objects using the word "like" or "as." Because the rubber is ancient, it cannot be used for its purpose, that of making a bike able to be ridden; that is, since the snake is dead, it no longer has any purpose. She gets out of her automobile and moves the snake into some shrubbery along the side of the road.

Lines 9–12

In the third stanza, Oliver uses several additional similes to convey the quality of the snake's body. She says first that his body is cold and shining, and she compares the snake to a whip. She also states that the snake is lovely and makes no noise, just as a sibling who had died. This comparison is startling; one would not necessarily think to compare a snake with a human sibling. Yet the comparison is apt, since Oliver wants to make the point that humans and animals are all related. There is a period after the third line, indicating a stop at the point where she has made the comparison. Finally, Oliver reports that she places the snake under the ground cover. She does not, however, use a period at the end of this line, such that the sentence carries over to the next stanza in a technique called enjambment. Enjambment breaks a syntactic unit, such as a sentence or phrase, across lines or stanzas. Thus, Oliver begins a sentence at the very end of the third stanza that she does not complete until the fourth line of the fourth stanza.

Lines 13–16

The fourth stanza begins with a coordinate conjunction, a word such as "and" or "but" used to join parts of a sentence together. In this case, Oliver joins two actions: dropping the snake and motoring away. Although she has left the snake behind, she is contemplating mortality. Again she italicizes the word "death," lending weight to the consideration. She lists three characteristics of the end of life: it comes quickly and without warning; it is an awful, heavy thing; and it is unavoidable. These three items are spread over three lines of the fourth stanza. She uses a period in the middle of the final line of the stanza, indicating that she has finished her thought. In addition, after the period she uses a word that suggests a turn in the poem away from the meditation on death, and she once again uses enjambment to carry the reader to the next stanza.

Lines 17–20

Oliver continues the turn away from her thinking about death in continuing her sentence into the first line of the next stanza. She writes that although everyone rationally knows that all living things die, all living things also carry in them a warm place, a happier thought. Oliver says that this is the belief that only good things will happen. Further, it is the belief that one will not really die. The final line of the stanza can be taken in several ways. One is that the speaker being represented is in denial; that is, she believes that everyone else must die, but not her. Another way to interpret this line is that something in the speaker believes that she will continue to survive in some manner.

Lines 21–24

Oliver generalizes this thought at the beginning of the final stanza by suggesting that it is this bright spark that is at the center of even the smallest organism. She says that this belief in life itself is what makes living possible even in the face of certain death. She concludes by saying that it was this belief that kept the snake slithering along in the vernal leaves before he met his end on the highway.

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY

- Oliver is often compared to other well-known poets such as Elizabeth Bishop, James Wright, and Robert Frost. Choose one of these poets, locate and read several of his or her poems, and write a paper comparing and contrasting your selected poet's work with that of Mary Oliver, noting characteristics such as subject, theme, and structure.
- Select and read four to five poems in Oliver's *New and Selected Poems* (1992). What are the major images in these poems? Find illustrations and photographs from a variety of sources that seem to exemplify your selected poems. Create a large poster board of images and words drawn from the poems to present to your classmates.
- Working with a small group, rehearse a choral reading (reading out loud in unison) of Oliver's work, including representative poems and essays from *New and Selected Poems*, *Owls and Other Fantasies* (2003), and any other of Oliver's collections you find appealing. Present your reading to your class.
- Oliver is often compared to American transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson. She acknowledges her connection to Emerson by using a quotation from him as an epigraph to open her 2002 book *What Do We Know: Poems and Prose Poems*. Research the transcendental movement in the United States, identifying the major poets, writers, and philosophers who made up the movement. What did the transcendentalists believe? Why do so many critics suggest that Oliver writes in this tradition? Write a paper in which you explore the connections between the transcendentalists and Oliver.
- Nature writing has grown in popularity during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Who are some of the best-known nature writers? Create a multimedia presentation or Web page on the topic of nature writing, including examples of work, music and video clips, links to related Web pages, explanations of techniques and themes, illustrations, and a list of works cited.
- Research the geographic locations that serve as the settings for Oliver's work. What are the typical flora and fauna of these regions? Are the ecosystems of these areas endangered by pollution, human intervention, and/or climate change? Prepare a multimedia presentation for your classmates that examines Oliver's poems from the perspective of an environmental biologist.

THEMES

Humans and the Natural World

In "The Black Snake," Oliver explores the connections between the creatures of the natural world and humans in several important ways. First, the humans in the poem are driving vehicles on a human-made road in the country, a place that before the incursion of humans was solely the habitat of plants, animals, insects, birds, and all creatures of the natural world. The meeting of human and snake, in this instance as mediated by the truck, results in the death of the snake, just as many meetings between humans and animals lead to the death of one or the other. This is not to say that the creatures of the natural world generally meet each other with anything like kindness; in many poems and essays, Oliver describes the way creatures prey on other creatures in nature. She often writes from the perspective of the hunted as well as the hunter. However, "The Black Snake" deliberately places a creature that humans generally find unsympathetic in the path of a truck.

A second connection that Oliver draws between humans and creatures occurs when she refers

Black phase timber rattlesnake *(AP Images)*

to the snake as a dead sibling. In this phrase, she implies that all creatures of the world are related to each other. That is, the division between humans and the natural world is a human construct, not reality. The reality is that all living things of the earth share the same elements and molecules. All are related in a very fundamental way, through the chemistry of creation. Thus, the death of the snake for Oliver is the equivalent of the death of a relative. In his "Meditation XVII," the seventeenth-century English poet John Donne writes that each person's death diminishes each other person in the world, since all are connected. Oliver extends this thought to include all life on earth in "The Black Snake."

Death

Throughout her body of work, Oliver often considers death: the situation of its occurrence, its meaning, its mystery. In "The Black Snake," she is struck by the passage from life to death of a snake on the road, hit by a truck. She picks up the snake and realizes that now that it is dead, it is useless. She vividly compares the vital movement of the living snake with the stillness and emptiness of the dead snake. It is this contrast that so sharply renders the poem's message. Quickly, she makes the connection between the dead snake and the inevitability of death for all creatures, including humans. She knows that one day she, too, will suddenly go from being a living creature to a dead one. Her reasoning leads her to this conclusion. One could adapt the most famous of all philosophical syllogisms to reflect the train of Oliver's rational thoughts: All humans are mortal. Oliver is a human. Therefore, Oliver is mortal.

Nonetheless, at the end of the fourth stanza, Oliver turns away from reason and its implacable march toward death. She then instead entertains the irrationality of life, the belief that somehow, someway, it will be different for her, that somehow, someway, she will escape death. She says that it is this denial of death that is at the core of every living creature. This belief in life, she asserts, is what drives the snake to weave its way through the forest in spring until the very moment

of its death. By extension, Oliver seems to suggest, it is the irrational belief in everlasting life, in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, that permits many people to continue to live and put one foot in front of the other, day after day.

One can read in "The Black Snake," therefore, two possible messages about death. First, Oliver suggests that passion and the irrational belief that death will not touch a person are a gift. They allow a person to continue happily throughout his or her life and get up every morning believing that the day will be good. It is also possible, however, to read a bleaker message in the poem. While a snake can go about its business literally unaware that its life will one day end, perhaps violently under the wheels of a truck, humans do not have that luxury. As self-aware creatures, the only way that humans can escape thoughts of the inevitability of death is through self-deception and denial, or by engaging in fantasy.

STYLE

Memento Mori

Writing in an article in *Cross Currents*, Douglas Burton-Christie identifies one of Oliver's poems as a "memento mori." A memento mori is a meditation on death, and it is a genre that extends back at least as far as the Middle Ages. There are many poems written within this genre; perhaps the most famous of all is the Scottish poet William Dunbar's "Lament for the Makars." In Scots, a *makar* is a poet. In this poem, Dunbar laments the deaths across time of all the great poets before him, concluding each stanza with the refrain, "Timor mortis conturbat me," a phrase from the Catholic Office of the Dead that means "fear of death disturbs me." As Dunbar mourns the death of his forbears, he also realizes that he, too, will one day be dust, just as they are.

While it might seem a long stretch from a fifteenth-century Scottish poet to Oliver's "The Black Snake," Oliver is indeed operating in the same generic convention. The death of the snake in the road gives rise to her own contemplation of the nature of death, its suddenness, its complete annihilation of the life force. At the same time, however, the contemplation of death turns Oliver to a consideration of what it means to be alive. As such, she is acting in accord with many poets of the memento mori tradition. As Burton-Christie suggests, "Oliver places herself in a long and ancient company of seekers, for whom the discipline of memento mori represented the surest way of retaining a firm grasp on life."

Enjambment and Caesura

Two important poetic devices that Oliver uses skillfully in "The Black Snake" are enjambment and caesura. Enjambment is a French term meaning "striding over," and this sense of movement is an essential ingredient to understanding its poetic use. Enjambment occurs when a poet spreads a syntactic unit, such as a phrase or sentence or thought, across more than one line, sometimes from one stanza to the next. Sometimes scholars will refer to these as run-on lines. In the case of "The Black Snake," Oliver uses enjambment between the first and second lines of each stanza except the last; she also uses enjambment at the ends of the third and fourth stanzas. In using this device, she introduces a slight pause in the middle of the syntactic unit, brought about by the white space of the end of the line or stanza. This affects the way that the reader moves through the poem, at once speeding up the process of reading and slowing it down with a slight hesitation. When Oliver separates the actions of placing the dead snake beside the road and driving off, two actions she includes in the same sentence but in different stanzas, she emphasizes the difference between the dead and the living.

Caesura is another important poetic device featured here. A caesura is a strong pause in a line of poetry, often marked by punctuation, occurring within a line rather than at the end of a line. Oliver uses this device very effectively in line 16 of "The Black Snake." She places a period two words before the end of the line, bringing to a close her meditation on death. Immediately after the period, she uses a word to signal a turning away from her previous thought, a word that functions like "however" in this poem. The caesura underscores the turn.

Because Oliver typically writes short-lined poems, it is crucial for students to note how and why she chooses to line her poems as she does. Enjambment and caesura allow her to invest her verse with greater resonance and meaning.

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **1970s:** An interest in the environment and in ecology surfaces among writers and critics. According to the author Don Scheese in his book *Nature Writing: The Pastoral Impulse in America*, the "'greening' of literary studies and 'ecocriticism'" begins late in the 1970s.

  Today: Literary interest in the environment and ecology continues, as exemplified by writers such as Oliver, Annie Dillard, and Barry Lopez. Ecocriticism, the study of the relationship between literature and the natural world, is an accepted branch of literary criticism.
- **1970s:** Provincetown, Massachusetts, on Cape Cod, is becoming known as a cultural center and is the home of Oliver and other writers such as Norman Mailer.

  Today: Provincetown, Massachusetts, remains an important cultural center, attracting diverse writers, artists, photographers, and actors. Oliver continues to live there.
- **1970s:** Many natural areas suffer from human exploitation. The Massachusetts Audubon Society, which manages the state's Black Pond Nature Preserve, is forced to close the boggy area because of overuse causing environmental degradation.

  Today: While natural areas continue to suffer, some manage to recover. The Nature Conservancy manages the Black Pond Nature Preserve, and the bog has recovered. The Audubon Society and the Nature Conservancy lead walks on the property.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Environmental Movement in the 1970s

On April 22, 1970, Americans celebrated the first Earth Day, an event instigated by the U.S. senator Gaylord Nelson of Wisconsin. Part protest, part teach-in, and part activist inspiration, Earth Day has served to raise public awareness of environmental issues and concerns.

During the 1970s, a growing number of writers, poets, philosophers, and scientists began to sound the alarm that the natural world was in danger from human-made pollution and misuse. Aldo Leopold's 1949 landmark volume *A Sand County Almanac* was one of the first books to raise issues of environmental conservation in the United States. In turn, Rachel Carson's 1963 best-seller *Silent Spring* presented galvanizing environmental and ecological warnings. In this book, Carson details how the use of the pesticide DDT results in the thinning of the eggshells of large birds, notably raptors such as hawks, ospreys, and eagles, leading to drastically reduced reproductive rates. As a result of DDT use, many bird species came close to extinction. Carson's work proved to be one of the most influential environmental books ever written in the United States. By the 1970s, both of these books were very well known, with Leopold's work receiving renewed interest, and environmentalists were working hard to protect the natural world. Many credit *Silent Spring* with being directly responsible for the banning of DDT in 1972.

Much of the decade's concern over environmental issues sprang from a series of devastating events. In the mid-1970s, for example, a chemical used for making fire retardants for plastics was accidentally added to cattle feed for dairy herds in Michigan. As a result, the cattle and the people who consumed dairy products from these cows suffered serious health problems. Mothers across the state passed the chemicals to their children through their breast milk, and dairy farmers were forced to slaughter their herds. In 1978, a toxic disaster was discovered at Love Canal, a neighborhood in Niagara Falls, New York, where humans and animals suffered terrible damage from exposure to chemical wastes. After many

Car on road (Image copyright Max Earey, 2009. Used under license from Shutterstock.com)

families experienced birth defects, illnesses, and deaths, members of this community eventually had to be moved away from their homes. Although there was some compensation for losses, the toxicity of the area remains, and the words "Love Canal" have come to stand for extreme environmental degradation. As Eckardt C. Beck wrote in the January 1979 *EPA Journal*, "Quite simply, Love Canal is one of the most appalling environmental tragedies in American history." Finally, an accident at the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant in 1979 frightened citizens of the United States about the potential for an environmental catastrophe in the form of a nuclear meltdown. Just seven years later, a similar situation at Chernobyl, Ukraine, in the former Soviet Union, resulted in widespread nuclear contamination, and that prolonged episode remains one of the worst environmental disasters of all time.

In 1978 the Congress of the United States demonstrated growing environmental concern through the passage of three laws: the National Energy Act, the Endangered American Wilderness Act, and the Antarctic Conservation Act. These laws served to encourage conservation of natural resources while ensuring that wildlands would be set aside and left undeveloped for the mutual benefit of all the world's citizens. The 1970s were generally marked by congressional interest and action regarding the environment.

Oliver, living and working in the flourishing natural habitat of Cape Cod, is one of several writers who matured during the ecologically eventful 1970s and are now chronicling the lives and deaths of creatures of all sorts, particularly birds. While Oliver does not romanticize nature, it is also clear that she values nature deeply, identifying her as an important environmental voice. Her early career spanned the opening days of the environmental movement, and that movement's values seem to continue to influence her writing.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

Oliver has attracted both popular and critical attention since the publication of her first book in 1963. Certainly, with the publication of *Twelve*

Moons in 1979 and *American Primitive* in 1983, Oliver established herself as a major force in American letters. Winning both a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Award, Oliver is among the very few modern poets who have won critical acclaim while at the same time attracting a diverse and wide readership.

Jean B. Alford, writing in *Pembroke* magazine in 1988, calls Oliver's work "both distinctive and worthwhile." Alford sees in Oliver's poetry an acceptance of death and, in that acceptance, a kind of redemption. She writes, "In her meticulous craft and loving insight into what endures in both the human and natural worlds, she gives us all not only hope but also the potential for salvation—a modern renewal through mortal acceptance." Stephen Dobyns, in turn, writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, comments on one of Oliver's most common themes, the role of death in nature: "Nature for her is neither pretty nor nice. Beauty is to be found there, but it is a beauty containing the knowledge that life is mostly a matter of dying." Likewise, Judith Kitchen, in the *Georgia Review*, comments on Oliver's treatment of death as a theme. In a review of *New and Selected Poems*, Kitchen writes, "Imagined death is at the heart of many of these new poems—and, for Oliver, death is the ultimate merger of the human and the natural."

Some critics consider the spiritual nature of Oliver's verse. For example, Douglas Burton-Christie affirms in an article in *Cross Currents* that Oliver's poetry, in its consideration of life, death, and the oneness of nature, is deeply spiritual. He concludes, "Oliver evokes a deeply integrated spirituality of the ordinary, helping us to see and embrace what is, after all, one world, where nature, spirit and imagination rise together." On the other hand, critics like the poet Diane Wakoski focus on her careful consideration of the natural world. Wakoski declares in *Contemporary Poets* that Oliver's "knowledge of plants and animals is so rich that no one could question its authenticity."

Not all criticism of Oliver's work is positive, however. Gyorgyi Voros, writing in *Parnassus*, argues, "Considering that she is one of the foremost laureates of American Nature poetry of the last decade, Mary Oliver exhibits a peculiar lack of genuine engagement with the natural world." He later comments, "Finally, what is vexing about Mary Oliver's poetry is precisely that it does not suffice as poetry.... Nor does her language hold up under the contradictions of her need for transcendence and her need to speak plainly." Likewise, David Barber, in a review of *New and Selected Poems* for the journal *Poetry*, also finds fault with Oliver's work, remarking that in this collection, "Oliver skates perilously close to the overweening rhetoric of the self-help aisle and the recovery seminar." Both critics find Oliver's earlier poems, of which "The Black Snake" is one, to be more satisfying than the later poems included in *New and Selected Poems*.

Most critics and readers, however, agree with Kathryn VanSpanckeren, who asserts in her essay "Contemporary American Poetry: A Rich Cornucopia with a Genuinely Popular Base," that Oliver is a "stunning, accessible poet" who "evokes plants and animals with visionary intensity." She sees in "The Black Snake" a celebration of the day at hand: "This *carpe diem* is an invitation to a more rooted, celebratory awareness."

CRITICISM

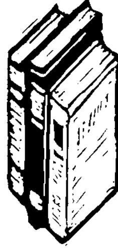
Diane Andrews Henningfeld

Henningfeld is a professor emerita of literature who writes widely for educational publishers. In the following essay, she examines Oliver's careful use of poetic techniques such as pause, caesura, and enjambment in "The Black Snake."

The English Romantic poet John Keats once wrote famously, "If poetry comes not as naturally as the leaves to a tree, it had better not come at all." With this statement, Keats suggests that poets ought to listen to their hearts and emotions rather than to their minds and reason. It is unlikely that he meant poets ought to just pour whatever comes into their minds onto paper and expect the result to be good poetry. Keats worked hard at his poetry, and while his ideas and thoughts flowed naturally to him, he nonetheless used a wide variety of poetic techniques to craft some of the most lovely poems in the English language.

Many readers and writers of poetry seem to feel that contemporary poetry is all emotion, with little or no attention to craft. Because Mary Oliver's work is so clearly written and so accessible, it is possible for readers to assume that her work just flows naturally from her heart to the paper, without her needing to give any consideration to the writing itself. When one examines, however, Oliver's own writing about poetry, one discovers a rich understanding of how the craft of the poem contributes to the meaning of the poem

WHAT DO I READ NEXT?



- *The Alphabet of the Trees: A Guide to Nature Writing* (2000), edited by Christian McEwen and Mark Statman, is a collection of essays about teaching and learning nature writing. The book is valuable for teachers, students, and writers who want to learn more about how to craft an essay or poem about nature. Included is an essay by Oliver.
- John R. Knott's book *Imagining Wild America* (2002) is a good example of ecocriticism, the branch of literary criticism that investigates nature writing. Knott includes a chapter on Oliver's work as well as chapters on Henry David Thoreau and John Muir, among others.
- Mary Oliver's 2008 volume *Red Bird: Poems* is an excellent example of her work nearly thirty years after the first publication of "The Black Snake," providing students the opportunity to compare and contrast the poet's early and later work.
- In the 1990s Oliver published two books about writing and reading poetry, *A Poetry Handbook* (1994) and *Rules for the Dance: A Handbook for Writing and Reading Metrical Verse* (1998). Both books offer insight into Oliver's techniques and style and are instructive for young and old would-be poets.

itself. As Oliver notes in an article for the *Ohio Review*, "Through the many possibilities of craft, the poem comes into its careful existence."

"The Black Snake" offers a small laboratory for readers who want to know more about how a poem's structure bears impact on its overall effect. Perhaps one of the most interesting ways to examine "The Black Snake" is to look closely at the line structure Oliver chose for her poem, something the reader might not think to consider. However, as Stephen Dobyns notes wisely in the *New York Times Book Review*, "Ms. Oliver's lines and line breaks completely control the rhythm and the pacing. She forces us to read her poems as she meant them to be read."

LIKE THE SNAKE MOVING UNAWARE INTO THE ROAD, NOT KNOWING THAT HE IS IN THE LAST SECONDS OF HIS LIFE, THE READER SLIDES INTO THE LAST LINE OF THE POEM, SLAMMING INTO THE PERIOD MARKING THE POEM'S END."

When a reader first looks at "The Black Snake," he or she will see that the poem is composed of short lines. The longest lines in the poem have only ten words each, and most lines are much shorter. Oliver's use of the short line is masterful. The critic Jay Rogoff argues in an article in the *Southern Review* that "no one alive uses the short poetic line as effectively or as excitingly, and few other poets working in free verse have as precise and seductive a sense of rhythm." One way that Oliver achieves this virtuosity of lining is through her use of pauses, caesura, and enjambment.

Oliver notes in the *Ohio Review* that "at the end of each line there exists—inevitably—a brief pause. This pause is part of the motion of the poem, as hesitation is part of dance." When a line of poetry is end-stopped, that is, completed with a comma, period, colon, semicolon, or dash, the pause is pronounced. Oliver suggests that such end stopping provides "an instant of inactivity, in which the reader is 'invited' to weigh the information and pleasure of the line." A good example of this technique can be found in line 3 of "The Black Snake." The poem has opened with the snake flowing onto the road and the information that the truck is not able to swerve to avoid hitting the snake. The third line, then, closes with a dash, a punctuation mark that stops the rhythm of the poem very abruptly and suddenly, the way that slamming on the brakes might stop a car. The reader thus has a moment to understand the implication of the scene that Oliver has just set up. At the same time, the dash pushes the reader to the next line, which begins with the word "death," written in italics, another device that provides sudden impact for the reader. The word "death" is immediately followed by a comma, providing another pause. Thus, on either side of the word "death" is space for a breath as well as the contemplation of a last breath.

Another good example of an end-stopped line is the third line of stanza 3. In the first three lines of the stanza, the narrator (who can be identified with Oliver) contemplates the snake's body, now still and quiet in death. In the third line, she compares the snake to a deceased sibling and then closes the line with a period. The comparison is shocking to the reader; few people ever consider a snake as a brother or a sister. Yet for Oliver, who believes in the connectedness of all nature, the snake is a member of her creaturely family. The period at the end of this line allows the reader to take this in and meditate for a brief moment about how the snake's death diminishes the narrator and all of creation. At the same time, of course, the period also signals an ending—the ending of the snake's life as well as the ending of the section of the poem that concerns the actual killing of the snake by the truck. The fourth line of the stanza, after the period, focuses now on the first-person narrator, not the snake.

Another way that a poet chooses to introduce pauses into his or her work is through the use of caesura, a word that in verse simply means a pause, usually in the middle of a line rather than at the end. Oliver uses this device several times in "The Black Snake." In the second line of stanza 4, Oliver places a colon immediately after the italicized word "death." A colon is often used in writing to introduce a list. Thus, the caesura produced through the use of the colon signals to the reader that Oliver is about to list something profound, something at the heart of the poem. Then, after two brief, end-stopped lines, Oliver again uses caesura in the middle of the last line of the stanza; after listing three true things about death, she stops. Her next sentence, beginning in the middle of the fourth line of the stanza, starts with the word "yet." This word functions in this sentence in the same way that "but" or "however" might: to signal a shift in idea. In this case, Oliver shifts her focus away from death, toward a consideration of what makes life persist in the face of certain death. The use of caesura here with the word "yet" reads as if Oliver has constructed a sign that says, "Stop! Prepare to turn!"

In addition to end stops and caesuras, poets sometimes choose to carry their thoughts or syntactic units over lines or stanzas in a technique called enjambment, a French term for "striding over." Oliver addresses how a poet can use enjambment to control the reader in her *Ohio Review* essay:

Braided whip (© Michael Rutherford / SuperStock)

> When the poet—enjambs the line—breaks syntax by turning the line before the phrase is complete at a natural point—it speeds the line for two reasons—curiosity about the missing part of the phrase impels the reader to hurry on, and the reader will hurry twice as fast over the obstacle of the pause *because it is there*—we leap with more energy over a ditch than over no ditch.

Oliver uses enjambment throughout "The Black Snake" with fine effect. The last stanza of the poem illustrates the combination of end stopping with enjambment that drives home the message of the poem. The first line of stanza 6 is end-stopped, the syntactic unit completed. The second line of the stanza, though it begins with the same two words, setting up a parallel structure, presents a thought that is continued over the next three lines. In this case, the lines provide a description of the snake moving as snakes do, through leaves and greenery in the spring, all symbolic of life. The enjambment, weaving across the lines of the stanza, mimics the snake's movement through nature. It is also significant that lines 2 and 3 are two of the longest lines in the poem, also mimicking the long, lean body of the snake. The enjambment continues to the last, suddenly short, end-stopped line.

The effect of the combination of enjambment and end stopping is at once startling and dazzling. Through her subtle use of poetic devices, Oliver entices the reader to slide quickly through lines 2, 3, and 4 of the last stanza, freely moving with the snake through the happiness of spring. Like the snake moving unaware into the road, not knowing that he is in the last seconds of his life, the reader slides into the last line of the poem, slamming into

the period marking the poem's end. Through her punctuation, line structure, caesuras, and enjambments, Oliver structurally supports her word choices, images, and metaphors to produce a small masterpiece of life and death.

Source: Diane Andrews Henningfeld, Critical Essay on "The Black Snake," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2010.

Douglas Burton-Christie

In the following essay, Burton-Christie examines how Oliver reconciles the impulse to symbolize nature with the desire to "let nature stand on its own terms"—a tension at work in "The Black Snake."

When death comes
like the hungry bear in autumn;
when death comes and takes all the bright
coins from his purse
to buy me, and snaps the purse shut;
when death comes
like the measle-pox;
when death comes
like an iceberg between the shoulder blades
I want to step through the door full of
curiosity, wondering:
what is it going to be like, that cottage
of darkness?

In the opening lines of "When Death Comes," poet Mary Oliver invites us to consider with her the final, irrevocable moment in all its starkness. There is a painful ambiguity here. On the one hand, death itself cannot be skirted; its inevitability, driving force, and finality are clear—like the hungry bear, the purse snapping shut, the measle-pox, the "iceberg between the shoulder blades." There is no hope for escape, no sense of a better place beyond death—it is merely a "cottage of darkness." On the other hand, she is expressing a hope that even at the moment of death she will retain an interest in the shape and texture of things. This is not, then, a meditation on eternal life; it is a memento mori, a meditation on death. Anticipating the day of her death in this way, Oliver places herself in a long and ancient company of seekers, for whom the discipline of memento mori represented the surest way of retaining a firm grasp on life. And so it is with her. She continues:

And therefore I look upon everything
as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,
and I look upon time as no more than
an idea,
and I consider eternity as another possibility,

THESE TWO APPARENTLY DIVERGENT IMPULSES, ONE ANTISYMBOLIC, THE OTHER SYMBOLIC, EBB BACK AND FORTH IN THE POETRY OF MARY OLIVER. HER ABILITY TO INTEGRATE THEM WITHOUT CONFUSING THEM YIELDS AN ORIGINAL VISION OF SPIRIT AND NATURE THAT IS BOTH UTTERLY CONCRETE AND UTTERLY TRANSCENDENT."

and I think of each life as a flower, as common
as a field daisy, and as singular
and each name a comfortable music in the
mouth,
tending, as all music does, toward silence,
and each body a lion of courage, and
something
precious to the earth.

Memento more here leads toward intimacy, communion, kinship with "everything" that is. Time and eternity? No answer is given to these questions; none is needed. It is enough, she says, to cherish each life for what it is, as common and as singular as a field daisy. To treasure each body as something "precious to the earth" is to keep from being swept away, swallowed up in an anonymous, opaque existence. This attention to the particular is for Oliver a discipline, necessary for cultivating and preserving the only spiritual awareness that matters—an awareness of life's endless vitality and beauty:

When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world
into my arms.
When it's over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something
particular, and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and
frightened,
or full of argument.
I don't want to end up simply having
visited this world.

With these last plaintive lines, we are brought around to consider again that final moment,

when everything that has gone before will stand etched sharply before us. This memento mori is really a meditation on the present moment, raising a pointed question (and a choice) about the kind of life that is unfolding before us, the kind of life we are or are not choosing: are we "sighing," "frightened," "full of argument"? Are we simply visiting this world? Or are we making of our lives something "particular and real"?

For over thirty years, Mary Oliver has been putting such questions to herself and to her readers. With her intense gaze focused carefully on the details of the ordinary, the everyday—especially in the natural world—she asks whether seeing more clearly can lead to living more deeply. She is well known in literary circles, having received a Pulitzer Prize in 1983 for the *American Primitive*, and a National Book Award for her recent *New and Selected Poems*. Among scholars of religion she is less well-known, however; to my knowledge no one from this community has yet given her poetry the sustained attention her work richly deserves. Oliver's call to notice and reimagine the natural world as a place pulsing with spirit is absolute and uncompromising. Yet she is unwilling to idealize the natural world or to leave it behind in seeking heightened spiritual awareness. Rather, she articulates an utterly particular and concrete sense of spiritual transformation that emerges in and through the ordinary, transfigured by poetic imagination.

I want to probe a particular tension in Oliver's work, using categories employed by critic Sherman Paul: adequation and correspondence. In *For Love of the World*, Paul defines adequation as describing carefully, letting things be in their concrete particularity, refraining from the temptation to symbolize. It is a literary equivalent that "respects the thing and lets it stand forth . . . an activity in words that is literally comparable to the thing itself." Correspondence refers to the search for symbolic meaning, the process of making imaginative connections between the ever-shifting and fathomless worlds of self and nature. In the tradition of American nature writing, Thoreau stands as one of the most vivid examples of a person given to adequation: he "respected particular things and was skeptical of the sovereign-idealist-symbol-making mind." Emerson, on the other hand, gave lucid expression to the process of correspondence; he wished "to take symbolic possession of things" and focused on "the epiphanic moment when a fact flowered into a truth." These two apparently divergent impulses, one antisymbolic, the other symbolic, ebb back and forth in the poetry of Mary Oliver. Her ability to integrate them without confusing them yields an original vision of spirit and nature that is both utterly concrete and utterly transcendent.

Adequation, for Oliver, means refraining from idealizing or symbolizing the natural world, letting it stand forth in all its stark otherness. It means recognizing there may be no meaning there at all, or at least no symbolic meaning suggestive of transcendence. In "Rain" we hear how:

> At night
> under the trees
> the black snake
> jellies forward
> rubbing
> roughly
> the stems of the bloodroot,
> the yellow leaves,
> little boulders of bark,
> to take off
> the old life. . . .
> In the distance
> the owl cries out.
> The snake knows
> these are the owl's woods,
> these are the woods of death,
> these are the woods of hardship
> where you crawl and crawl,
> where you live in the husks of trees,
> where you lie on the wild twigs
> and they cannot bear your weight,
> where life has no purpose
> and is neither civil nor intelligent.

Notice the rhythm of the language here. The short phrases are themselves suggestive of the slow, methodical "jellying forward of the snake." By the time we meet the owl, however, this slow building rhythm begins to take on another, more ominous connotation: these are "the woods of death / the woods of hardship . . . where life has no purpose / and is neither civil nor intelligent." The simple self-evident clarity of these lines does little to mask the horror that lurks beneath them: this is the way life really is, the poem suggests, and neither you nor I nor the snake nor the owl can do anything about it. Such sentiments may seem to imply a harsh, pessimistic view of the natural world and of life itself. I think, however, that it is truer to say we have here a clear-eyed appreciation of life's rich-textured otherness, of its capacity to defy our attempts to subsume it easily or simply into our categories.

Such an awareness leads to a posture of respect, of humility before the natural world, a refusal to give in to the impulse to domesticate. In the same poem, she describes watching as . . .

> The wasp sits on the porch of her paper castle.
> The blue heron floats out of the clouds.
> The fish leap, all rainbow and mouth, from the dark waters.

She resolves:

> And I do not want anymore to be useful, to be docile, to lead
> children out of the fields into the text
> of civility, to teach them they are (they are not) better than the grass.

In a similar vein, in "October" Oliver describes how . . .

> One morning
> the fox came down the hill, glittering and confident,
> and didn't see me—and I thought:
> so this is the world.
> I'm not in it.
> It is beautiful.

One can hardly imagine a starker statement of the need to resituate—even evacuate—the human in order to let the natural world stand forth. But there is a paradox here: after all, it requires a human observer to notice the fox "glittering and confident" and to reflect on the possibility of the fox's existing apart from the human. There is truth in Oliver's observation all the same; nature does not need us to be what it is. It has its own integrity, proceeds on its own way with or without us. Is it, in its wild independence, "beautiful" as Oliver suggests—even though this word implies a very human and subjective judgment? In the context of this poem, "beautiful" appears to have less an aesthetic than an ethical connotation—suggesting that part of what adequation asks of us is to relinquish our habit of determining the value and purpose of nature.

Such relinquishment may also require us to recast the question of the soul. In "Some Questions You Might Ask," Oliver queries:

> Is the soul solid, like iron?
> Or is it tender and breakable, like
> the wings of a moth in the beak of the owl?
> Who has it, and who doesn't? . . .
> Does it have a shape? Like an iceberg?
> Like the eye of a hummingbird?
> Does it have one lung, like the snake and the scallop?
> Why should I have it, and not the anteater
> who loves her children?
> Why should I have it, and not the camel?
> Come to think of it, what about the maple trees?
> What about the blue iris?
> What about all the little stones, sitting alone in the moonlight?
> What about roses, and lemons, and their shining leaves?

While there is a whimsical naiveté to such questions, there is also a hard-edged seriousness. The history of theology is full of attempts to situate different species along a continuum; all are valued, yet all are nonetheless ordered in a hierarchy of being. In such a scheme the soul is the province of the human alone. Oliver pointedly challenges this anthropocentrism. Yet she does so not by argument, but by a simple series of unnerving, unanswerable questions. Such questions seem, on the face of it, to stand in contrast to Oliver's desire to let nature stand forth on its own terms, as if she is suggesting the need to impute "soul" to nonhuman species in order to give them their proper value.

These questions can, however, be read in another way, as a means of playfully turning the entire question of soul on its head. If we have indeed spiritualized soul, made it the elite possession of human beings, have we not thereby reduced the natural world to a domain bereft of enduring value and meaning? In asking such questions Oliver seeks less to "elevate" the natural world than to "ground" soul. There is something here akin to Duns Scotus's insistence on haeccitas, the "thisness" of reality, or Hopkins's "inscape," the sense that even in the humblest objects, an entire universe burgeons forth. By posing such questions, Oliver asks us to revise our conventional assumptions about the soul and about the natural world, providing a new imaginative space in which to encounter nature and, perhaps, ourselves.

It is in this sense that Oliver pursues the process of correspondence or symbolic reflection. She shows no inclination to impose upon nature an alien symbolic structure of meaning; she seeks instead to understand how and where the natural world takes root within us, how we are challenged and even transformed in the process of wakening to nature's soulful presence. In this sense, adequation, or respect for nature's "otherness," provides

the necessary climate for engaging in the process of correspondence, or imaginative apprehension of nature as revelatory.

Her treatment of death illustrates this. She notices not only the brute fact of death—much of her poetry is given over to an unflinching examination of the power of death in the natural world—but also asks: what value do we give it in our experience? Is death a final, irrevocable darkness? Or does life somehow endure? Two poems about flowers pulse with the tension of these questions.

In "Poppies," Oliver engages in an inner dialogue, a painful struggle with herself in which she weighs in the balance the two most basic facts.

> The poppies send up their
> orange flares; swaying
> in the wind, their congregations
> are a levitation
> of bright dust, of thin
> and lacy leaves.

Abruptly, Oliver shifts her tack, observing:

> There isn't a place
> in this world that doesn't
> sooner or later drown
> in the indigos of darkness,

Then another shift:

> but now, for a while,
> the roughage
> shines like a miracle
> as it floats above everything
> with its yellow hair.

As if unsure of whether to trust what she sees with her own eyes and knows from personal experience, Oliver relents again:

> Of course nothing stops the cold,
> black, curved blade
> from hooking forward—
> of course
> loss is the great lesson.

Honesty, it would seem, prevents her from denying the harsh reality of the "black, curved blade." Yet, in spite of this, she allows herself a final expression of defiance:

> But I also say this: that light
> is an invitation
> to happiness,
> and that happiness,
> when it's done right,
> is a kind of holiness,
> palpable and redemptive.
> Inside the bright fields,
> touched by their rough and spongy gold,
> I am washed and washed
> in the river
> of earthly delight—

What kind of holiness is this? Certainly not a flight into the transcendent. Rather, holiness and happiness arise here in and through the light. The "bright fields" of the poppies invite her to lie down in their midst, to immerse herself in their light, to be "touched by their rough and spongy gold." And she does. "Washed and washed / in the river / of earthly delight," Oliver emerges with a new sense of the power of that light, perhaps with a new sense of faith. Without for a moment denying the force of the "black, curved blade," she is nevertheless emboldened by her experience to ask a parting question (one that becomes a kind of credo):

> and what you going to do—
> what can you do
> about it—
> deep, blue night?

The dialogue of the poem has the same rhythmic pace and sense of inevitable movement of day followed by night into a new day and so on. We move from the "orange flares" to "indigos of darkness" to "roughage [shining] with its yellow hair" to the "cold, black, curved blade [of] loss" to the "light [which] is an invitation to happiness." Light and darkness here are woven into a single fabric, suggested by a single, graspable image: the poppy itself is an indigo center circled by orange flares. To set them in opposition is to pose a false division. Still, the image also suggests a profound struggle and tension, a recognition that one does feel pulled—now toward the "bright fields," now toward the "deep, blue night." Oliver is honest enough not to skirt this struggle or to suggest that the "indigos of darkness" have nothing to teach her. But neither is she prepared to admit that the swathe cut by the "black, curved blade" is final, irrevocable, incapable of yielding—somehow—to light.

Such issues are intensely personal, which probably helps to explain why Oliver has taken up the mode of personal address in her recent poems. This technique serves to sharpen the work of correspondence, compelling the reader to reckon in a very personal way with the cost of really noticing the natural world. In "Peonies," Oliver considers these flowers as . . .

> pools of lace,
> white and pink— . . . [which]

all day
under the shifty wind,
as in a dance to the great wedding,
bend their bright bodies
and tip their fragrance to the air,
and rise,
their stems holding
all that dampness and recklessness
gladly and lightly,
and there it is again—
beauty the brave, the exemplary,
blazing open.

Suddenly and dramatically the tone changes, as does the subject of Oliver's observations. She turns her attention directly to us, the bystanders, asking:

Do you love this world?
Do you cherish your humble and silky life?
Do you adore the green grass, with its terror beneath?
Do you also hurry, half-dressed and barefoot, into the
garden, and softly,
and exclaiming of their dearness,
fill your arms with the white and pink flowers,
with their honeyed heaviness, their lush trembling,
their eagerness
to be wild and perfect for a moment, before they
are nothing, forever?

Here we are beckoned not only to observe, to appreciate these "pools of lace," dancing under a shifting wind, but to abandon our detached perspective and run to embrace them, filling our arms and whispering tender words of love before it is too late, before they are "nothing, forever." These two moments—appreciative description and loving embrace—are integrally related. It is only by carefully describing that one can really come to see the peonies, to notice they are passing from our midst. What is at issue here is something as personal and particular and ultimate as whether we are prepared to risk loving this world, knowing we cannot hold onto it—perhaps because we cannot hold onto it. The sense of ultimate loss again serves to sharpen our sense of the natural world's haunting, alluring texture; it poses for us a stark choice about what we will do, how we will live now.

Mary Oliver's poetry is filled with such stark choices. Yet it is also a poetry of delicate balance, especially in the tension she maintains between adequation and correspondence. By etching sharply the world we live in, its fragile beauty and its perplexing darkness, she lays before us a simple, but demanding question: are we prepared to pay more careful attention to what is unfolding before us? To pay attention means, for Oliver, to relinquish, to let go—of the need to symbolize, of the need to impose meaning on everything we see. It means learning to let the natural world be in its unassimilated otherness. Yet she also encourages us to reflect symbolically on the world of mystery evoked by our encounter with the natural world. She asks: what does it feel like, what does it mean to dwell in that mystery? Adequation and correspondence, letting be and imaginatively appropriating—both are necessary if we are to live deeply and see clearly. This is the challenge Oliver holds out to us. In a recent poem, aptly titled "Yes! No!," she invites us to live within this tension:

Yes! No! The
swan, for all his pomp, his robes of glass and petals, wants only
to be allowed to live on the nameless pond. The catbrier
is without fault. The water, thrushes, down-among the sloppy
rocks, are going crazy with happiness. Imagination is better
than a sharp instrument. To pay attention, this is our endless
and proper work.

"Paying attention" here means letting nature be (the swan, [who] wants only to be allowed to live on the nameless pond) and infusing it with meaning (the water thrushes... going crazy with happiness). In balancing these two seemingly divergent impulses, Oliver evokes a deeply integrated spirituality of the ordinary, helping us to see and embrace what is, after all, one world, where nature, spirit and imagination rise together.

Source: Douglas Burton-Christie, "Nature, Spirit, and Imagination in the Poetry of Mary Oliver," in *Cross Currents*, Vol. 46, Spring 1996, pp. 77–87.

Jean B. Alford

In the following essay, Alford explores how in Oliver's poems, including "The Black Snake," humans struggle with mortality and ultimately find renewal in nature.

Mary Oliver is a distinctive poet in the fashionably surreal and escapist world of contemporary

THE THEME OF OLIVER'S POETRY IS REVITALIZATION. THROUGH SELF-CONSCIOUS DENIAL, MODERN MAN MUST RECONNECT HIS ROOTS WITH THE NATURAL CYCLES AND PROCESSES OF ALL LIFE."

verse. The message and craft of her poetry are valued by peers and critics alike despite her unfortunate neglect as potential critical review. According to Hyatt H. Waggoner, she lacks the representative qualities associated with contemporary aesthetic values. However, her real worth as a modern poet lies in these very atypical qualities. Representative contemporary poets gloomily doom modern man and his life in apprehensive responses to present political, social, economic, and moral uncertainties. Oliver instead passionately affirms their survival. Within them both, she exalts the natural—an inherently renewing and regenerative potential.

The theme of Oliver's poetry is revitalization. Through self-conscious denial, modern man must reconnect his roots with the natural cycles and processes of all life. As Oliver's poems engross the reader in a fully sensual union with nature, she urges him to recognize the universal joys, pains, beauties, and terrors experienced in such connectedness. She then celebrates his transforming potential—the loving acceptance of his mortality in the human and natural worlds.

Oliver's poetic technique will not be examined in this discussion. It is important to note, however, that it too is in keeping with her different contemporary stance. Rather than adopt the surreal escapism and the personal confessions of many peers, she uses the traditional lyric form to embrace her readers emotionally and intellectually. Her meticulous craft and her skilled use of language create poems that are seemingly effortless, sensual delights. She combines rich, musical lyrics with swift, taut meters; she uses illuminating images that seldom startle; and she produces a confident, yet graceful and serene, tone. According to Anthony Manousos, Oliver's craft is deceptively simple—an emotional intensity that speaks clearly and directly to the reader. More appropriately, James Dickey characterizes it as remarkable, creating richly complex poetry without throwing complexities in the way of the reader.

An analysis of Oliver's poetic message reveals that she begins her positive affirmation by seeking to reconnect modern man to his roots in the natural processes of all life. According to Waggoner, rather than despairing over the current separation and alienation of contemporary life, Oliver searches memory and present experiences. Through the world of nature, she finds those intrinsic meanings and values which can be retrieved, embraced anew, and celebrated in the modern world. To Manousos, then, her exploration of the natural world and its cycles elicits concurrent themes analogous to those which are deepest and most enduring in human experience.

In *Twelve Moons*, especially, Oliver celebrates the natural cycles of birth, decay, and death as flourishing in all life. More important, though, she reveals the companion dreams that motivate and drive the mortal existence. In "The Fish," Oliver compares the salmon's exhaustive and painful battle upstream to reach her "old birth pond" with the efforts of "any woman come to term, caught / as mortality drives triumphantly toward / immortality / the shaken bones like / cages of fire". "Stark County Holidays" describes a Christmas family reunion as the narrator's awareness of her mother's "wintering" decay; though the musical dream and desire persist, the "stiffened hands" on the "blasted scales" ensure that seasonally "the promise fades." In "The Black Snake," the reptile found dead in the roadway is thrown into the bushes as "looped and useless as an old bicycle tire." Yet, it is remembered as "cool and gleaming as a braided whip," imbued with the "brighter fire" of all nature which ". . . says to oblivion: not me!"

Oliver identifies within these life cycles the continuous elements of change, sensual pleasure, and love. She reveals that they not only accompany the companion dreams but also necessarily involve experiencing both pain and pleasure. In "Two Horses," Jack and Racket are wished from death into "Elysian fields . . . without fences" but realistically and sadly recognized as changed like all of life in "two graves big as cellar holes / At the bottom of the north meadow." In "Worm Moon," the death of winter changes joyfully into spring's "love match that will bring forth fantastic children / . . . who will believe, for years, / that everything is possible." Celebrating

sensual pleasure in "Looking for Mushrooms," the poetic persona perceives the hunt and capture of the delectable "salvo of the forest" as "rich / and romping on the tongue" for man and beast alike. Yet, in the "Bone Poem" that follows, as she comes upon the "rat litter" at the bottom of the owl's tree, she recognizes the owl's most recent sensual delight not only as being part of the eternal food chain but also as eventually dissolving "back to the center" where "the rat will learn to fly, the owl / will be devoured." And, Oliver celebrates motherly love in both the human and animal world. In "Snow Moon—Black Bear Gives Birth," the mother bear washes and snuggles her newborn, gives them the "rich river" of her nipples, and thus establishes each one as "an original." A mother's love changes, though, from joy to a pain that "lashes out with a cutting edge" in "Strawberry Moon." Elizabeth Fortune is not only left by "the young man / full of promises, and the face of the moon / a white fire" but also separated from the child born out of wedlock, being forced by society to "climb in the attic."

As Oliver celebrates the themes of birth, decay, death, dreams, change, sensual pleasure, and love, she asserts their equal and certain existence for both man and animal. In fact, she assures modern man of his survival because he is part of the natural world and its rejuvenating potential. This assurance, though, includes the experience of beauty, joy, and sensual pleasure as well as that of mystery, terror, and pain.

According to Joyce Carol Oates, Oliver relates these experiences to an essential tension and loneliness man experiences as he lives simultaneously in two worlds—the personal, familial, human world and the inhuman, impersonal, natural world. Within the human world, man essentially struggles alone to find a sense of identity, peace, and immortality. In the poem "John Chapman," an eccentric, anti-social old man of the Ohio forests becomes a "good legend" by planting and giving away apple trees. He decides not to die to "the secret, and the pain" of unrequited love but "to live, to go on caring about something." In "Dreams," the narrator compares a single rain-swollen creek's rushing drive and desire for "a new life in a new land / where vines tumble thick as ship-ropes, / The ferns grow tall as trees!" to two pioneering great-uncles who got lost in Colorado looking for the good life. With "pounding heart and pride," she celebrates them as "full of hope and vision; / . . . healthy as animals, and rich / as their dreams . . . "—at peace and immortalized before they died alone.

Manousos suggests that Oliver then counterbalances man's dream of immortality with man's struggle to survive mortality—his subjection to increasingly waning natural powers after birth. In "Ice," the narrator painfully acknowledges her father's feverish distribution of ice grips as an attempt in his "last winter" to " . . . be welcomed and useful— / . . . Not to be sent alone over the black ice." In "The Garden," the speaker pities the wealthy, good-mannered, defiant woman who spends her life alone working three gardeners around the clock to keep "the wilderness at bay." In the end, this self-sufficient matron terrifyingly discovers her wasted effort and struggle and loss—"how powerless she was / . . . like the least of us grew old and weedy. / Felt her mind crumble . . . / Heard the trees thicken as they stumbled toward her / And set their cracking weight upon her bones."

To Oliver, the reconciliation of man's desire for immortality and his experience of mortality depends on his willingness to recognize them as polarities. According to A. Poulin, Jr., the essential tension between them in Oliver's poetry " . . . defines the boundaries of all experience—whether in the physical world, in the realm of human relationships, or in the self." In her poems, she equates this reconciliation with the very sense of connectedness she celebrates in *Twelve Moons*, a unity existing between the human and natural worlds. Through a personal psychic journey, man must deny and eliminate the self-conscious "I" that seeks immortality and open his sensual perception to the mortal kinship between the human and the natural.

In "Entering the Kingdom," the narrator expresses her desire to negate the "I" and become one with nature—"the dream of my life / Is to lie down by a slow river / And stare at the light in the trees— / To learn something of being nothing / A little while but the rich / Lens of attention." In "Blackleaf Swamp," she asks whether being human negates her being "part bird, part beast" and queries if so, " . . . why does a wing in the air / Sweep against my blood / Like a sharp oar?" After her study of "darkness and trees and water," she confidently concludes that such selfless communion with nature "feels like the love of my mother." In "The Plum Trees," as the poetic persona explores the sensual inundation of eating summer plums, she celebrates the "sensibility" or

critical importance of increased sensual perception. For her, "joy / is a taste before / it's anything else . . . " and "the only way to tempt happiness into your mind is by taking it / into the body first, like small / wild plums." According to Manousos, Oliver's vision of man's sensual union with nature becomes celebratory and religious in the deepest sense. In "The Fawn," the worshipper questions "what is holiness?" as she succumbs not to the ringing church bells but "to the woods instead," calling "blessed" a momentary touching of spirits between herself and a newborn fawn.

The results of a psychic journey which elevates man's sensual perception above his self-consciousness are still polar—eliciting both joy and pleasure, pain and terror. As man recognizes the oneness of all forms of life, he joyfully experiences glimpses of immortality and eternity. In "Pink Moon the Pond," Oliver celebrates this moment:

> . . . the soul rises from your bones
> and strides out over the water . . .
> not even noticing
> You are something else . . .
> And that's when it happens—
> You see everything
> through their eyes,
> their joy, their necessity . . .
> And that's when you know
> You will live whether you will or not,
> one way or another,
> because everything is everything else,
> one long muscle.

Man finally sees his immortality as a self-denying mortal life in communion with the eternal processes of nature.

When man acknowledges his mortal participation in the natural cycles of life, he is also terrified by nature's total disregard for the individual, whether prey or predator. According to Oates, Oliver, in "Winter in the Country," reveals the natural world's refusal to divide individuals or creatures into victims or oppressors. The narrator states, "the terror of the country / Is not the easy death . . . " but "Is prey and hawk together, / still flying, both exhausted, / In the blue sack of weather." Oliver insists that man must also take his place in this frightening, unsentimental, unpoliticized natural world, for he too is subject to waning natural powers. In "Farm Country," the speaker criticizes the view that "life is chicken soup." She urges man to act as decisively and realistically as the farm wife does—"sharpening her knives, putting on the heavy apron and boots, crossing the lawn, and entering the hen house."

Because of this elevated yet terrifying sensual perception, man can be potentially renewed. When he denies the superiority of his own self-consciousness and acceptingly connects his own mortality to the world around him, he is different. No longer is he the "cruel but honest" one in "Cold Poem." Such a man keeps " . . . alive . . . taking one after another / the necessary bodies of others, the many / crushed red flowers." Neither can he be a part of the dispassionate news audience in "Beyond the Snow Belt." They "forget with ease each far mortality" because " . . . except as we have loved. / All news arrives as from a distant land."

Instead, contemporary man can be more loving, caring, and sensitive as he participates in his environment. His potential exists as surely as that of the narrator's ancestors in "Stark Boughs on the Family Tree." They "built great barns and propped their lives / Upon a slow heartbreaking care" as "they left the small / Accomplished, till the great was done." Like the niece in "Aunt Mary," he may even long to know the hidden spirit of one so loud and fat. As he views the skinny child in the family album " . . . in a time before her glands / Grew wild as pumps, and fleshed her to a joke," he may even lament her death, learning "how wise we grow, / Just as the pulse of things slips from the hand."

As a different person, modern man can also recognize that facing, coping, and adapting to life's trials and disappointments are the only means of gaining inward peace and self-identity. In "No Voyage," Oliver documents the human tendency to run away from the pain and unpleasantness experienced in life. The poem's narrator insists on the necessity to "inherit from disaster before I move/ . . . To sort the weeping ruins of my house; / Here or nowhere I will make peace with the fact." To Oliver, as nature learns, so must man. In "Storm," as the speaker seeks shelter from a deadly heaven "full of spitting snow," she marvels at "deer lying / In the pine groves," "foxes plunging home," "crows plump / As black rocks in cold trees." She concludes that "what saves them is thinking that dying / Is only floating away into / The life of the snow"—accepting their place and time in the natural cycle of life and fulfilling the complete potential of their being.

Poulin believes that the acceptance of the hard truths of mortal existence is epiphany for Oliver as well as for modern man himself—the essential nature or meaning of life. In "Blackwater Wood," she asserts that living productively today is dependent on three measures of acceptance by man:

> to love what is mortal;
> to hold it
> against your bones knowing
> your own life depends on it;
> and, when the time comes to let it go,
> to let it go.

To Oliver, man's inward struggles to be immortal through art, work, or love do not cancel mortal existence but rather create a fleeting sense of stay. In "Music Lessons," when the teacher takes over the piano, "sound becomes music" that flees "all tedious bonds: / supper, the duties of flesh and home, / the knife at the throat, the death in the metronome." The grand finale, though, is only a momentary transformation.

Contemporary man's acceptance of his mortality will benefit daily living in productive encounters of love, caring, and understanding. It allows him to look beyond the self to view death as in harmony with the recreative processes of nature. In "The Kitten," the narrator believes that she "did right" to give the stillborn "with one large eye / in the center of its small forehead" back peacefully to nature rather than to a museum. For she asserts, "life is infinitely inventive. / saying what other arrangements / lie in the dark seed of the earth . . . " In "University Hospital, Boston," a family member reconciles the dying of a loved one. While she tells him "you are better," she sees other beds "made all new, / the machines . . . rolled away. . . ." And, she acknowledges, " . . . the silence / continues. deep and neutral, as I stand there, loving you."

The acceptance of the hard truths of mortality also provides a reforming perspective on daily dying—the progressive inward death of one's self-consciousness. As Oliver celebrates in "Sleeping in the Forest," such daily extinctions allow man to "vanish into something better." In "Sharks," as the narrator describes swimmers too soon forgetting the lifeguard's warning, she asserts: " . . . life's winners are not the rapacious but the patient; / What triumphs and takes new territory / has learned to lie for centuries in the shadows / like the shadows of the rocks."

Oliver's poetry, then, reminds modern man that accepting the dire consequences of mortal existence through a heightened sensual perception takes time and patience. It does not come easily like an automatic reflex but rather develops through a slow, painful transformation of self to selflessness. Its rewards, however, are as delectable and exciting as the red fox's appearance in "Tasting the Wild Grapes"—"lively as the dark thorns of the wild grapes / on the unsuspecting tongue!"

Thus reviewed is the poetry of Mary Oliver—contemporarily non-representative, positive, traditional, conservative, deceptively simple, complex without throwing complexities in the way of the reader. As a modern poet, she is both distinctive and worthwhile. In her meticulous craft and loving insight into what endures in both the human and natural worlds, she gives us all not only hope but also the potential for salvation—a modern renewal through mortal acceptance.

Source: Jean B. Alford, "The Poetry of Mary Oliver: Modern Renewal Through Mortal Acceptance," in *Pembroke*, Vol. 20, 1988, pp. 283–88.

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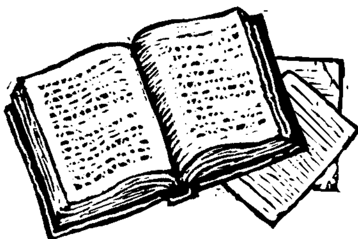
The Fish

ELIZABETH BISHOP

1940

"The Fish" is considered one of Elizabeth Bishop's best and most popular poems, and it is her most frequently anthologized work. It is representative not only of her early work (in style and form) but also of her work as a whole (in theme and tone). Given that Bishop is one of America's foremost modernist poets, "The Fish" is not only a standout work from Bishop's overall oeuvre but also an exemplary work of modernist poetry. Though the poem appears to be a straightforward if somewhat flowery description of a fish caught by the speaker, it ultimately becomes a treatise on perception and reality. The poem is also highly meditative; as the speaker holds the newly caught fish, the unspoken problem of whether to release it or keep it is being deliberated through the speaker's observations of the fish and of the life it must have led. In addition, through the description of the fish, several different poetic devices are employed, adding to the range and depth of the poem. First published in the *Partisan Review* in 1940, "The Fish" was next included in Bishop's 1946 poetry collection *North and South*. The poem remains one of Bishop's most well-known works, and it is often included in both high school and college curriculums as an integral part of the study of modernist poetry. "The Fish" is widely available on the Internet and can be easily found in the 1984 edition of Bishop's *Complete Poems, 1927–1979*, a volume that has remained continuously in print since its first publication.



Elizabeth Bishop *(Library of Congress)*

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Elizabeth Bishop was born on February 8, 1911, in Worcester, Massachusetts, the only child of William Thomas Bishop and Gertrude May Bulmer. Her father died when Bishop was eight months old, and she was raised for a time by her mother, who suffered from poor mental health. Bishop was only four when her mother was institutionalized, and from then on she was raised by her maternal grandparents in Nova Scotia. Her time in Nova Scotia was quite influential on Bishop's respect for, and fascination with, the natural world. The country would often feature in her writings. By the age of sixteen, however, Bishop's wealthy paternal relatives had her returned to Massachusetts, where she attended boarding school. Bishop resented the move and, according to Temple Cone in *The Scribner Encyclopedia of American Lives Thematic Series: The 1960s*, "the resulting sense of loss and homelessness became a central theme in her writings and contributed to the depression, asthma, and alcoholism that troubled Bishop much of her life."

Bishop attended Vassar College from 1930 to 1934. There, she met the poet Marianne Moore, who remained a substantial influence on Bishop throughout her lifetime. Around this time, Bishop began writing in earnest, and by the early 1940s, her poems were appearing regularly in such publications as the *Partisan Review* and the *New Yorker*. ("The Fish" appeared in the former in 1940.) Following her graduation from Vassar, Bishop split her time between New York City and Key West, Florida. This pattern was reflected in her first published poetry collection, *North and South* (1946), in which "The Fish" also appeared. Based on the success of this work, she was named consultant in poetry to the Library of Congress (what is now called the poet laureate of the United States), a post she held from 1949 to 1950. Notably, *North and South* was released again in 1955 as a tandem edition titled *Poems: North & South — A Cold Spring*. The reissued volume garnered Bishop a Pulitzer Prize in 1956.

By 1951, Bishop found herself in Brazil, where she stayed with the aristocrat Lota de Macedo Soares. The two would ultimately begin an affair that lasted for fifteen years. Because of this relationship, Brazil remained Bishop's main residence until 1968, and her 1965 poetry collection, *Questions of Travel*, was heavily influenced by her extended stay in Brazil. The volume received a National Book Award that same year.

In 1961, Soares and Bishop moved from Soares's country estate to Rio de Janeiro, but the move strained the couple's relationship. Bishop's drinking also increased dramatically at this time. She spent most of 1966 teaching at the University of Washington, where she began an affair with Suzanne Bowen. It is likely that Soares knew of the affair; when she rendezvoused with Bishop in New York City in 1967, Soares overdosed on sedatives and died within the week. Following Soares's death, Bishop resumed her relationship with Bowen, and they traveled to San Francisco together in 1968. That same year, her third poetry collection, *The Ballad of the Burglar of Babylon*, was released. It was her least successful work to date. The couple next settled in Brazil, but in 1970, Bishop and Bowen parted ways.

Bishop's *The Complete Poems* was published in 1969 and was honored with the 1970 National Book Award. That same year, Bishop accepted a year-long teaching position at Harvard University. She stayed in Boston for the remainder of her life.

During this period, she worked on the poems that appear in her acclaimed collection *Geography III* (1976). The collection won the National Book Critics Circle Award.

Bishop died of an aneurysm on October 6, 1979, in Boston, and her body is interred in the Bishop family plot in Worcester. In addition to her poetry, Bishop often worked as a translator and editor of anthologies. She also occasionally wrote short stories, many of which are presented in the 1984 volume *The Collected Prose*. Her definitive *Complete Poems, 1927–1979* was also published in 1984. As of 2009, the volume remained in print. In 2006, *Edgar Allen Poe & the Juke-box*, a posthumous collection of Bishop's previously unpublished poems, was also released.

POEM TEXT

I caught a tremendous fish
and held him beside the boat
half out of water, with my hook
fast in a corner of his mouth.
He didn't fight. 5
He hadn't fought at all.
He hung a grunting weight,
battered and venerable
and homely. Here and there
his brown skin hung in strips 10
like ancient wallpaper,
and its pattern of darker brown
was like wallpaper:
shapes like full-blown roses
stained and lost through age. 15
He was speckled with barnacles,
fine rosettes of lime,
and infested
with tiny white sea-lice,
and underneath two or three 20
rags of green weed hung down.
While his gills were breathing in
the terrible oxygen
—the frightening gills,
fresh and crisp with blood, 25
that can cut so badly—
I thought of the coarse white flesh
packed in like feathers,
the big bones and the little bones,
the dramatic reds and blacks 30
of his shiny entrails,
and the pink swim-bladder
like a big peony.
I looked into his eyes
which were far larger than mine 35
but shallower, and yellowed,
the irises backed and packed
with tarnished tinfoil
seen through the lenses
of old scratched isinglass. 40
They shifted a little, but not
to return my stare.
—It was more like the tipping
of an object toward the light.
I admired his sullen face, 45
the mechanism of his jaw,
and then I saw
that from his lower lip
—if you could call it a lip—
grim, wet, and weaponlike, 50
hung five old pieces of fish-line,
or four and a wire leader
with the swivel still attached,
with all their five big hooks
grown firmly in his mouth. 55
A green line, frayed at the end
where he broke it, two heavier lines,
and a fine black thread
still crimped from the strain and snap
when it broke and he got away. 60
Like medals with their ribbons
frayed and wavering,
a five-haired beard of wisdom
trailing from his aching jaw.
I stared and stared 65
and victory filled up
the little rented boat,
from the pool of bilge
where oil had spread a rainbow
around the rusted engine 70
to the bailer rusted orange,
the sun-cracked thwarts,
the oarlocks on their strings,
the gunnels—until everything
was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow! 75
And I let the fish go.

POEM SUMMARY

Lines 1–10

Written in the past tense, "The Fish" opens with the unidentified speaker stating that she caught a large fish. The speaker then notes that she was on a boat, and she describes holding the fish as it is still partially in the water with her fishhook embedded in its mouth. Notably, the speaker refers to the fish as a male, assigning it a gender instead of referring to the fish as an "it." In line 5, she notes that the fish does not struggle, and repeats this fact again in line 6, as if the fish's placidity is so remarkable that it bears repeating. The fish is an ugly, heavy, battle-worn being in the speaker's hands. Pieces of his skin are flaking off of him.

Lines 11–20

The fish's flaking skin looks old, like wall hangings falling from a wall. Its mottled brown appearance is like old flowered wallpaper whose flowers and patterns have grown discolored over time. According to the speaker, the fish carries barnacles and sea mites on its body. A few pieces of ragged seaweed also cling to him.

Lines 21–30

The fish's gills are flapping in the open air, as if he is gasping for breath. The gills are described as terrible and bloody. The speaker indicates that it is as if the gills can slice whatever they touch. In line 27, the speaker reinserts herself, mentioning herself in the first person for the first time since line 1. She says that she thought of the fish's insides, of his meat and of his skeleton, with bones of varying sizes.

Lines 31–40

The speaker also imagines the bold colors of the fish's organs and intestines. She pictures his bladder and compares it to a flower. The speaker gazes into the fish's eyes. She says they are bigger than her own, though they are not as deep. His eyes are yellowed and shiny as if there is foil behind them. The speaker says that looking at the fish's eyes is like looking at something through an aged and cracked gelatin-like substance. Ironically, the particular gelatin the speaker refers to is made from fish bladders.

Lines 41–50

The fish's eyes move slightly, though they do not appear to make contact with the speaker. The speaker says the eyes seem to move unconsciously toward any available brightness. She indicates that the fish's gaze is akin to an inanimate item, rather than being that of a living being. After calling the fish's face morose, the speaker reinforces the idea of the fish as an inanimate object by noting that the structure of its jaw is like a machine. Then, for the first time, the speaker suddenly notices the fish's impressive bottom lip.

Lines 51–60

On the fish's lip are five different strings of fish line, all of them old. The speaker then revises her statement by saying that there are actually only four pieces of fish line and that the fifth piece is instead a wire fishing leader with a metal piece from a fishing pole still connected to it. All four lines and the wire leader are still connected to fish hooks. The fish hooks are dire and look like weapons, and they have become firmly embedded in the fish's mouth, his skin having grown over much of them.

The speaker then describes the various pieces of fish line, noting their different colors, lengths, and thicknesses. Some of the lines appear older and more tattered, whereas one of the lines looks as if it is newly bent from the fish's successful struggles for freedom.

Lines 61–70

The speaker says the ragged and tattered lines are like badges of honor. They are like the whiskers of a beard comprising knowledge and experience. The speaker imagines that the fish's jaw must be in pain. She may be indicating that the pain stems from the physical weight of the hooks and lines but also from the metaphorical weight of the wisdom their presence has earned him.

The speaker mentions herself in the first person and says that she looked and looked at the fish. Having thoroughly inspected him, the speaker experiences a sense of triumph that encompasses the entirety of her leased boat. The sense of triumph includes a puddle of water on the deck. A shining streak of oil in the puddle creates a prism of colors as the light is reflected in it. Next, the speaker's feeling of achievement stretches to include the boat's corroded motor.

Lines 71–76

The speaker's sense of success also extends to the corroded bucket used to bail out excess water from the boat, to the rowing seats whose covers are aged and split by the sun, and to the locks meant to hold the boat's oars in place. The feeling surrounds everything until all is transformed into colorful prisms of light much like that in the oil-slicked puddle. Indeed, at this point the speaker's sense of ecstasy reaches a peak, as she repeats the word *rainbow* three times in a row. The speaker then releases the fish.

THEMES

The Power of Observation

First and foremost, "The Fish" is a poem about observation. The fish, the object of the poet's gaze, is subject to all manner of description, from adjective to metaphor to simile. Each literary device is a means through which the speaker attempts to

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY

- The poet Marianne Moore and Bishop were lifelong friends, and Moore's influence on Bishop's work was substantial. Notably, one of Moore's most famous poems is also titled "The Fish" (1918). Read Moore's poem and write an essay comparing and contrasting it to Bishop's poem.
- Write a poem in which you describe something in detail and end the poem with an action inspired by that intense observation—just as Bishop does in "The Fish." In a short essay, note whether the conclusion you came to was expected or unexpected and why.
- Some critics have described Bishop as a feminist and some have even gone as far as to call her a feminist poet. Yet little of her work is overtly feminist. Study feminism in the twentieth century and give an oral presentation on the topic. Based on your research, do you think that Bishop was a feminist? Which poems support or undermine your conclusion?
- Create a collage or drawing based on your reading of "The Fish" and present it to your class. How did your artwork enhance or change your understanding of Bishop's poem?

adequately define that which appears before her. That the speaker must struggle through the majority of the poem to do so only underlines the difficulty of truly and fully seeing. This is why the poem is largely a progression from surprise, having caught a fish that does not struggle, to elation, having fully understood the fish and thus being compelled to let it go. The transformation that occurs between these two points is largely, if not wholly, achieved through the vehicle of observation. Indeed, the speaker's surprise at the fish's placidity is perhaps what spurs her observation. He stays still enough for her to begin to truly see him for what he is.

Certainly, it would seem that the crux of the poem's theme lies in the speaker's observation of the myriad hooks grown into the fish's bottom lip. Notably, this is the last aspect of the fish that the speaker notices before choosing to let him go. This fact is significant in that the hooks are likely the fish's most prominent feature. Any fisherman who would catch such a fish would likely notice this aspect straightaway. Yet, this is not the case with the poem's speaker. The omission is, at the very least, a deliberate delay of the inevitable. The delay underscores the journey of observation undertaken by the speaker. Furthermore, it allows the speaker's respect for the fish to build from disgust to admiration. In the speaker's eyes, the fish is transformed from a lice-ridden creature to a worthy and battle-worn adversary.

The triumph the speaker experiences could be initially ascribed to this realization—that the speaker has caught a fish that has escaped so many like herself. Yet the speaker's sense of triumph has far deeper implications. It stems from her journey of observation, from seeing the fish as an object to recognizing it as a being worthy of intense thought and consideration. The triumphant epiphany lies not in the realization that the speaker has caught a worthy fish but in the realization that the speaker, through actively seeing and observing, has been able to come to any realization or understanding of the fish at all. This idea is reinforced by the speaker's transference of triumph and beauty to all that surrounds her. An ugly oil-slicked puddle, a corroded bucket, the rowing seats whose covers are aged and cracked, all become beautiful—transformed into rainbows. Though the speaker indicates that everything has been transformed into rainbows, rainbows are in and of themselves everything in that they are a full presentation of the color spectrum. Thus, the poet indirectly indicates that she can see everything as everything (every color) at once. This, then, is the power of observation made concrete.

Unexpected Beauty

What follows the speaker's initial surprise at having caught the docile fish is an observation that first leads to disgust. The fish's shredded skin and the ragged pieces of seaweed sticking to it give an impression of age and decay. This impression of disgust is further underlined by the barnacles and sea lice with which the fish is infested. These rather morbid observations turn the speaker's thoughts toward observations of that which is unseen, the fish's organs and skeleton. Yet the speaker derives beauty from so much ugliness; the fish's bladder is compared to a flower.

Freshly caught fish *(Image copyright The Finalmiracle, 2009. Used under license from Shutterstock.com)*

The speaker even finds beauty in the hooks protruding from the fish's lower lip. Although that beauty is not as explicit as the speaker's earlier comparison to flowers, it is implicit in her fascination with them, in her ascribing to them an honorable meaning, and in the resultant respect they inspire in her. The beauty that the poet finds in the fish's ugliness also extends to the ugliness that surrounds her. The rickety old boat and its sun-worn and corroded parts all take on the same measure of intense beauty. Notably, this theme is derivative of the poem's main theme. "The Fish" demonstrates that beauty can only be found in the ugly via intense observation.

STYLE

Descriptive Language and Simile

Given that "The Fish" is a poem about observation, the predominant stylistic device Bishop employs is descriptive language. This includes adjectives, such as the use of color to describe the fish's skin, organs, and eyes, as well as to describe the lice and seaweed that cling to him. Adjectives are also used to assign the fish his large size, his heavy weight, his ugly appearance, his terrifying gills, the impressive size and minimal depth of his eyes, and the morose expression on his face. However, the use of simile, of comparing one thing to another (often using the word "like" or "as"), is the most prominent, or effective, descriptive device used in the poem. Indeed, the word "like" appears seven times in the first sixty-one lines in the poem (the section that is devoted to the observation of the fish and precedes the speaker's epiphany). The speaker uses simile to compare the fish's skin to wallpaper, and then uses it doubly to compare that wallpaper to flowers. Simile is also used to describe the fish's skeleton and is used when the speaker compares the fish's bladder to a flower. In one striking instance, simile is used to ascribe unconscious movement to the fish's eyes, underscoring the speaker's treatment of the fish as an inanimate object. Simile is once again used when the hooks grown into the fish's mouth are compared to badges of honor. In this latter instance, metaphor is also implied, as the badges of honor are symbols of a hard-won knowledge and experience.

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **1940s:** The predominant style of poetry is modernism, a style characterized by loose forms and traditionally unpoetic topics, such as isolation, technology, and despair.

  Today: Free verse remains a highly popular poetic form. However, an increasingly prevalent style of poetry is new formalism, a style characterized by a return to traditional metric forms and structures.

- **1940s:** America joins World War II following the December 7, 1941, attacks on Pearl Harbor.

  Today: Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States invades Iraq on March 19, 2003, beginning the Iraq War.

- **1940s:** Most women in the United States marry, have children, and become homemakers. While millions of women temporarily enter the workforce during World War II, few enjoy Bishop's lifestyle of unfettered travel.

  Today: Career paths and opportunities for women abound. Women typically marry later in life, have fewer children, and are more likely to maintain careers or travel often.

Descriptive language also permeates the speaker's epiphany at the end of the poem, encompassing the boat on which she fishes. The corroded bucket, the prismatic colors in the oil-slicked puddle, the split seat cushions, the corroded motor—all are described with a wealth of adjectives.

Free Verse

"The Fish" is written in free verse, which means that it has no set metric structure or rhyme scheme. In fact, the poem resembles prose in its language and rhythm. Were it not for the descriptive devices employed throughout, "The Fish" would hardly appear to be a poem. Furthermore, "The Fish" is not divided into stanzas; it is written in continuous lines from start to finish. Although the poem is largely without form, it does slightly mimic the schematics of a sonnet. For instance, some traditional sonnets first present a situation, then pose a problem based on the situation, and next present a solution to that problem in the final couplet (pair of rhymed lines). All three criteria take place in the correct order in "The Fish." The speaker presents the situation in which a fish is caught, and then the unspoken problem of whether or not to release the fish is considered (largely through the speaker's observation of her catch). In the final couplet, the speaker decides to grant the fish its freedom. Notably, the poem's final couplet is the only place in the poem in which rhyme is employed. This rhyme emphasizes the poem's roots in the sonnet, as well as the importance and finality of the conclusion.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Modernism

Modernism is an artistic movement that began in the early twentieth century and was at its most popular during the 1920s and 1930s. Yet modernism remained a prominent movement well into the middle of the century. Modernism was not limited to literature, and the style prevailed in the visual arts of the period as well. The movement first began in Europe, later growing in popularity in the United States. Several cultural upheavals taking place around the turn of the twentieth century sparked the beginning of modernism. Up until this time, the belief that mankind is more important than the individual was largely accepted. The heavy casualties of World War I contributed to an immense paradigm shift in social thought, as poets and artists challenged the importance of politics and patriotism and exalted the idea of individual experience. Yet another factor that added to modernist thought was the question of how to remain human in a society built increasingly on technology. Other contributing factors included groundbreaking

Fishermen *(Image copyright Steve Bower, 2009. Used under license from Shutterstock.com)*

works of psychology by such leading figures as Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud. Existential philosophy further brought the idea of man as an individual being to the fore. Art, then, became less about creating beauty for all mankind and more about establishing individual and singular modes of expression. This in turn led to the abandonment of established forms in both poetry and the visual arts.

For instance, painters like Marc Chagall and Pablo Picasso were producing canvases that challenge traditional methods of visual expression. Authors such as William Faulkner and James Joyce stretched the limits of traditional narrative with the introduction of the stream-of-consciousness style of writing. Writers such as Gertrude Stein and E. E. Cummings rearranged established language structures, playing with syntax and grammar. Leading modernist poets included T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, and although Bishop was writing somewhat after the peak of modernism, her work is most often ascribed to this movement. It tackles nontraditional subjects (an ugly fish) in nontraditional forms (free verse).

Confessional Poetry

Bishop's work lies somewhere between modernism and confessional poetry, that is, poetry that includes intimate details about the poet's life. It forgoes traditional poetic form and topics, yet it falls just short of the deeply personal admissions characteristic of the confessional movement. Perhaps her lasting popularity stems from this very versatility. Nevertheless, the two major poetic influences in her life were the modernist poet Marianne Moore and the confessional poet Robert Lowell. Furthermore, the peak of the confessional movement took place during the 1960s, the decade in which Bishop was at her most prolific. The child of modernism, confessional poetry took individual forms and expression one step further, leading to additional experimentation with free verse as well as with the limits of deeply personal topics.

The movement first surfaced in the 1950s and, aside from deeply personal topics and free verse form, was characterized by introspection and an awareness of psychology. Confessional poetry was not necessarily about the act of confession but about the creation of a poetic self, the persona of

the poetic "I." Notably, while modernism began as a European movement that gained ground in the United States, confessional poetry is a uniquely American movement. Also, unlike modernism, it is an entirely literary movement with little resonance in the visual arts. Although confessional poetry is no longer a prevailing movement, its influence on contemporary poetry is as deeply felt as the influence of modernism. Leading confessional poets of the 1950s and 1960s include Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

Although "The Fish" was first published in the *Partisan Review* in 1940, it did not appear in book form until the 1946 release of Bishop's first poetry collection, *North and South*. The collection was an immense critical success, vaulting Bishop to the forefront of the American modernist movement. Indeed, based solely on the strength of this collection and her work in periodicals, Bishop held the equivalent post of United States poet laureate from 1949 to 1950. Furthermore, when *North and South* was released again in 1955 as a tandem edition titled *Poems: North & South— A Cold Spring*, the reissued volume garnered Bishop a Pulitzer Prize in 1956.

It is no surprise that Marianne Moore, Bishop's friend and mentor, applauded *North and South* upon its initial release. In a 1946 *Nation* review of the collection, Moore declares: "At last we have a prize book that has no creditable mannerisms. At last we have someone who knows, who is not didactic." Discussing "The Fish" in the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, Nathan A. Scott, Jr., notes that "perhaps the most notable instance in Bishop's poetry of [her] genius for empathy is the great poem in *North and South* that has been so frequently anthologized, 'The Fish.'" Further commenting on the triumph described in the poem, Scott remarks that "the greater victory surely belongs to the poet herself who . . . succeeds in quelling the sportswoman's aggressiveness to the point of being able to respond to that in this creature which asks to be saluted and admired."

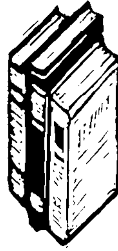
Notably, critical response to the "The Fish" varies most when the poem's last line is considered. In an ambivalent analysis of "The Fish" in the *New York Review of Books*, Michael Wood notes Bishop's "perfect poise." Yet, he also states: "Of course the fish must be let go, I don't quarrel with the sentiment. Such a victory would be ruined if it ended in possession. But the abrupt last line—deliberately unprepared for, deliberately prosaic, reinforced by a rhyme which seems to separate rather than to link the elements of the couplet—has the effect of a slap on the wrist." Despite this complaint, Wood comments: "To be sure, nothing could spoil this marvelous poem." Still, he repeated his complaint once more, finding that the poem's last line "is just too bumpy and monosyllabic . . . and I prefer to think Bishop intends the effect she gets." He adds: "It is the intention which seems rather cramped." Addressing this very intention in *Raritan*, Anne Ferry inadvertently counters Wood's objections to it. She observes that "the casual sentence fragment that ends 'The Fish' is plainly matter-of-fact, and matter-of-fact is precisely what [Bishop] claimed the poem to be."

In her lengthy review of "The Fish," Ferry largely discusses why and how the poem became Bishop's most anthologized work. She notes that "the sheer amount of space given to 'The Fish' in reviews was the clearest signal to anthologists that among the poems in *North & South*, this one, at least, should be given room in their collections." Nevertheless, Ferry adds: "When reviewers tried to place the poem in relation to others in the book, they sent anthologists a less intelligible message about what their choices would say to readers meeting Bishop's work probably for the first time in their collections." She explains that this was largely due to the fact that the poem "was measured against the poems around it, usually to their disadvantage, by the book's admirers as well as its detractors, even as they tried to argue that the preferred entry was somehow representative of her work." Like many artists who become notorious for only one work among many, Bishop likely resented the poem's immeasurable success. According to Ferry, "Because the poem was requested so often, Bishop eventually granted permission for it only to anthologists who would agree to print three of her other poems beside it; like other authors, she resisted being identified by a single poem."

CRITICISM

Leah Tieger

Tieger is a freelance writer and editor. In the following essay, she presents a near line-by-line explication of "The Fish."



WHAT DO I READ NEXT?

- *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952) by Ernest Hemingway is also a fisherman's tale. The novella similarly espouses respect and awe for nature through the visceral experience of it.
- Also considered a great American modernist poet, Marianne Moore exercised a great deal of artistic influence on Bishop and her work. Her *Complete Poems* (1994) provides a comprehensive overview of this major poet's oeuvre.
- Prominent confessional poet Robert Lowell was second only to Moore in his influence on Bishop. His *Collected Poems* (2007) presents a definitive example of confessional poetry.
- Peter Gay's *Modernism: The Lure of Heresy* (2007) is a nonfiction overview of the modernist movement. The volume includes discussion of both the visual arts and literature, as well as profiles of the artists who founded the movement.

The first line in Elizabeth Bishop's "The Fish" begins as a standard fisherman's tale, as in, "I hooked a fish and it was this big. . . . " Though this format exists largely in oral traditions, the fisherman's tale also appears throughout American literature. One notable example is Ernest Hemingway's 1952 novella, *The Old Man and the Sea*. Bonnie Costello, writing in the *Wallace Stevens Journal*, also comments that Bishop "invokes folk narrative" in "The Fish." She finds that this is particularly true of "the great American 'fish tale' sublimely parodied" in Herman Melville's classic 1851 novel, *Moby-Dick*. Costello states that "Bishop's anecdote, like Melville's tale, challenges the official narrative drawn from the Bible: that man will have dominion over the fish of the sea." Yet, the fish story tradition stretches beyond biblical times, including myths and folk tales across several cultures. Certainly, folk tales and myths about fishermen and their mystical catches are relatively common. One biblical story that turns the fisherman's tale on its head is that of Jonah and the whale. In that story, Jonah is swallowed by the whale and carried to a far off island. Thus, the fisherman becomes the fish, the hunter becomes prey, and vice versa. A not dissimilar transformation takes place in "The Fish." "Bishop's most frequently anthologized poem . . . relies upon a . . . spiritual exercise to justify a rowboat transformation from plunderer to benefactor," notes C. K. Doreski in *Elizabeth Bishop: The Restraints of Language*.

Certainly, by the fifth line of Bishop's poem, the fisherman's tale is transformed into a nontraditional format; the poem is no longer the expected story of the glorious hunt, of nature vanquished and subdued. This is indicated by both the fifth and sixth lines, in which the speaker remarks upon the fish's uncanny placidity. That the fish does not struggle is an immediate sign that this is no standard hunter's tale. Indeed, the fish's unusual lack of virility, its near refusal to fight for its life, is so uncanny that the speaker finds it to be a fact that bears repeating. Notably, it is in the fifth line that the speaker begins to refer to the fish as a male, assigning it a gender instead of referring to the fish as an "it." Thus, there are actually two indicators that the poem is veering away from the fisherman's tale. The first is the fish's calm acceptance of its fate; the second is the personality granted to the fish by the speaker's assignation of a gender.

From there, the speaker launches into a lengthy and detailed observation of the fish, filled with descriptive language and simile. The fish, in no uncertain terms, is ugly. It is covered with mites and other refuse from the sea. It is made to seem old and worn with age, infested so much by the sea that it is almost as if it becomes the sea personified. Yet, even as the speaker is barely able to contain her disgust at the fish's shredded skin, she finds beauty. The fish exudes age and decay, but the speaker compares his skin to rose-patterned wallpaper (albeit stained). She finds the fish's gills terrifying, and yet she nevertheless likens his internal organs to flowers and imagines his insides in vivid colors. Notably, although the speaker describes the fish as a male, she gives it some feminine attributes, as when she compares the fish's bladder to a flower, or perhaps later on when she discusses his large eyes. Certainly, the poem's themes pertain not only to the power of observation but also to the power of finding beauty in the ugly through that very observation. As Thierry Ramais points out in *Modern American Poetry*, "There is a strong sense that repulsion, combined with fear . . . of

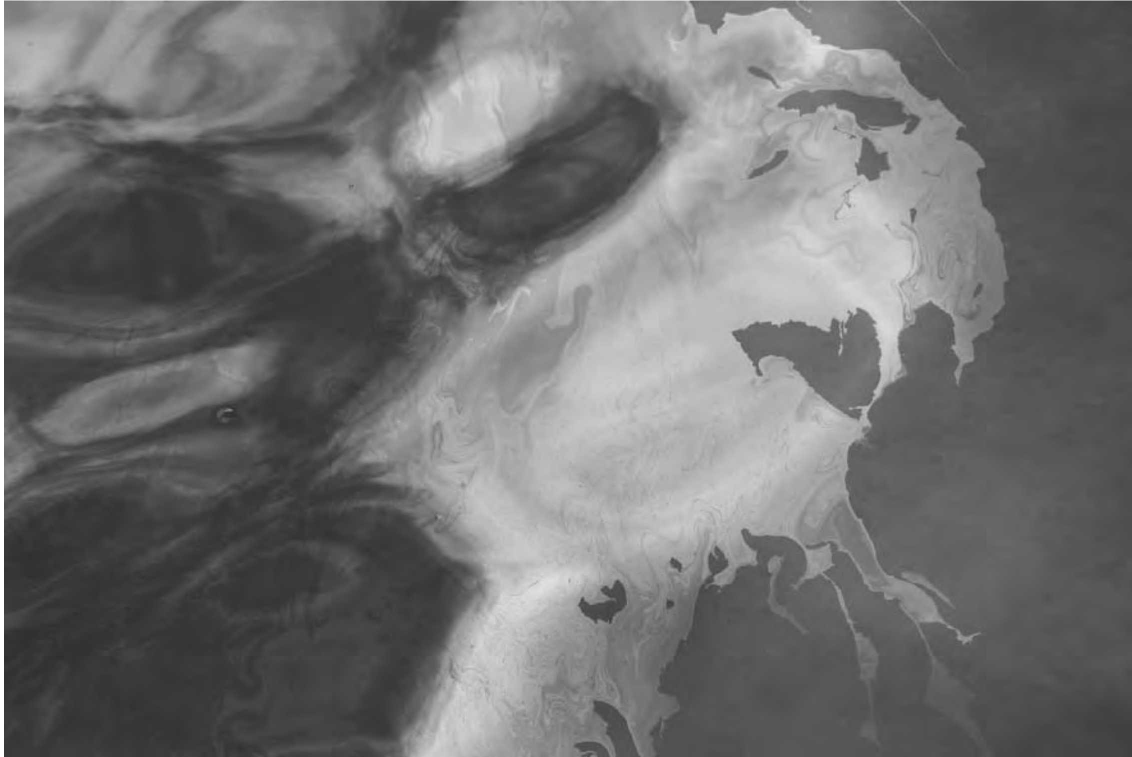
the animal . . . is a necessary step in the process of looking closely, of admitting the 'reality' of the fish, of describing it objectively, demystifying its tall-tale attributes and of eventually admiring it."

Following a thorough examination of the fish's less appealing aspects, the speaker explores the fish's eyes, larger and shallower than her own. His eyes appear as if they are backed by foil; they are shiny and yellow and appear to harbor no conscious intelligence. The eyes merely reflect the light, shifting toward it as if by instinct rather than will. The speaker observes that the fish's eyes are seen as if through a screen; looking at them is like looking at something through a cracked substance made of gelatin that is derived, ironically, from fish bladders. This statement is notable because the gelatin through which the speaker feels she is gazing is an obscuring and obfuscating substance. The indication is that no matter how hard and long the speaker stares, she will never be able to see clearly. This idea is also supported by the speaker's next observation, that pertaining to the multiple hooks and lines embedded in the fish's mouth. It certainly seems odd that the speaker would fail to notice so prominent and obvious a detail. Most observers would note this aspect first, but this is not the case with the poem's speaker.

It is fair to say, however, that the speaker has merely saved this observation for last in pursuit of establishing a narrative structure. This is largely because the poem presents a progression from fascination and disgust to respect and awe. The former is achieved through discussion of the fish's ragged skin and dull gaze, while the latter is achieved via the speaker's inspection of the hooks attached to the fish's lower lip. Here, the speaker employs metaphor, likening the hooks to badges of honor and symbols of a hard-earned wisdom. The lines trailing from the hooks are like a beard, further lending the fish a measure of wisdom and distinction. The speaker also wonders whether the fish's jaw might be in pain. While the pain could ostensibly stem from the burden the fish must undergo in carrying the piercing hooks in his mouth, it can also be ascribed as a metaphor for the pain of knowledge and experience. If ignorance is bliss, as the saying goes, then knowledge must certainly be pain.

Nevertheless, the knowledge that the speaker gains through her intense observation of the fish in fact brings on a sense of bliss and euphoria. The beauty the speaker finds in the fish's most disgusting features, the respect he has gained for his battle scars, all extend to the speaker's immediate surroundings. The oil-slicked puddle, the boat's cracked seats and rusted parts, are all encompassed in the speaker's near-euphoric experience of never-ending beauty. Everything the speaker's gaze takes in becomes rainbows like the one found in the oil-slicked puddle. Costello, this time writing in *Elizabeth Bishop: Questions of Mastery*, comments that "such an epiphany, set as [it] is in the highly ephemeral space of the rented boat with its rusted engine, must be of mortality. The grotesque is the style of mortality not because it makes us turn away in horror but because it challenges the rigid frames of thought and perception through which we attempt to master life." Discussing the rainbows that overtake the poem's end, Costello writes in her *Wallace Stevens Journal* article that "Bishop's rainbow at the end of 'The Fish' explicitly reminds us of the ancient rainbow that marked [the] covenant between God and Noah." In that biblical story, God sends a rainbow as a symbol of his promise to never again destroy the race of humanity.

Perhaps it is this referenced promise that inspires the speaker's decision to release the fish. It seems inevitable that given the speaker's journey she could not do anything but allow the fish its freedom. Still, though critics are able to agree that the poem's conclusion is inevitable, few find that the motivation behind the decision can be as easily ascertained. James McCorkle, writing in *The Still Performance: Writing, Self, and Interconnection in Five Postmodern American Poets*, finds that the fish is released because it has served its purpose as a receptacle for observation, language, and ideas. "The fish fills with language until it can hold no more. It is at this moment that the generation of language can go no farther. The fish must be discarded and replaced. The self has also reached its own limits of creation and definition." For Ramais, the fish's release is due to its transformation from that of "a mere trophy." The fish soon becomes "imbued with human qualities which the fisherwoman can identify with. As a result, the [speaker] feels she cannot do anything but let it go." Ramais concludes that "the poem obviously celebrates a moment in [a] person's life when his/her humanness goes as far as to recognize the humanity of nature itself, to consider nature not as 'object' but as equally 'subject.'" To this critic's mind, the speaker releases the fish because he has given her more than the food she imagines in his flesh. Her epiphany



Oil slick with rainbow colors *(Image copyright Bryan Busovicki, 2009. Used under license from Shutterstock.com)*

sustains her and in her gratefulness for that epiphany, she lets the fish continue on his way.

Source: Leah Tieger, Critical Essay on "The Fish," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2010.

William Logan

In the following excerpt, Logan discusses why Bishop has often been misunderstood by critics and identifies her "observing eye" as her true gift, as evidenced in poems like "The Fish."

The beauty of Elizabeth Bishop's poetry lies in the keenness of its reserve, and the duplicity such reserve demands from the integral operations of language. Surely no poet in this century, other than Auden, has written so many likable poems or suffered more from the consoling attentions of critics. Her readers cannot be blamed for having mistaken her: it is the condition of a poet of limited means to be mistaken, and usually in her virtues rather than her vices.

Her vices were of course often taken for virtues. Bishop was once pigeonholed as a poet of visual scale, of specious ornamentation and frivolous detail. She was a Florida coastline stocked with rare birds, tediously pretty, littered with beautiful shells: "with these the monotonous, endless, sagging coast-line / is delicately ornamented." Robert Lowell wrote that "When we read her, we enter the classical serenity of a new country," and certainly some poems appear to be merely structures of visual seduction whose passivity, like landscape, is violently serene.

Poetry is a system of communication in which the instinct of communication is often exceeded by the poetic means. The means at such a moment bear a burden in excess of their commitment, and in a poet like Bishop the innocence of those means may become part of the troubled drama of understanding, may agree to be the carrier of less innocent messages. Poetry is not a code, because it is more ambivalent than code—its most immaculate expression may not seem genuine unless betrayed by the archeology buried beneath it.

"Land lies in water," begins "The Map," the first poem in her first book, marking at the outset this devotion to appearances, even when appearances are deceiving. Every schoolboy knows that water lies on land (undersea mountains taller than

THE VIRTUE OF HER LANGUAGE, LIKE THE VIRTUE OF HER EMOTION, IS IN ITS PRIVACY AND RESERVATION; AND WHAT IT RESERVES IS NOT JUST THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF ITS CAUSES BUT THE RETRIEVAL OF ITS MOTIVES."

the Himalayas haunt many immature imaginations), but Bishop has a more primitive conception of the physical world. Her ideas often rely on pretending to have the untamed eye (if not the heart—her heart was always a civilized broken one) of the innocent.

A reader may accede to the faux naïve out of a delight in playacting, but it offers only a thin term of appreciation unless it returns to the wrongness of our common sense. There, all lands are islands—and islands float in the isolation of their waters. What interests me is not the cajoling quality of her rhetoric—her arrogation of the reader's judgment in her intimate "we" ("We can stroke these lovely bays"), the dry irony of her questions ("Are they assigned, or can the countries pick their colors?"), the fine hesitation of her perceiving instinct ("Shadows, or are they shallows . . . ")—but the purpose to which the rhetoric is put, here to blur the distinction between the map and the world it represents.

The map is not the world, but as rhetoric it becomes a world, just as our printed representations don't just refer to a world but are a world in themselves. In the orders of that world the guileless observation may be the most guilty of suggestion.

> The names of seashore towns run out to sea,
> the names of cities cross the neighboring mountains
> —the printer here experiencing the same excitement
> as when emotion too far exceeds its cause.

The labors of history have complication if no subtlety, but the complications of history have been resolved in the map, a visual equivalent to the blind work of civilization, where the names of ports are carried to sea on ships and the names of inland cities traded across mountains. Such commerce, of course, required the making of maps; but commerce was already ancient before someone looked down on the world like a god and drew a picture of it.

Emotion that exceeds its cause is usually labeled sentiment, but here the printer has experienced the excitement of the discoverer. It is easier to be a god than to act like a god, and the power of naming has encouraged the printer to write the names in water and impose them on scarps. That is a kind of civilization, too, and an example of the fate that countries suffer from the inattentions of history rather than the attentions of mapmakers. From above we see none of the hatreds that run over borders, none of the wars that have put borders in place. (From a plane we would see no borders at all.) That detachment allows the mapmakers to devote their art (and this is a poem intimate with the detachments of art) to choosing a palette for history's winners and losers. The colors of history are all bolder strokes, as the poem reminds us: "More delicate than the historians' are the map-makers' colors." The rhetorical understandings of the poem proceed by what they ignore: art has here imposed on history.

Many early readers of Bishop must have felt that their emotions too were outrunning the cause, a common reaction to minor poets or private favorites—Housman, Hardy, and Larkin have also excited the wary eagerness of readers unsure whether their fondness did not exceed their judgment. The properties of her poetry are slight and conditional, and the subtlety of her arguments is felt neither as a compelled candor nor as a compelling passion. As a poet of the tentative, she bears the frailties of a resistance not in the language so much as beneath it: the intimacies her poems trouble to create are sometimes desperate in their resolve, and even her unbearable prettiness—so tempting and so ingenuous—often cloaks the unpleasantly real. The virtue of her language, like the virtue of her emotion, is in its privacy and reservation; and what it reserves is not just the announcement of its causes but the retrieval of its motives.

Bishop therefore did not have—perhaps could not have had—any significant influence on the direction of American poetry in the postwar period; her sensibility was more precarious and less cautiously disposed than the demand of the period. She did not grapple with the religious or formal or personal responsibilities that tormented Robert Lowell, against whose poetry

hers sometimes acted as a subtle counterirritant—the softer inflections of his middle period were among the few signs that a poetry might be written to allay her influence. Their regard was mutual and their echoings of each other sometimes concordant; but everything Lowell touched turned to poetry, and it was impossible for Bishop not to measure herself against such fluent self-transformation—her disappointments and impediments never seemed of such artistic value.

Bishop was treated as a peculiar case, a deviant and unhelpful example like Marianne Moore, to whose poetry—similar in its observant miniatures—hers was often compared, at times to her disfavor. She had accepted Moore's friendship and patronage, which came bound with the misapprehensions of critics. Moore's early poems had considerable radical force, in their carapace of poetic manner (Moore's early poetry has still not been completely absorbed; but then later in life Moore apparently did not comprehend, or had little liking for, the uncomfortable burs of that poetry). Bishop was a poet uniformly more conventional, whose timidity and mordant self-deprecation never seemed virtuous to herself ("[O]ne has wasted one's talent through timidity," she once wrote in a letter). One might see in her sequence of prose poems, "Rainy Season; Sub-Tropics," the barely concealed triptych of a personality and its defeats: of all the tropical fauna, why else choose a poisonous toad that longs to be touched; a wandering crab ignorant of its terrible fragility and far from home; and a huge lumbering snail, asking for pity, which can never see its own gorgeous shell? Each has been crippled in its hope by the consequence of its limitations.

Bishop's major gift, what might be called the stimulus to the higher and less provisional reaches of her art, was a nakedness of the observing eye, of seeing the world as if the world had never been seen before—she seemed to come upon objects with a little delighted gasp ("Why couldn't we have . . . / . . . looked and looked our infant sight away"). Marianne Moore had a similar gift; but though Moore might claim an imaginative priority the gift was original in its effect on Bishop—the characteristic turns in her early drafts might have come after reading Moore's poems, but they are already part of a sensibility more warmly functioning, more intimate, and quite different in its occupations, if as yet more tentative (compared to Bishop, Moore is a finicky clipper of news articles, her gift more scientific, more primly precise, and therefore much cooler).

The course of Bishop's poetry is largely a history of the use of this gift, its development (and taming) and temptation. Poetry functions supremely well in the visual frequencies, since language trades not just in observation but in the metaphorical transformations that lie as deep as etymology or as shallow as simile. At its simplest but most gratifying level Bishop's gift was formed not just in the chromatic saturation of individual comparisons but in the variance of their emphases and strategies, and the passivity of their forced beauty:

> Here and there
> his brown skin hung in strips
> like ancient wallpaper,
> and its pattern of darker brown
> was like wallpaper:
> shapes like full-blown roses
> stained and lost through age.
> ("The Fish")

> White, crumbling ribs of marl protrude and glare
> and the boats are dry, the pilings dry as matches.
> Absorbing, rather than being absorbed,
> the water in the bight doesn't wet anything,
> the color of the gas flame turned as low as possible.
> ("The Bight")

> The world seldom changes,
> but the wet foot dangles
> until a bird arranges
> two notes at right angles.
> ("Sunday, 4 a.m.")

> Now flour is adulterated
> with cornmeal, the loaves of bread
> lie like yellow-fever victims
> laid out in a crowded ward.
> ("Going to the Bakery")

Other poets have had descriptive gifts as striking, but rarely has a poetry been organized to take better advantage of this gift in particular. The lyric arrangement of her poems often became subordinate to the presence of these images, which sometimes (in "The Bight,""Seascape," and "Florida," most obviously) entirely usurped the office of argument. In such poems one detail succeeds another but, within the margin of the subject, often has little to do with it. Such poems, not surprisingly, offer the critic a progressive freedom as well as a regressive constriction in his interpretation—the argument is not apparent at all or is apparent only in the interstices.

The danger of this gift (every literary gift harboring disadvantages to offset its advantage) lies precisely in its quarantine of beauty. The more the object is raised above the surface of the poem by the hard strike of description, the less available it is to the plainer functions of the poem—such images may seem, divorced of any design but to exact a prettiness from nature, nothing but preciousness disguised as imaginative resolve. Bishop herself worried about using "this accumulation of exotic or picturesque or charming detail," and thought that she might "turn into solid cuteness in my poetry if I don't watch out—or if I do watch out." . . .

Source: William Logan, "The Unbearable Lightness of Elizabeth Bishop," in *Southwest Review*, Vol. 79, No. 1, Winter 1994, pp. 120–38.

Nathan A. Scott, Jr.

In the following excerpt, Scott argues that Bishop portrays the world with both "unblinking clarity" and "affectionate responsiveness" in her poems, including "The Fish."

When [Elizabeth Bishop] accepted the Neustadt International Prize for Literature at the University of Oklahoma in the spring of 1976, she spoke about how all her life she had "lived and behaved very much like . . . [a] sandpiper—just running along the edges of different countries and continents, 'looking for something.'" Which is not unlike what her poetry is doing, what indeed it *has* to be doing, since there is no controlling myth to chart and guide its motions: it is forever turning to this and that and something else and saying (as does the final line in the great poem "The Monument"), "Watch it closely." . . . [Since] her poetry is unregulated by any metaphysic wherewith the things and creatures of earth might be ordered into a system of total meaning, it must be continually searching for significances, looking here and looking there till (in the final phrase of "Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance") it has "looked and looked our infant sight away." We dwell, as she sees it, in a world whose variousness is beyond all calculation, a world of continents and cities and mountains, of oceans and mangrove swamps, of buzzards and alligators and fireflies, of dews and frosts, of light and darkness, of stars and clouds, of birth and death, and of all the thousands of other things that make up the daily round of experience. And, amidst "the bewilderingly proliferating data of the universe," a poet of her stamp must take it for granted, as John Ashbery says, that "not until the senses have all but eroded themselves to nothing in the process of doing the work assigned to them can anything approaching a moment of understanding take place." The attention bestowed upon whatever comes one's way must be so pure, so absolute, so intransitive, as to allow us to hear (as she phrases it in her story "In the Village") "the elements speaking: earth, air, fire, water." And, in this way, even without myth or metaphysic, we may win through to knowledge, fundamental knowledge. . . .

NOW IT IS UNDOUBTEDLY HER DEEP FORMATION BY THE KIND OF MEDITATIVE DISCIPLINE UNDERLYING THIS POEM THAT ACCOUNTS FOR THE EXTRAORDINARY SYMPATHY WITH WHICH ELIZABETH BISHOP APPROACHED A WORLD WHICH, HOWEVER INTENTLY IT IS SCANNED, SEEMS NOT TO LOOK BACK AT US."

Indeed, the posthumously issued *Complete Poems* might well have been given the title that Bishop chose for her book of 1965, *Questions of Travel*, for, in its search for significant particulars, the poetry is constantly moving from Wellfleet, Massachusetts, to Paris, from Florida to Nova Scotia, from New York to Brazil, and on to still other scenes and regions. "There are in her poems," says David Kalstone, "no final visions—only the saving, continuing, precise pursuits of the travelling eye." Which may well be why, as one moves through her work from her first book *North & South* (1946) to *A Cold Spring* (1955), *Questions of Travel* (1965), *Geography III* (1976), and on to the last poems, one has no sense of any progress or growth, as one does in contemplating the whole career of Eliot or Auden or Lowell: poem after poem is recording utterly discrete perceptions, and though, taken poem by poem, her work is powerfully unified and cogent, the poems altogether seem to be an affair of "Everything only connected by 'and' and 'and'" ("Over 2,000 Illustrations . . . ").

So, for the reader tackling Elizabeth Bishop's poetry for the first time, it makes little difference where one begins, since, in whatever one turns to, one finds oneself in the hands of a poet who is saying, "But surely it would have been a

pity / not to have seen" this or "not to have pondered" that—as she does in the beautiful poem called "Questions of Travel." . . . [The] tone in which the closing question of the poem [" . . . should we have stayed at home, / wherever that may be?"] is asked clearly indicates that this poet wants it to be answered in the negative. For she takes a skeptical view of Pascal's injunction that we forswear the temptations of *divertissement* and remain quietly in our own chamber.

It is . . . with an unblinking clarity that Elizabeth Bishop views the world, and she has no recourse to any kind of sentimental pastoralism. Her way of rendering the natural order would have made it wholly appropriate for her to say, with the French writer Alain Robbe-Grillet, "Man looks at the world, and the world does not look back at him." Yet, hard as it is, for all its blazoned days, she bestows upon it and all its creatures an attention so passionate that very often the distinction between the self and the not-self seems nearly altogether to have been dissolved. . . .

Elizabeth Bishop did, to be sure, have a great admiration for George Herbert, but her own idioms would suggest that she was perhaps far more immediately influenced by Hopkins and Stevens and Marianne Moore than by the Metaphysicals in general. Certainly she was most insistent on her neutrality in regard to any form of religion. Yet, again and again, her own style of thought moves from a "composition of place" or object to reflection on its anagogical import and on to a "colloquy" either with herself or with her reader. The central masterpiece in *A Cold Spring*, "At the Fishhouses," presents a case in point. The setting of the poem is a town in Nova Scotia, in the district of the local fishhouses. And the "composition" of the scene, for all its apparent casualness, is wrought with the utmost care. . . .

Thus it is that, with a most deliberate and meticulous kind of literality, the scene is "composed" with such an exactness as will lock us up within the closet of that which is to be meditated. At a later point in the poem the speaker declares herself to be "a believer in total immersion," and this is what she wants for us: total immersion in the tableau presented by [the] old fisherman weaving his net on a bleak, cold evening down at the waterfront where everything seems to have been either iridized by the sun or plastered and rusted over by the erosive power of the sea. Indeed, it is not until we have been fully drawn into this scene that the poem allows it to quiver into life: the speaker offers the old man a cigarette, and they begin to "talk of the decline in the population / and of codfish and herring," as "he waits for a herring boat to come in." . . .

[Having] been made to contemplate the "cold dark deep and absolutely clear" waters of the sea, waters "bearable . . . to fish and to seals" but "to no mortal," the scene is at last fully composed, and thus the meditation begins, issuing finally into a colloquy with the reader who is directly addressed as "you" . . . .

By this point the lone fisherman and his shuttle and net have quite faded into the background, and the speaker has realized that what most urgently asks to be pondered is the sea itself, "dark, salt, clear," And the rippling sibilance with which it is described—"slightly, indifferently swinging above the stones, / icily free above the stones"—does, as it echoes the rising and falling of the waters, make for a very intense realization of the briny, inscrutable abysm beyond the land's edge. But the *result* of this meditation is the grave recognition that the sea is much like something in the affairs of human life with which we must reckon, and thus the poem is ready to eventuate in the final colloquy which the speaker addresses at once to herself and to her reader. "If you should dip your hand in, / your wrist would ache immediately, / your bones would begin to ache. . . . " "If you tasted it, it would first taste bitter, / then briny, then surely bum your tongue." And then, with what is for her an uncharacteristic explicitness, Bishop specifies the referent of which the sea is a symbol: "It is like what we imagine knowledge to be. . . . " Here it is that the poem at its end formulates the idea to which it would have the "whole soul" give heed, that a truly unillusioned awareness of our place and prospect is won only by facing into the cold, hard, bedrock realities of our mortal condition and that, however circumspect and sober it may be, even at its best it remains something "historical," something needing to be revised over and again, flowing and flown—like the sea. So to render Bishop's final lines is, of course, to betray them, but it is, one feels, to something like such a conclusion that she is brought on that cold evening in a Nova Scotia town, down by one of the fishhouses where an old man sits netting, as he waits for a herring boat to come in.

Now it is undoubtedly her deep formation by the kind of meditative discipline underlying this poem that accounts for the extraordinary

sympathy with which Elizabeth Bishop approached a world which, however intently it is scanned, seems not to look back at us. In this connection one will think of such poems as "The Weed" and "Quai d'Orléans" and "Rooster" in *North & South*, "The Riverman" and "Sandpiper" in *Questions of Travel*, and "The Moose" in *Geography III*. And certainly one will think of the beautiful prose poems, "Giant Toad" and "Strayed Crab" and "Giant Snail," that make up the sequence called "Rainy Season; Sub-Topics." . . . [In "Giant Snail"], like Wordsworth, [Bishop] is looking steadily at her subject, but—again, like Wordsworth—not from a merely analytical, matter-of-fact perspective: on the contrary, she is facing a wordless creature with so much of affectionate responsiveness that not only (in Coleridge's phrase) does "nature [become] thought and thought nature" but there occurs even an interchange of roles, the snail becoming a speaking *I* as the poet becomes a listening *thou*. And the result is a well-nigh preternatural commingling of love and awe before the sheer otherness of the things of earth.

Elizabeth Bishop's remarkable powers of sympathy are not, however, reserved merely for fish and snails, for birds and weeds, for rocks and mountains, for the insensible or subhuman things of earth: they also extend far into the realm of what Martin Buber called "the interhuman," and she presents many poignantly drawn and memorable personages. Her readers will tend perhaps most especially to recall the Brazilian portraits in *Questions of Travel* which focus not on people of importance but on the humble and the lowly, on those who perch ever so lightly on some narrow and incommodious ledge of the world. . . . [There] is "Manuelzinho," with its account of a young man—"half squatter, half tenant (no rent)"—who is supposed to supply the poet with vegetables but who is "the world's worst gardener since Cain." . . . Manuelzinho is shiftless and improvident and unreliable, but, with his "wistful face," this "helpless, foolish man" is irresistible: so Bishop says: "I love you all I can, / I think."

The poem, like so many of Elizabeth Bishop's finest statements, asks for no "explication": its plea is unmistakable, that, whatever the particular legalities may be, we give our sympathy to this poor devil who has never had any large chance at life or liberty or the pursuit of happiness and for whom the world has always been like a wilderness. And it is a similar triumph of moral imagination and fellow feeling that one encounters again and again in such poems as "Cootchie" and "Faustina, or Rock Roses" and the beautiful poem in *Geography III*, "In the Waiting Room."

The immaculate precision of her language has led many of the commentators on her work to speak of Elizabeth Bishop as a "poet's poet"—which is a bit of fanciness that, prompted by however much of appropriate admiration and respect, may be more than a little questionable. For the tag "poet's poet" tends to suggest an imagination sufficient unto itself, taking its own aseity for granted and, with a royal kind of disdain for the world, making poetry out of nothing more than the idea of poetry itself. But nothing could be further from the sort of métier to which Bishop kept an absolute commitment, for she was a poet without myth—even about the poetic vocation itself. And, as she makes us feel, when she in the act of composition crossed out a word and replaced it with another, she did so not for the sake merely of the particular mosaic of language being fashioned but because the stricken word did not adequately render this or that detail of something she had *observed*. Which is to say that her primary fidelity was to the Real and to Things. And though there are numerous poems—like "The Burglar of Babylon" and "Visits to St. Elizabeths" and "In the Waiting Room"—that find their space in the realm of "the interhuman," she was most principally a poet of the subject-object relationship.

So it is something like "Cape Breton"—one of the most perfect poems of our time—that presents her characteristic manner and method.

One commentator has suggested that "'Cape Breton' is a glimpse into a heart of darkness," and this indeed is what the poem seems to be peering into, the dark, uncommunicative, and unknowable noumenality at the heart of the world. The speaker is *looking* at this landscape as intently and as piercingly as she can—but it does not look back at her: whatever there is of meaning remains hidden, and on this quiet Sunday morning "the high 'bird islands'" and the weaving waters and "the valleys and gorges of the mainland" and the road clambering along the edge of the coast and the man carrying a baby "have little to say for themselves." All is enveloped in mist, and the scene is overborne by "an ancient chill."

Yet, recalcitrant though the world may be, Elizabeth Bishop could find nothing else to depend upon except what she could *see* and *observe;* and thus she seems never to have been inclined to reach what was at one point Stevens' exasperated

conclusion, that "reality is a cliché" which the poet had better try to do without; on the contrary, she represents a constantly unquerulous, and sometimes even exuberant, submissiveness to the hegemony of *l'actuelle*, always taking it for granted that (as Jacques Maritain says in his book *The Dream of Descartes*) "human intellection is living and fresh only when it is centered upon the vigilance of sense perception."

Unlike Stevens, it was not her habit to discuss her poetics in her poetry, but the endlessly absorbing and subtle poem called "The Map" conveys, for all its indirection, perhaps the best inkling to be found anywhere of how she viewed her special responsibility as a poet. She is looking at a printed map, and she notices how the land which is "shadowed green" appears to lie in water. But then she wonders if indeed the land may not "lean down to lift the sea from under, / drawing it unperturbed around itself." May it not be the case that the land is "tugging at the sea from under?" And, as she gazes at this map, she marvels at the transforming perspective that the map-maker's art casts upon the surfaces of the earth....

Now, of course, the unspoken premise of the poem is that the cartographer's craft is a mode of art. And his images, like those of any true artist, practice a very radical kind of metamorphosis upon the things of earth: they make the peninsulas of the land appear to be "flat and still"; they render the waters of the sea as calm and quiet, when actually they are rolled with agitation; they make it appear that Norway is a sort of hare running south; and—in, as it were, a spirit of frolic—they organize themselves into highly intricate patterns of figuration that belong to the order of the metonymic. Yet the cartographer's "profiles investigate" topographical actualities: he is not free to rearrange at will the contours of geography: he must be faithful to the given literalities of nature. And thus he supervises a very "delicate" art indeed—an art, as Bishop may be taken to be implying, not unlike that of poetry itself.

So it is *amor mundi*, never *contemptus mundi*, that one feels to be inscribed over her entire work. Though on occasion (as she suggests in "Wading at Wellfleet") she considers the sea to be "all a case of knives," she loves it nevertheless. Though the "huntress of the winter air" (in "The Colder the Air") consults "not time nor circumstance," she admires "her perfect aim." And, as she tells us ("The Imaginary Iceberg"), she'd "rather have the iceberg than the ship." Like the black boy Balthazár in "Twelfth Morning; or What You Will," she thinks "that the world's a pearl," and thus her poems want (as she says of the crude artifact being described in "The Monument") "to cherish something" and want to say "commemorate." Hers, as Robert Mazzocco says, is "the middle range, the middle style." "History as nightmare, man as a cipher"—these "*de rigueur* subjects ... [she] subverts." And thus she has never claimed the wide popularity that is more easily won by those writers who offer some kind of existentialist *frisson*. But her deep influence is easily to be traced in the work of such poets as Randall Jarrell and Robert Lowell and Richard Wilbur and John Ashbery and James Merrill. And in "The Map," "The Monument," "Roosters," "The Fish," "Cape Breton," "The Armadillo," and scores of other poems she appears as one of the most remarkable poets to have graced the American scene, no doubt not a major figure—not in the range of a Frost or a Stevens or a Carlos Williams—but one whose legacy will long be a bench mark against which false sentiment and specious eloquence will be severely judged.

Perhaps the most notable instance in Bishop's poetry of this genius for empathy is the great poem in *North & South* that has been so frequently anthologized, "The Fish." The poet has caught "a tremendous fish" and is looking at him, as she holds him, "battered and venerable / and homely," half out of water beside her boat. She watches his gills "breathing in the terrible oxygen," and she notices his eyes which shift a little, "but not / to return my stare." Then, as she admires "his sullen face" and "the mechanism of his jaw," she sees

> that from his lower lip
> —if you could call it a lip—
> grim, wet, and weaponlike,
> hung five old pieces of fish-line,
> or four and a wire leader
> with the swivel still attached,
> with all their five big hooks
> grown firmly in his mouth.
> A green line, frayed at the end
> where he broke it, two heavier lines,
> and a fine black thread
> still crimped from the strain and snap
> when it broke and he got away.

Like Hemingway's old Santiago, who, after he hooks his great marlin, yet pities him in his wounded, massive dignity and pain, this poet, too, is deeply moved by the pathos that belongs to this scarred survivor of man's predatoriness:

> I stared and stared
> and victory filled up
> the little rented boat,

from the pool of bilge
where oil had spread a rainbow
around the rusted engine
to the bailer rusted orange,
the sun-cracked thwarts,
the oarlocks on their strings,
the gunnels—until everything
was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!
And I let the fish go.

And the victory that fills up the little rented boat? To whom does it belong? It is a question by no means simple. It belongs in part, of course, to the fish who in the end manages to escape "the terrible oxygen" and to return to his watery home. But the greater victory surely belongs to the poet herself who, despite her first satisfaction in winning her prey, yet succeeds in quelling the sportswoman's aggressiveness to the point of being able to respond to that in this creature which asks to be saluted and admired. And thus, the fish being allowed (in Coleridge's phrase) "its moment of self-exposition," everything becomes "rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!"

Source: Nathan A. Scott, Jr., "Elizabeth Bishop: Poet without Myth," in *Virginia Quarterly Review*, Vol. 60, No. 2, Spring 1984, pp. 255–75.

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A collection of thirty years' worth of correspondence between two major American poets, this book is essential to any study of Bishop and her work. Notably, both Lowell and Bishop struggled with depression and alcoholism.

Underwood, Lamar, ed., *The Greatest Fishing Stories Ever Told: Twenty-Eight Unforgettable Fishing Tales*, Lyons Press, 2004.

This collection of fishing tales provides an interesting complement to Bishop's poem. The volume includes stories by Ellington White, Odell Shepard, and A. J. McLane, among several others.

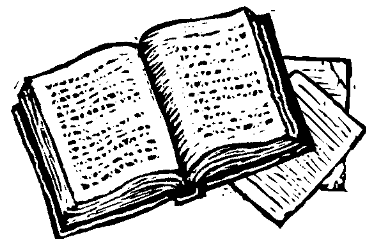
Fragment 2

SAPPHO

500s BCE

"Fragment 2" was composed by Sappho sometime in the sixth century BCE. Many of Sappho's poems focus on love and marriage, often taking the form of pleas to Aphrodite, the goddess of love. In "Fragment 2," Sappho asks the goddess to come and celebrate a joyous occasion with the poet, and presumably with her young female students. Sappho organized a group of her young female students into a *thiasos*, a cult that worshipped Aphrodite with songs and poetry. "Fragment 2" was most likely composed for performance within this cult. "Fragment 2" has no specific date of composition but, like all of Sappho's work, was composed in the sixth century BCE. After Sappho's death, her poems were preserved in a library in Alexandria, Egypt, in the early third century BCE, but eventually the texts disappeared, and only fragments now remain.

During her lifetime, Sappho never wrote down a single poem. Instead, she sang her compositions. She lived during an era that is defined as marked by the end of strictly oral tradition and transition to the written word. Her poetry was celebrated throughout the Greek world and often copied and passed around, but all of this occurred many years after her death. After her death was when the development of a more advanced Greek alphabet and writing materials allowed Sappho's admirers to finally preserve her compositions, which had been memorized, on papyrus. The result was at least nine volumes of poetry, most of which eventually disappeared from the written record and has been lost. The work that has survived did so in ways that seem quite serendipitous now. Some of her works were



Sappho (*Library of Congress*)

quoted by other authors and survived in the preserved texts of later writers. Others of Sappho's original papyrus texts survive only as papyrus fragments recovered from Egyptian rubbish heaps. Prior to the twentieth century, only a few lines from "Fragment 2" were known to exist. These few lines had been quoted by the early fourth-century philosopher Hermogenes in his treatise *Kinds of Style*. Additional lines from "Fragment 2" were found by Medea Norsa, an Italian papyrologist, who found a broken piece of terra-cotta pottery dating from the third century BCE with four stanzas from Sappho's poem inscribed on it. The poem found on this pottery shard was identified as "Fragment 2" through the lines from Hermogenes, which were also present on the shard. In the past, "Fragment 2" was initially titled "You Know the Place, Then," which was thought to be the first line of the poem; it is now thought that this line is, instead, the last line of another poem, the body of which is now lost, and that this previous title has nothing to do with the Sappho poem now most commonly known as "Fragment 2." A translation of "Fragment 2" is included in Margaret Reynolds's study of Sappho's poetry, *The Sappho Companion* (2001). Another translation is included in *Sappho: Poems and Fragments* (1992), by Josephine Balmer. That translation, titled simply "79," has been used for this entry.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

There are few known facts about the Greek poet Sappho, but there has been much speculation in efforts to provide a biography of her life. What is known is that Sappho was one of the great Greek lyrists and one of the few female poets of the ancient Greek world. Sappho was born between 630 BCE and 612 BCE, lived on the island of Lesbos (sometimes spelled Lesvos), and likely died sometime between 550 BCE and 580 BCE, but that is almost all that is known of her life. Much of what is thought to be known about Sappho has been taken from her poems, most of which exist only in fragments. In looking to the poem fragments for autobiographical information, what is read is little more than conjecture taken from a few shreds of papyrus. For instance, the fragments suggest that either Sappho committed suicide, jumping off a cliff after being rejected by a lover, or that she lived until a very old age and died in bed, her beauty passed into thousands of wrinkles. The first possible death is much more romantic than the second and so is repeated most often. In fact, there is no information about when or how Sappho died. Some additional autobiographical clues are taken from other texts of the early Greek period that are believed to be referring to Sappho, but some of these sources are generally considered unreliable. Aside from those scholars who would read her poems as autobiography, the other remaining source of information about Sappho's life is found in the tenth-century Byzantine encyclopedia called the *Suda*, whose entry on Sappho is filled with information that cannot be verified and much of which is thought to be speculation.

Traditionally, the limited biographical information suggests that Sappho was an aristocrat who married a prosperous merchant, with whom she had a daughter, Cleis. It is thought that Sappho made her primary residence on Lesbos but also traveled widely throughout Greece. Supposedly, Sappho was exiled from Greece on at least two occasions because of the political activities in her family. During her time of exile she lived in Sicily, although there is no information about her life there. Since it is thought that her husband was wealthy, Sappho is presumed to have had the opportunity to live a life devoted to studying the arts. The isle of Lesbos was a cultural center in the Greek world of the seventh century BCE and would have provided an ideal setting for such study. Although she is best known as a lyrical poet, Sappho is also credited with efforts to

educate young girls, although those are uncertain. She supposedly founded a school in Mytilene, where she taught music, poetry, and etiquette. Young women of this period were trained to fulfill their proper social positions, and Sappho's school, if it existed, would have provided an emphasis on poetry and music, considered the proper foundation for educating young women.

Although much of her personal biography may be conjecture, Sappho was very well known as a poet and was the object of many honors. For example, the residents of Syracuse were so thrilled by Sappho's visit that they erected a statue honoring her. During her lifetime, coins of Lesbos were minted with her image on one side. Plato reportedly considered Sappho a great poet, although that cannot be verified, and in the period after her death, her poems were often memorized and recited, and eventually copied and read, as she inspired the many poets who were familiar with her work. With the passage of time, however, Sappho's poetry disappeared from common usage. Papyrus was replaced by other materials, and her works were not rewritten on the new material. Eventually Sappho's poems disappeared from public circulation, as did the little information that was known about her life. Some of her poems reappeared during the late Renaissance, when a new appreciation of Greek literature led to an increased interest in the few preserved examples of her work. But most of what is known about Sappho and her compositions has resulted from increased interest by scholars after some fragments of Sappho's poems were discovered in an ancient Egyptian garbage site unearthed during the nineteenth century.

POEM TEXT

Leave Crete and come to me now, to that holy
temple,
where the loveliness of your apple grove
waits for you and your altars smoulder
with burning frankincense;

there, far away beyond the apple branches,
cold streams 5
murmur, roses shade every corner
and, when the leaves rustle, you are seized
by a strange drowsiness;

there, a meadow, a pasture for horses, blooms
with all
the flowers of Spring, while the breezes blow 10
so gently . . .

there . . . Cyprian goddess, take and pour
gracefully like wine into golden cups,
a nectar mingled with all the joy
of our festivities 15

POEM SUMMARY

Stanza 1

"Fragment 2" opens with a call to the goddess Aphrodite to leave Crete and come to the poet. Although the goddess is not mentioned by name in this first stanza, Sappho regarded Aphrodite as her personal muse and addressed many of her poems to the goddess. While Aphrodite was most often associated with Cyprus, she was also associated with Crete, and thus Sappho's summoning of a figure from that island is in keeping with the Sapphic tradition of praying to or directing a hymn to her goddess. The temple to which the goddess is summoned is not necessarily a formal building. Instead, it is likely an altar created in a garden. Despite the absence of a formal temple building, the location is probably a formal setting for worship of the goddess, with an altar where incense would be burning in anticipation of her arrival. In the last line of the first stanza, Sappho mentions that she is burning frankincense, which according to Greek myth was one way to summon Aphrodite. Thus, the first line of the poem, with the formal call to the goddess, and the fourth line of the stanza, with mention of burning frankincense, are both familiar calls to Aphrodite to come to the poet.

In this first stanza the poet also tempts Aphrodite by telling her of the apple grove that awaits her visit. Throughout the poem Sappho describes an Edenic garden, but this is not the biblical Garden of Eden. The Greeks worshipped many gods, each designated to represent a specific need in their lives. Aphrodite was the goddess of beauty and love. In the first stanza here, the poet calls to the goddess to come and entices her with promises of lovely apple trees, a whole grove of which are awaiting her arrival. Apples symbolize love and weddings in Greek myth, and thus Sappho's specific mention of the grove of apples suggests that she is inviting Aphrodite to participate in a celebration of a young woman's leaving Sappho's circle, perhaps from a possible school, and preparing for marriage.

Stanza 2

The second stanza continues with a description of the gardenlike setting that the poet has invited Aphrodite to visit. The description of the garden takes the reader beyond the apples to where roses await the goddess's arrival. The rose bushes are expressions of love and romance, since the rose is closely identified with Aphrodite as her personal symbol. There are two sounds to soothe the goddess's ear. One is the murmuring of water from a nearby stream, and the other is the quiet rustling of leaves as the breeze gently moves them. The smell of apple blossoms and roses is combined with the almost hypnotic sound of water murmuring and leaves moving. The smells and sounds create a place of sensuous drowsiness, such that a state of lethargy is induced. In this stanza, the visual is combined with the senses of smell and sound to create a sense of stuporous waiting, a world placed on hold while the goddess's arrival is awaited.

Stanza 3

The third stanza of "Fragment 2" continues to emphasize the gardenlike setting to which Aphrodite has been invited. Thus far, no human being is present in the poem. The only sounds and sights are those of idyllic nature. The meadow is filled with spring flowers; although none are mentioned by name, they are likely poppies, a spring-blooming wildflower that was sacred to Aphrodite. The meadow is also home to horses, which are also linked in Greek myth to Aphrodite. The quiet breeze completes the image of eternal spring that the poet creates in this third stanza. The sense is of time stopped, where the peacefulness of nature continues with no interruption by humankind, since thus far Sappho has not situated herself in the picture that she has created.

The image that the poet has created in the first three stanzas is that of an ideal garden, a world in which apple trees are abundant and where roses and wildflowers are copious. The air hangs heavy with the scents of wildflowers and apple blossoms. It is spring, and nature is awakening. The sounds of leaves moving gently in the breeze and water flowing combine to form the lulling aural aspect of the idyllic world in which perfect nature beckons. This is the natural beauty of Sappho's world, a luxurious sanctuary that awaits the arrival of Aphrodite.

Stanza 4

Finally, in the first line of stanza 4, the goddess whom Sappho first called in stanza 1 is identified. Aphrodite is associated with Cyprus, and so the goddess is confirmed as the object of Sappho's plea. Aphrodite is invited to pour wine into golden cups. This nectar of the gods will celebrate the young girl, who is soon to become a bride. This celebration linked to marriage festivities is one of joy and happiness. The flowers and wine are symbolic of Eros and of the transition that the young girl makes as she leaves adolescence and becomes a young wife. Although the garden is a private place, it is also the place where Sappho gathers her young female students, her *thiasos*, a Greek word that refers to a group of believers—in this case of a cult that worships Aphrodite with songs and poetry. This is Sappho's private community, whose celebration of impending marriage is ample cause for inviting Aphrodite.

THEMES

Cult of Aphrodite

The cult of Aphrodite was an important element in Sappho's poetry. The cult of Aphrodite was first established in Cyprus in about 1500 BCE, when a temple was built on a hilltop to honor her. Cyprus was so closely associated with Aphrodite that Sappho's reference to her as Cyprian in "Fragment 2" makes her identity quite certain. Aphrodite was the goddess of beauty, love, and fertility. Festivals to honor her in the spring were common, since spring was most closely associated with rebirth and fertility. Aphrodite was associated with procreation more closely than with romance, and hence her inclusion in Sappho's poem was probably as part of a festival to mark the forthcoming marriage of one of the girls at Sappho's school. The young women at Sappho's school, if indeed the community did incorporate schooling, formed a *thiasos*, a cult that worshipped Aphrodite with songs and poetry. In "Fragment 2," the poet entices the goddess to come by burning frankincense and by promising an earthly garden of delightful scents and great beauty. When Aphrodite appears in the last stanza, she is given the honor of pouring the nectar of the gods into golden cups. All of Sappho's descriptions reinforce the prominence and honor that Aphrodite merited in Greek culture.

Greek Aesthetic

The images that Sappho creates in "Fragment 2" form an example of the Greek aesthetic. For the

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY

- Artists are often inspired by poets to create some of the most beautiful art imaginable. Spend some time looking through art books in the library and select a picture or illustration that you feel best illustrates the images in Sappho's poem. Then, in a carefully worded essay, compare the art that you have selected to Sappho's poem, noting both the similarities and the differences between art and poetry.
- Select a poem by any twentieth-century female author and compare it to Sappho's "Fragment 2." In an essay, compare such elements as content, theme, tone, and word choice. In your evaluation of these two works, consider the modernity of Sappho's poem. Do you think it is modern in tone and content? How does it compare to the more obviously modern poetry of the twentieth-century author?
- Aphrodite was the subject of several of Sappho's poems. Aphrodite has also been the subject of much visual art, having inspired both paintings and sculpture. Research the story of Aphrodite and then locate illustrations of the goddess in sculpture or paintings. Prepare a poster presentation using your illustrations and what you have learned about this goddess and her role in art and literature.
- Homer also wrote poetry about Aphrodite. Read the "Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite" as well as Sappho's "Hymn to Aphrodite," also called "Ode to Aphrodite," and then write an essay comparing Homer's image of Aphrodite to the images that Sappho creates.
- "Fragment 2" celebrates an impending marriage. Research women's lives and marriage during Sappho's time and prepare an oral presentation about what you have learned. Your presentation should compare women's lives on Lesbos to what women might have experienced in Athens in the sixth century BCE.
- One of the best ways to learn about poetic form is to write poetry. Imagine yourself in Sappho's life on a quiet island. Using her work as a guide, write at least two poems that imitate her style, structure, and content. When you have completed your poems, write a brief evaluation of your work, comparing it to Sappho's. What have you learned about the difficulty or ease of writing lyrical poetry?

Greeks, aesthetics were about the merging of sense stimulations to create beauty. Beauty could be perceived via sight, sounds, and smells. Beauty was also considered pure, a notion that in turn evoked pleasure. The burning incense, the smells of apple blossoms and roses, the sounds of water murmuring in the stream and leaves gently rustling, the sight of spring flowers and a meadow for horses, all stimulate the senses and portray the beauty of the Greek aesthetic. Each of these things is only a brief image, an incomplete scene, made more so by Sappho's poem itself being a fragment. These fragments of images stimulate the imagination, which was considered an important element of the Greek aesthetic, and as a result, Sappho's readers are able to imagine the beauty of this idyllic garden. When the goddess pours wine into the golden cups, taste is added to complete the picture. The imagined garden is no longer a place of fragmented images; it has become a real place, where Aphrodite will come to be worshipped. Sappho's poem is a clear example of the Greek aesthetic at work.

Importance of Community

Sappho and the young women of her group, whether students, admirers, or friends, created a community in which women celebrated and worshipped together. In her "Fragment 2," Sappho describes an Eden-like garden, a place of perfection, in which the poet's community of women assembles for a celebration to honor the goddess Aphrodite. The garden is a private place where

Sir Lawrence Alma Tadema's Sappho and Alcaeus *(1881), depicting Sappho and another woman listening to a lyre performance by fellow poet Alcaeus* *(Hulton Archive / Getty Images)*

Sappho gathers her young female students, her *thiasos* of believers who worship Aphrodite. In Sappho's private community, then, women gather together in celebration of a strong woman. It is likely that "Fragment 2" was composed for this community of women as part of a festival or marriage celebration. Sappho would have sung the poem, perhaps joined by her female companions. The singing of "Fragment 2" would have united the women in their worship of Aphrodite, who, though a goddess, was still accessible for Sappho's community.

Worship of Gods and Goddesses

Sappho's poem represents a common Greek sentiment—the desire for gods to participate in the lives of humans. The Greeks of antiquity believed fervently in their gods' ability to offer assistance, with different gods assigned qualities and functions to fit particular aspects and needs of human life. Aphrodite was designated the goddess of love and the protector of marriage, as well as the goddess of sexuality and passion. She was very beautiful and quite promiscuous, as were many of the gods. Sappho, with her students and companions, created a cult devoted to the worship of Aphrodite. Songs and poems were written to honor the goddess, and pleas for her help were also common. In "Fragment 2," the poet opens and closes the poem with stanzas that invite Aphrodite to participate in their ceremonies. In the opening stanza, she is invited to come as an honored guest. In the final stanza, Aphrodite is invited to participate by pouring the celebratory nectar. The Greek worship of their gods included an understanding that the gods could leave their heavenly homes and come to earth to be a part of human existence.

STYLE

Garden Imagery

The image of an ideal garden filled with earthly delights is an important one in Sappho's poem. The relationships between images can suggest important meanings in a poem. With imagery, the poem uses language and specific words to create meaning. In "Fragment 2," it is the images of spring gardens that help to create mood and tone. Understanding patterns of imagery can help the reader to infer meaning in the poem. In lyric poetry, the connections between images become more important, since lyric poetry draws on emotion and the senses to create a narrative in which meaning must be discovered. In Sappho's poem, the garden

imagery creates an idealized setting for the worship of Aphrodite. The spring flowers also symbolize marriage and fertility, and so the connection to Sappho's school, and to a ritual celebration of the transition between girlhood and marriage, is also more clearly established through these images.

Kletic Hymn

Sappho's poem can be classified as a *kletic* hymn, or a calling hymn, which calls for the goddess to come from where she lives to where the poet lives. The kletic hymn names both the originating location of the god, in this case Crete, and the place where she is wanted, in Sappho's poem, the garden altar. The hymn is a genre that expresses emotion and is most often designed to be sung; Sappho's poem almost certainly was performed in this manner. Later hymns, such as those created during the Middle Ages when hymns became an important expression of religious fervent, were solely a genre of Christian religious expression. In Sappho's time the hymn was no less fervent. Greeks believed in their gods as fervently as Christians have believed in their god and church as an absolute power. Sappho's hymn, then, is analogous to a prayer. She requests that her god, Aphrodite, come to her. The celebration to which she invites Aphrodite might be compared to a religiously themed festival. A careful study of Sappho's "Fragment 2" acknowledges its place as a forefather to the later hymns of the Christian church.

Lyrical Poetry

Lyrical poems are those that are strongly associated with emotion, imagination, and a songlike resonance, especially as delivered by an individual speaker or singer. Lyrical poetry emerged during Greece's archaic age. These poems were shorter than the previous narrative poetry of Homer or the didactic poetry of Hesiod. Since lyric poetry is so very individual and emotional in its content, it is by nature also subjective. Lyrical poetry is the most common form of poetry, especially since its attributes are also present in many other forms of poetry. Sappho is often acknowledged as one of the earliest creators of lyrical poetry. Her lyrical poems were meant to be sung, as was the case with all lyrical poetry, and Sappho accompanied herself by playing the lyre. In fact, Sappho is credited with the invention of the twenty-one-string lyre. Lyrical poetry's focus on individual feeling represented a new genre in Greek literary output.

Sapphic Stanza

The Sapphic stanza is named after Sappho and consists of three lines of eleven syllables and a fourth line of five syllables. Because so many of Sappho's poems are incomplete fragments, it is difficult to apply the Sapphic meter to most of her works, including "Fragment 2," in which several words are missing and other words have been added or altered by modern translators. By the middle of the sixteenth century, many poets, including Sir Philip Sidney, were inspired to use the Sapphic stanza in their own poetry. Modern poets who have used the Sapphic pattern include Thomas Hardy, E. E. Cummings, and Ezra Pound.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Early Greek Development and Religious Life

Sappho lived in a time of change, just after the end of the period known as the Dark Ages and just as the golden age of Greek life was beginning. At the beginning of the sixth century BCE, Greek people were not called by that name; the Romans gave the people of the area the name "Greek." The name that the people of this area actually used translated into English as "Hellenes," hence the term *Hellenism*. In one sense, this period of Greek history had many similarities to the origins of the United States. The area that became Greece was filled with immigrants from other countries, just as in the early establishment of the United States. As the Dark Ages ended, a diverse group of people came together into one area, where they began to share the same language. All of these people would become known as Greek because they now lived together in the same location and because they shared similar religious beliefs.

The Greek colonization of this area had begun only two hundred years earlier, but by the time that Sappho was writing in the sixth century BCE, the unification of the Greek world was already well under way. One crucial aspect of this unification was the belief in myth as religion. Greek religious life was based upon a complex grouping of gods and goddesses, whose existence governed every aspect of Greek life. Local superstitions were also important, as were some beliefs that had been imported from other cultures, but the centerpiece of religious life was the worship of the Greek gods, who were remarkably

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **6th century BCE:** The archaic Greek world is still mostly an oral society, not a written one. Thus the principal means of communication, especially for the transmission of history, is oral stories, most often sung, as was the case with Homer, who sang his long narrative epics two hundred years earlier.

  Today: Modern communication in Greece takes many different forms, from newspapers and books to mobile phones and the Internet. While singing remains popular, its value as entertainment has changed since Sappho's period, when it was the traditional form of disseminating history to the people as well as providing entertainment as part of religious observance.

- **6th century BCE:** Some Greeks move away from traditional mythology and begin to explore cosmology, construing a belief system in which there are no divine beings, no Greek gods. These early Greeks begin to study the universe as a set of mathematical truths that can be discovered through careful observations. Some of these observations are tied to the movements of the planets and a desire to understand the universe in a way not explained by belief in mythical gods. This early study of the universe is sometimes described as metaphysical, which refers to the study of ideas that are not part of mankind's usual physical reality.

  Today: The study of the origin and evolution of the universe continues to fascinate mankind. In the world today, this study has moved away from the sort of metaphysical study of the ancient Greeks and instead focuses on strictly scientific explanations. The exploration of space becomes a central tenet of efforts to understand the universe.

- **6th century BCE:** Greek citizenship is available to free adult males but not to women, slaves, or foreigners. Freemen who do not own land are also not offered full citizenship. Greek democracies are run by landowning free males and so are not true democracies, since other groups are not represented in government.

  Today: Greek citizenship is open to both genders, while new immigrants must meet certain requirements in order to attain citizenship. If an immigrant can prove Greek ancestry, he or she can become a Greek citizen. Immigrants without Greek ancestry must live in Greece for ten years before they can apply for citizenship.

human in spite of their supernatural foundation. That is, these gods were usually men or women whose behaviors were governed by very humanlike passions. There were twelve Olympian gods, of which Aphrodite was one. There were many lesser gods as well, and many cities also had their own gods who served as their protectors. The Greek gods governed many aspects of daily life. For instance the goddess Persephone is associated with a myth that explains the divisions of growing seasons and the creation of winter, while Aphrodite governed love and marriage.

Many of these gods appeared in the poetry and drama of the period. In Sappho's "Fragment 2," the poet calls to Aphrodite to come to her and be an honored guest at her celebration. In addition to Sappho's use of Aphrodite, Homer used many of the Greek gods in his two major epic poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Although Homer's works had circulated orally for a long period of time, after they were written down in the late sixth century BCE, they became the authoritative accounts of early Greek life, recalling the greatness that had been Greece and offering the promise of a golden age to come. Homer's works also emphasized the role of the gods in Greek life and history, and thus they continued to reinforce the worship of these gods.

The Aphrodite of Melos *(*Venus de Milo*)* *(Image copyright Galina Barskaya, 2009. Used under license from Shutterstock.com)*

Greek Life on Lesbos

Sappho is thought to have been part of the aristocracy. Although exact information about her parentage is unknown, most scholars think that her parents were wealthy and that she was brought up as part of a privileged class. In the sixth century BCE, Greece was made up of many city-states, each of which operated as an individual community and not under a unified government. The island of Lesbos was more cosmopolitan than the city of Athens, which was still largely a farming community. Lesbos was an international trading center that shipped wine throughout the known world. The island was not a military center like Athens would become, since unlike Athens, Lesbos was not involved in near constant warfare to defend farmland. Lesbos was also further east than the rest of Greece and so had been less affected by the Dark Ages, which were brought about by the Dorian invasions five hundred years earlier.

By the sixth century BCE, Lesbos was far ahead of Athens in its emphasis on art and culture. The women on Lesbos also enjoyed more than the limited freedoms offered to other Greek women, especially the women of Athens. Women on Lesbos had more autonomy, spoke freely in public, and attended public gatherings. Their opinions were valued, and women could be educated and were encouraged to seek education. If Sappho actually ran a school for young girls, it would not have been the only school available for this purpose. Although the great age of drama and poetry would not emerge in Athens for another hundred years, in Lesbos literary culture was already encouraged. Young women were expected to engage in the writing of poetry and songs. They were also encouraged to play musical instruments, most notably the lyre, which Sappho played well and no doubt taught to her admirers. Young girls were sent by their families to these schools, where they lived about from the age of twelve until age fifteen, when they left to marry. The freedom that women enjoyed was not absolute. Political strife could still interfere with life, even in the more relaxed atmosphere of Lesbos. For instance, although her family was wealthy and influential, Sappho was exiled twice during her lifetime.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

There is a surprising amount of information about how Sappho's work was received in ancient Greece. This is surprising because she never wrote down any of her work. She performed her compositions to music, and so they were memorized and later sung. Sappho lived at the cusp between the ending of the oral tradition and the beginning of the written word. Shortly after her death, a more advanced and more easily used Greek alphabet was devised, and her poems were written down, gathered together, and collected into nine papyrus books. For the next three hundred years, Sappho's work was studied and copied, was passed around on papyrus, and continued to inspire other poets, who both quoted from her and imitated her work. By the third century BCE, Sappho was recognized as a great lyric poet. Then her work virtually disappeared. Sappho, herself, continued to be well known because she became an object of Greek comedy and satire, but her poems were no longer being read.

What happened to Sappho's work has become the source of several literary legends. Some stories blame the destruction of the great library at Alexandria for the loss of her work, while other stories blame the spread of Christianity and the church's disapproval of Sappho's celebration of female love. In her study *The Sappho Companion*, Margaret Reynolds discusses these possible legends but attributes the loss of Sappho's work to events more ordinary than deliberate large-scale destruction. Reynolds argues that Sappho was merely a victim of changing fashions. The language of Athens became the classical Greek, with which scholars are familiar, while the language of Sappho, the Aeolic dialect, was regarded as provincial and no longer the language of art. Another change that Reynolds notes was the change in writing materials. Papyrus was replaced by parchment codex, and many texts were rewritten on the new material. Reynolds suggests that perhaps "scribes and their employers thought Sappho an arcane taste, not worth the labour of retranscription." Within a short period of time, all of her nine books had disappeared. What remained were scraps of Sappho's poems that had been preserved within the works of other writers, who quoted from her songs and poems.

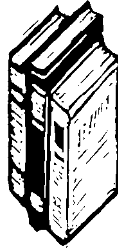
The availability of Sappho's compositions changed late in the nineteenth century when farmers in Egypt discovered shreds of papyrus in an area that was being plowed for new fields. The area being laid open had been a rubbish dump, and amongst the old pieces of papyrus were several fragments of poetry that were later identified as Sappho's work. Many of the fragments had been used to wrap mummies. To do this, the papyrus was torn from top to bottom in narrow bands. The effect was that sections of poems were missing—often the center part. As such, the nine books of poetry that had been written and compiled some twenty-five hundred years earlier had been reduced to only a few hundred lines of verse, most with gaps in the beginning, middle, or end of a line. After the discovery of Sappho's fragments, several translations of her work appeared, by writers who attempted to fill in the gaps with words that they thought fit the idea being expressed. It did not matter to these early translators that the archaic Greek that they were translating was exceedingly difficult to translate or that the word or words chosen might not be correct. The idea of leaving a blank space in a line was unacceptable. Feminine pronouns that expressed Sappho's love for other women were also changed to masculine, both to protect the sensibilities of the reader and also to sanitize Sappho's reputation. The tendency to rewrite Sappho has fallen into disfavor in recent years, and few readers of Sappho now read these early translations. A significant number of women literary scholars have become interested in Sappho's work, and several translations that reflect both the author's use of feminine pronouns and the gaps in verse have emerged and are being studied. Thus, unlike with most poets, Sappho's work has been preserved not through her own efforts but exclusively through the work of admirers and scholars.

CRITICISM

Sheri Metzger Karmiol

Karmiol has a doctorate in English Renaissance literature and teaches literature and drama at the University of New Mexico, where she is a lecturer in the University Honors Program. 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 Aphrodite in Sappho's poem "Fragment 2."

Any study of Sappho would not be complete without some discussion of the importance of Aphrodite in her poetry. The cult of Aphrodite was ever



WHAT DO I READ NEXT?

- *The Love Songs of Sappho* (1998) is what author Paul Roche labels a "restored" translation of Sappho's poems. The texts are accompanied by drawings that complement the poems.
- *Sappho*, a 1958 translation by Mary Barnard, is often quoted by scholars. Barnard made no attempt to replace lost words with words of her own choosing.
- *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho*, published in 2002 and with an introduction by the translator Anne Carson, contains Greek renditions of the poems with the English translations on the facing page. Carson makes no attempt to restore the missing lines or to rewrite the feminine into masculine form.
- *Classical Women Poets* (1996), translated by Josephine Balmer, is a collection of poetry by early Greek and Roman women poets. Balmer provides biographical information and a brief introduction for each of the poets included in this text.
- Peggy Ullman Bell's *Psappha: A Novel of Sappho* (2000) is an imaginary historical novel about Sappho's life, which, while it cannot purport to know what no scholar knows about the poet's life, still manages to capture interesting images of classical Greek life.
- Diane Rayor's collection of early Greek poetry titled *Sappho's Lyre: Archaic Lyric and Women Poets of Ancient Greece* (1991) contains the work of sixteen of Sappho's contemporaries, including both male and women poets such as Archilochos, Alkman, and Ibykos.
- H. D.'s *Notes on Thought and Vision and the Wise Sappho* (1982) is a meditation on the sources of imagination and the creative process. Sappho was an important influence on the poet H. D.'s early-twentieth-century poetry, which is the subject of this work.

IN SAPPHO'S 'FRAGMENT 2,' APHRODITE IS MORE THAN A POETIC MUSE; SHE REPRESENTS FRIENDSHIP, STRENGTH AND POWER FOR WOMEN, AND THE POET'S OWN ALTER EGO."

present in Sappho's world on Lesbos, where young women gathered to study poetry and songs and to worship Aphrodite. As a result, the goddess played an important role in the poet's compositions, where she was a religious and mythical force. Being the object of celebrations and festivals, the goddess was the central subject in many of Sappho's compositions, whether as muse, friend, or religious icon. Because so much of what we might know about Sappho's life is conjecture, it becomes even more important to discuss what is known. Consequently, understanding the full importance of Aphrodite in Sappho's world is essential to appreciating the complexities of her poetry. In Sappho's "Fragment 2," Aphrodite is more than a poetic muse; she represents friendship, strength and power for women, and the poet's own alter ego.

Sappho's world on Lesbos was an exciting society in which women engaged in ritual practices, celebrations, and songs. Aphrodite was a part of this world. Paul Friedrich creates a picture of the goddess as Sappho would have known her in his book *The Meaning of Aphrodite*. According to Friedrich, the goddess was deceitful, mocking, and fun loving. She was fond of children, sunlight, flowers, and beautiful things. She was, of course, also beautiful, as would be expected of a god associated with beauty. In fact it was often claimed that Aphrodite was the most beautiful of all the Greek gods. She was also associated with water, as well as roses, spring flowers, and apple trees—all of which are present in Sappho's "Fragment 2." The cult of Aphrodite offered women worshippers the opportunity to focus on a god who was the patroness of marital love. The cult of Aphrodite thus provided a mythic world rich with emotional connections, as is clear in considering Sappho's associations with the goddess. Although Aphrodite was the most floral and the most aquatic of all the gods, most importantly, she was also the most intimate with humans. As a result, her presence in

Sappho's poetry is that of a close friend and not just a goddess.

A significant portion of Sappho's compositions took the form of love songs, which accounts for the high number of surviving poems and poem fragments of hers that incorporate Aphrodite into the text. Sappho and her followers were part of a "woman's culture," suggests Friedrich, that was present on Lesbos and which reflected the high status of women living on the island. Although much about Sappho's life remains either unknown or uncertain, it is known that Sappho lived in an aristocratic world on Lesbos, in a privileged lifestyle. Although she was a participant in the cult of Aphrodite, Margaret Reynolds suggests in her study *The Sappho Companion* that Sappho was not likely a priestess. Instead, says Reynolds, Sappho was "perhaps a leader of young noble women, probably training in the arts and being groomed for an advantageous marriage." As was the case with Sappho's most famous poem, "Hymn to Aphrodite,""Fragment 2" would have been composed for Sappho's female audience and performed as part of a ceremony or festival, as a function of the cult of Aphrodite. Friedrich suggests that Sappho and Aphrodite shared a common concern about love. They were interacting in matters of love, whether the group surrounding Sappho was composed of students, friends, or simply women united in their common love of poetry and song and their worship of the cult of Aphrodite. Sappho and Aphrodite responded as one entity, suggests Friedrich, who claims that "Sappho's goddess is a projection of herself." Perhaps this is because Sappho saw herself in Aphrodite, or at least the self she hoped would live on after her death.

Indeed, for Sappho, Aphrodite appears to have presented a mirror image of the poet. According to Warren Castle, Aphrodite was "a kind of projection of Sappho's idealized self, the unconscious personification of the self-critical reflective faculty of her personality." In his essay "Observations on Sappho's *To Aphrodite*," Castle claims that Aphrodite is the part of Sappho that stands apart from the poet, observing and commenting upon her actions. Castle argues that for Sappho, "the love-goddess was a real deity, faithful friend, conventional symbol and, in a sense, Sappho herself." Aphrodite had temples devoted to her worship, altars and statues, and of course, many worshippers. She also had a mythology that expressed her powers as a goddess and her role in her admirers' lives. She is the woman Sappho believes herself to be—one who is beloved and who commands followers of her own. Sappho's belief in Aphrodite as a goddess who comes to earth to interact with her followers would have added to the poet's self-identification with the goddess. Sappho believed in Aphrodite, as Castle suggests, on a "religio-mythological level, but also as a personal deity who could and would appear on earth to her supplicant worshippers." By invoking Aphrodite's presence in the apple grove, Sappho makes the goddess real. She is no longer a mythical god but a real one, who has the power to come to earth and participate in a celebration with the poet and her followers. This belief in Aphrodite as friend and not just mythical god is one reason why her presence in Sappho's poems is ubiquitous. Castle's claim that "Aphrodite commands a prominent position in the works of Sappho" becomes almost an understatement. Although there are few poems remaining of her prodigious poetic output, what remains is rich in references to Aphrodite, which underscores the importance of the goddess in Sappho's life.

It is important to consider just how ideally suited Aphrodite was for Sappho's use as a poetic muse. Margaret Williamson claims that Aphrodite offered opportunities not provided by other Greek gods. In her study of Sappho's life and work, *Sappho's Immortal Daughters*, Williamson points out that Aphrodite is "the only Olympian goddess to step out of the polar roles of active male and passive female." Aphrodite is a strong woman, not oppressed by men or limited in what she can achieve. The goddess was not a passive woman, as so many Greek women were forced to become. Sappho's songs about Aphrodite in turn presented a model of a strong woman who was not passive or submissive to men. She made it more than acceptable to be an assertive woman; Aphrodite made women strong. She is a Greek goddess who speaks to women and women's experiences, which is why the cult of Aphrodite is such an important element in Sappho's poetry. Thus the poet, who calls for Aphrodite to come to the apple grove in the first line of "Fragment 2," is speaking for a group of women worshippers and not just for herself. Although the poem never explicitly mentions any single person present at the apple grove, the final stanza, with its mention of golden cups, implies several participants at these festivities.

Aphrodite is both goddess and human. She exists in both the idealized earthly world of

Sappho's setting and in the heavenly world of the Greek gods. The setting that Sappho describes in her poem—the garden with roses, the spring flowers, the apple trees, the peaceful meadow, the gentle breezes, the soft sounds of water moving—is representative of Aphrodite's cult. This is an ideal world, a garden in which there are abundant apple trees and where roses and wildflowers are copious. The air hangs heavy with the scents of wildflowers and apple blossoms; the leaves gently move in the breeze, and there is the sound of water flowing. In this idyllic world, smells and sounds of such perfection can induce drowsiness. This is the setting to which Sappho invites the goddess. When, in stanza 2, Aphrodite causes a drowsiness to come over her worshippers, this is no ordinary sleep but a manifestation of the goddess's power. In the last stanza, she joins in a celebration in her honor, pouring not just wine but a nectar provided by the gods into golden cups. Williamson calls this a "fleeting touch of the divine" and argues that the scene in the temple grove is too magical in its description to be a real "earthly sanctuary." The grove is "a kind of supernatural paradise" that is too flawless to be present in the natural world. This setting presents a timeless perfection in which descriptions of nature, as provided by the poet, create an unspoiled world, one suitable for a goddess.

The perfection of Sappho's apple grove, the beauty of the roses and spring flowers, the gentle murmurs of water and leaves moving in a breeze, and the scents of all of nature are combined to create an earthly temple to welcome Aphrodite. In his article about "Fragment 2" in *Phoenix*, Thomas McEvilley suggests that the feast, the ritual, and the earthly paradise of the grove all overlap. These overlapping images, when applied to the worship of Aphrodite, assume "some of the atmosphere of a mystery cult," which might suit Sappho's desire to lend a mythical or even magical quality to the festivities. As McEvilley observes, this imaginative atmosphere is a more festive way to celebrate the impending marriage of a young woman, rather than with a "conventional banquet." The stillness of the grove is a stillness of timelessness, of a sacred place. The drowsiness created is a magical sleep. The apple grove itself, writes McEvilley, serves as "a description of an inner condition, a readiness in the heart," rather than just an outer scene. For the young women worshippers, the magic of the grove signals their readiness for marriage and for the transformation that will take them from young girls to brides. For the reader, "the trance of paradise and the vision of beauty" is created through the description of the apple grove. McEvilley suggests that for Sappho, the poem is the promise of happiness fulfilled, even though it is only imagined. For readers of "Fragment 2," it is important to remember that the goddess, who pours the nectar of happiness into golden cups, is present eternally for Sappho and for the audience for whom the poet sings.

Sappho's fame was such, according to Williamson, that her works are immortal. Williamson reminds readers that Sappho was "the only woman among the nine great lyric poets of archaic Greece." This fame led to great compliments, including a reported compliment by Plato in which Sappho was called the tenth Muse. Williamson considers such extravagant compliments a double-edged sword, since such praise reflects "a difficulty in thinking of real women as poets." In being such a great poet, "Sappho has passed beyond the bounds of ordinary humanity." She has, in essence, become a god, not unlike the goddess who was so much a part of her poetry, as in "Fragment 2." In her poem, Sappho's vision of Aphrodite transports the poet and her audience into a magical world of Greek gods. The poet and the goddess had the power to enchant Sappho's audiences in Greece in the sixth century BCE. That power has not changed. The magical effect of the goddess Aphrodite can be as real for modern readers of Sappho's poetry as it would have been for her audience nearly three thousand years ago.

Source: Sheri Metzger Karmiol, Critical Essay on "Fragment 2," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2010.

Diane J. Rayor

In the following excerpt, Rayor discusses the challenges and choices involved in translating Sappho's poetic fragments, using "Fragment 2" as an example.

Since ancient poetry so often survives only in fragments, it would seem to present the translator with special problems not shared by those who translate complete texts. But although some of the problems are unique, the methods used to "solve" them are much the same. Yet focusing on the translation of fragments makes it easier to see the additions, subtractions, and changes that occur in all translations. The awkward loss of text exaggerates the ever-present temptation to "fix" a text rather than represent the poet's words—and the gaps between those words—accurately.

TRANSLATIONS WORK BEST WHEN THEY FULLY EXPLOIT THE CONNECTION AND ACTIVITY OF THE READER WITH THE TEXT. LETTING THE ABSENCES SHOW IN THE TRANSLATION LEAVES ROOM FOR THE READER TO DETERMINE MEANING AND MAKE CONNECTIONS.”

Incomplete texts illuminate the criteria, strategies, tactics, and alternatives available for any rendering.

Quotations and papyri provide our only sources of ancient Greek lyric poetry. The quotations generally are very brief excerpts of one or two lines isolated from their original context within longer poems; occasionally a whole poem is quoted. Egyptian papyri containing poetry turn up in various stages of disintegration or in pieces. Indeed, many recent finds of poetry are on strips of papyrus wrapping mummies. Thus poems found on papyrus often are missing the right or left side; sometimes entire lines or scattered words have been erased by time.

The poetry of Sappho (seventh century BCE) demonstrates both the possibilities of translation and the necessity for establishing consistent principles of translation. Of the nine books of her poetry (some five hundred poems) collected in the Hellenistic period, only one definitely complete poem remains. The rest are fragments. The combination of the distance in time, the physical state of the manuscripts, the lack of reliable biographical information, and the poet’s gender have led to the constant creation of new Sapphos by translators.

Fragments clarify strategies of reading and translating poetry because their absences expose our necessary interaction with the text. They also expose where the translator distorts the text by interacting too much, thus not allowing the readers a chance to experience the potential of the poem. Translations work best when they fully exploit the connection and activity of the reader with the text. Letting the absences show in the translation leaves room for the reader to determine meaning and make connections.

Fragments implicitly remind us of their physical inscription and call into question the illusion of self-contained, “whole” texts. The holes in the text are not left empty in the reading process. As we read, we fill in, “read between the lines.” While we do this in all reading, fragments tempt us to guess authorial intention, to imagine what the poet originally wrote that is now missing.

Reading a translation of Greek poetry should be as close to the experience of reading the Greek text as possible. Yet the reader can discover the possibilities of the Greek text only through the eyes of the translator. Optimally, the translation recreates as much of the potential meaning of the Greek as possible—opening up rather than narrowing the range of possible interpretations. It is a delicate business to provide enough information without over-determining the meaning of the poem.

To recreate the experience of reading Sappho, for instance, the translation needs to show the reader where the Greek text breaks off. Most available translations of Greek lyric give no indication of fragmentation, where one thought does not immediately follow the last. Translators generally opt for expanding or condensing the text by adding or subtracting phrases. Peter Newmark’s terms of over- and under-translation have special meaning for fragments.

Over-translation and under-translation erase evidence of physical gaps. “Completing” the poem by filling in gaps overly privileges the translator’s interpretation, and fragmentary lines left out through condensing often contain vital information. Both practices simplify the poetry and mislead the reader. While the translator’s interpretation of the text always informs the translation, she should resist the temptation to add or subtract text itself.

Over-translation was once common because the editors of Greek texts used to add the Greek they guessed the author originally had written. Some additions to fragmented texts certainly are acceptable, and it would be a disservice not to include them. The standard Greek editions include generally accepted supplements based on quotations in other ancient authors, probable readings of papyri, information from ancient marginalia, and the sense of the texts themselves. The translator accepts or rejects these supplements on an individual basis according to probability and necessity. It is not over-translation to accept a suggested word that is likely paleographically and needed for an intelligible reading.

On the other hand, early editions of the Greek, such as Edmonds' Sappho, contain large-scale reconstruction. Edmonds fills in whole passages missing in the extant texts of Sappho; he even composes entire poems from a few fragments. More recent editions of Sappho, by Lobel and Page and Voigt, provide texts free from these restorations. Translations based on poorer editions, therefore, are an additional stage removed from the Greek. Translations not based on the latest findings or the most accurate scholarship are mistranslations rather than over-translations.

The justification given for over-translation is that fragmentary poetry should be completed by the translator to provide the reader with the closest possible experience of the original. The problem, of course, is that the translator cannot know what the poet originally wrote, and that translators always interpret through their own biases. For example, in Sappho ["16"], lines 13–14 are missing:

> She had no
> memory of her child or dear parents,
> since she was led astray
> [by Aphrodite] . . .
> . . . lightly
> . . . reminding me now of Anaktoria
> being gone,
> I would rather see her lovely step
> and the radiant sparkle of her face
> than all the war-chariots in Lydia
> and soldiers battling in shining bronze.

Richmond Lattimore's translation adds this for the missing lines:

> Since young brides have hearts that can be persuaded
> easily, light things, palpitant to passion/as I am.

This addition completely transforms the tone and purpose of the poem. Sappho's poem argues that "whatever one loves" (line 4)—the paraphernalia of war or an individual person—appears most desirable, not that women are particularly excitable and irrational. The lines Lattimore adds to to fill the gap are symptomatic of changes throughout his translations of Sappho; earlier in ["16"] he changes the neuter "whatever one loves" to "she whom one loves best."

While over-translated poems second-guess the author, under-translated poems tend to leave out even more text than is available in their fragmentary form. Should the translator trim more off a poem already pruned by time?

. . . Translators need to be particularly aware of their biases or assumptions when translating women's poetry to avoid distorting the message, or closing off interpretive possibilities available in the source text. Over-translations, such as Lattimore's of Sappho ["16"], fill in the fragment gaps with inappropriate or trivializing phrases. While fragments lend themselves to that sort of misrepresentation, whole poems also are subject to distorted or censored renderings. Obvious examples include translations that switch pronouns or even the subject from female to male. Nineteenth-century translations of Sappho ["1"] changed from female to male the object of the (female) speaker's desire:

> For if she flees, soon she'll pursue,
> she doesn't accept gifts, but she'll give,
> if not now loving, soon she'll love
> even against her will.

Fragments that are excerpts from lost longer poems frequently lack a context for interpretation. In these short fragments, it is sometimes difficult to determine the gender from the Greek verb. For example, in ["15." 4] the Greek could be "he came" or "she came":

> . . . Kypris,
> may she find you very bitter
> and may Doricha not boast, saying
> how she came the second time
> to longed-for love.

Nothing in the poem suggests a masculine pronoun, since the only person mentioned is female. Yet the poem generally has been translated "he came," which shifts the focus of the poem to an unidentified man. This has been justified by an unreliable biographical tradition that associates Doricha with a prostitute with whom Sappho's brother fell in love. Even if we accept that the rest of the poem dealt with that story, nothing hinders Doricha from being portrayed as the active one . . . Whether words or context are missing, fragments illustrate the need to be sensitive to tone and potential meaning of the poetry translated.

Yet without "completing" the poem, how does one make a wounded poem live in the new language? Gaps in poems can be bridged by loosely linking sense or images, so that the poem reads well, without being deceptive. The translator's job is to make the absences work as part of the poetry without being distracting: to evoke connections, enticing the reader to bridge the gap.

Fragments can engage the reader's imagination by actually using the breaks. Poems of recollection or memory have inherent possibilities.... The need for and effect of devices used in translating all poetry are exaggerated by the fragmentation of the text.

Poems with more radical breaks, such as those with the right side missing as in ["95"] (above), are more difficult to work with. The translator can make the most of the extant text by indicating missing parts through line breaks and punctuation. Some translations can even imitate the physical texture of the papyrus by showing where the lines were torn. But recording very fragmentary pieces containing an interesting myth or image is sometimes more a matter of preserving it than creating viable poetry. One example is an eighteen-line fragment ["58"] missing the left-hand margin, which tells the myth of Tithonos in the context of the speaker's aging:

> ... rosy-armed Dawn
> ... taking (Tithonos) to the ends of earth.

A second example, a two—line poem, tells an alternative story to the traditional one in which Zeus, in the form of a swan, rapes Leda and fathers Helen. Sappho ["166"] perhaps suggests that there was no rape and that Leda found an egg containing Helen:

> They say that once Leda found
> an egg hidden in the hyacinth.

Small fragments like ["166"] have inspired modern poems; H.D. has a series of poems based on Sappho fragments. One can admire the pieces, as one does broken statues or shards of pottery.

To offset gaps or lack of context, the translator needs to employ many different strategies to make the poem work on as many levels as possible. Effective strategies include sound and tempo effects, and even grouping the poems thematically. Sounds with a similar effect, although not usually the same sound, as the source language develop the potential of whole poems and fragments. Translations of Sappho ["2"] and a poem by another seventh-century-BCE writer, Alkman, both work with sound, especially with repeated vowels, to echo the hypnotic effect of the Greek:

> Sappho ["2"]
> cold water ripples through apple
> branches, the whole place shadowed
> in roses, from the murmuring leaves
> deep sleep descends.

and

> Alkman [89]
> All asleep: mountain peaks and chasms,
> ridges and cutting streams,
> the reptile tribes that black earth feeds,
> mountain beasts and race of bees,
> monsters deep in the purple sea,
> and tribes of long-winged birds all sleep.

Sappho ["140"] emphasizes the ritualistic aspect of the festival in honor of Aphrodite's (i.e., Kytheria's) lover Adonis, through alliteration in Greek: two words begin with a "t" sound, two with an "ah," and the rest with a "k" sound. The translation echoes the effects:

> Delicate Adonis is dying, Kytheria—what should we do?
> Beat your breasts, daughters, and rend your dresses.

Since an attempt to reproduce the Greek meter would work clumsily in English, one can compensate for this by recreating the vivid and direct effects of the Greek sound.

Placing short poems together will also help recreate a context through association. Grouping Sappho's short fragments according to such themes as friendship, rivalry, or epithalamia (marriage songs) builds meaning by accumulation. It is an interpretive move, for instance, to place Sappho ["51"] "I don't know what I should do—I'm of two minds," with erotic poems or with poems about writing poetry ("do" can mean "set down" in writing.)

By paying particular attention to the words on each side of the gap, by word choice and use of sound, and by the grouping together of short excerpts, the translator can develop the available text, the remaining words, in ways conducive to the reader's activity. As in translating nonfragmentary poetry, the translator abides by certain criteria that remain flexible enough to solve the individual problems posed by every poem. Tactics shift for individual poems, but the underlying approach should be consistent. The translator tries to incorporate as many facets of the source poem as possible, compensating for what is lost either from the fragmentary source text or in the transmission from source to target language. Fragments can make us more aware of how we "complete" texts as readers and interpreters. Then we are more likely to find the balance between over- and under-translation, finding the elusive fine line that is "just right."

SAPPHO'S PLACE-NAMES REFER TO THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE IMAGINATION, NOT THE GEOGRAPHY IN WHICH THE BODY MOVES."

Source: Diane J. Rayor, "Translating Fragments," in *Translation Review*, No. 32–33, 1990, pp. 15–18.

Thomas McEvilley

In the following excerpt, McEvilley rejects attempts to connect "Fragment 2" to geographical or biographical fact and situates the grove in the realm of the symbolic.

GEOGRAPHY AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY

The central question in the interpretation of ode 2 is indeed the central question for all of the Sapphic fragments: Does she mean it? Or, we might ask, What kind of song is it? A cult song? A record of personal experience? A reverie? A conceit?

Those who see autobiography in Sappho's poems not unnaturally connect the mention of Crete in the first line with the exile in Sicily, of which the Parian Marble informs us: on her way to Sicily, Norsa says, she stopped off in Crete. And Hesychius testifies appropriately that Aphrodite was worshipped . . . at Knossos. The reading "from Crete," however, is, as Page says, the "best sense with the least change," and the Parian Marble speaks from the age in which all testimony about Sappho has been polluted by the attention of the comic poets. (Schubart, now followed by West, wanted to remove Crete from the line altogether, but it seems to be confirmed by a parallel in Gregory Nazianzus). In any case, the mention of Crete seems to strengthen the view, basic to most criticism or this poem, that it is a real grove in a real geographical location which Sappho is referring to. But in fact this would be most unusual for Sappho. As much as we would like to learn about her life from her poems, we must face the fact that she does not help us in this. She does not, for example, use place names to express either autobiographical or historical fact; rather, for mythological, or purely poetical purposes. They are few enough to survey, to make the point clear.

Cyprus is royal (fr. 65) and the home of Aphrodite (fr. 35). Sappho longs to see the flowery banks of *Acheron* (fr. 95), and she will find fame there after death (fr. 65), because she has invoked the *Pierian* muses (fr. 103). But a woman who had no share in the roses of *Pieria* will be forgotten when she goes to *Hades* (fr. 55). There is a road to great *Olympus* (fr. 27.12). *Panormos* and *Paphos*, like royal Cyprus, are homes of Aphrodite (fr. 35). Love's power sent Helen to *Troy* (fr. 16). Aphrodite is invoked from *Crete* (fr. 2) . . . In the world which these place-names suggest, a spiritual autobiography may lie, but no geographical one. In fr. 44 (where the frequencies of personal names and of ornamental epithets are at their highest too, consistent with the choral lyric style) we find *Asia, Ida, Ilion* (twice), *Plakia*, and *Thebe*—all "literary" references, of course. Closer to home, we find that *Lydia* is mentioned four times: Sappho would not trade Kleis for it (fr. 132); Anaktoria's walk is to be preferred to the chariots of Lydia (fr. 16); a gown of rare beauty is imported from there (fr. 39); a departed girl who assumes a sort of mythic status shines out among the Lydian wives (fr. 96). Similarly, *Sardis* is the source of an imported kerchief (fr. 98a), and perhaps is named in relation to the departed girl (fr. 96). It seems that Lydia and Sardis are mentioned not really as geographical locations where events took place, but as symbols of wealth and of a somewhat gauche monumentality to which Sappho opposes her subjective and internal value. . . . A *Lesbian* singer (who, judging from a remark of Aelius Dionysus [*ap*. Eust. *Il*.1.129; see Edmonds, *Lyra Graeca* 1. 28], was probably Terpander) towers over the singers of other lands (fr. 106). Altogether nineteen place names are mentioned a total of twenty-seven times and only two seem possibly to represent external facts about Sappho's life: a kerchief sent from *Phocaea* is praised as a lovely gift, and *Mytilene* is mentioned in a broken and unclear context, probably involving Lesbian politics (fr. 98b3). We have no autobiography here—rather, if anything, a veil is pulled before our eyes. Sappho's place-names refer to the geography of the imagination, not the geography in which the body moves. Crete is mentioned in fr. 2 because it is associated with the cult of Aphrodite, and that is as far as we can go with it.

Turyn, looking, I think correctly, to spiritual geography rather than physical for the location of this grove, suggests that it contains elements common to Orphico-Pythagorean descriptions of the afterlife. Most prominent is Pindar's dirge: . . .

In purple-rosed meadows is the space before their city
and shadowy with incense-fume and heavy with golden fruits,
and some with horses, some with gymnastics, some with games
and some with lyres enjoy themselves, and among them the flower of happiness blossoms whole;
a lovely scent lies over their land
and sacrifices of all kinds are mixed forever with fire far-shining, on the altars of the gods.

If the spirit is quite different, still many images are shared: roses, incense, shadows, horses; and several words occur in both passages. . . . The afterlife of Ps.-Plato *Axioch.* 371c is also to be compared, where pure springs in flowery meadows recall Sappho's . . . phrase which recurs again in an Orphic grave tablet! The Elysium of the *Aeneid*, too, contains an echo: *passimque soluti / per campum pascuntur equi* (6.652–653), and Turyn finds others in Lucian's paradise in the *Vera Historia*, the *Apocalypse of Peter*, and later patristic literature. "Sappho herself was inspired by the old Orphic eschatologic poetry," he concludes, and ". . . simply transferred the picture of paradisiacal landscape, known from Orphic poetry, from the paradise to the holy precinct of Aphrodite."

In criticism of Turyn's view let us compare the following passage of Xenophanes: . . .

The crater stands full of good cheer.
and other wine is ready, which swears it will never betray,
sweet and smelling of flowers in the cups;
and among them the frankincense gives off its holy scent,
and there is cold water both sweet and pure. . . .
In the midst of it all the altar is piled with flowers;
round about, song and good cheer hold the halls.

And from Theognis: . . .

Boy, you are like a horse when, having had enough
of running loose you come back to our stables,
desiring your rider and good pasture, your fountain
fair and cold, and shadowy groves.

The first passage shares with Sappho's poem the readiness of everything, the frankincense, the cold water, the cups, the flowers, the altar piled high—but it is an introduction to a feast, not a scene of paradise. Has Xenophanes used attributes of paradise to glorify his feast? Or is the Greek paradise based on a banquet? Is Sappho alluding to paradise, introducing a feast, or both, or neither? Is Theognis, in welcoming his catamite back, consciously using phrases suggestive of a return to paradise? . . . As so often in early Greek poetry (and in particular in Sappho) we find that ritual, paradisial, and festal imageries overlap. It might be more reasonable to assume that the Orphic authors, when framing their descriptions of paradise, merely dipped into the common fund of imagery for their own purposes, as Sappho, Theognis, and Xenophanes did for theirs.

A brief look at Horace, *Carm.* 3. 18 is suggestive in this context. . . . *Vetus ara multo / fumat odore* is a fairly close parallel to lines 3/4 of the Sapphic poem, and in the same position in the strophe. Further, the last three of the four strophes are arranged in tri-cola, as are the first three of Sappho's poem. (The cola are not enjambed, but this is typical of the difference between Horace's sapphics and Sappho's own.) The most striking similarity, perhaps, is the paradisial description in strophes three and four, for which Horatian scholars can find no reason. T. E. Page says, commenting *ad loc.*, "The introduction of the miraculous element here into the account of the village festivities seems to us inharmonious." But if Horace was, indeed, imitating the Sapphic passage, then he may have seen clearly what is only dimly suggested to us, namely the conventional paradisial features of her grove.

Finally, although the presence in fr. 2 of elements of an Orphic tradition about paradise is perhaps no more than a strong possibility (not, I would think, a strong *probability*), let us consider what it means if it is in fact so. Probably Sappho is not describing an actual afterlife (elsewhere she uses more conventional pictures of Acheron and Hades). To lend, however, to the worship of Aphrodite some of the atmosphere of a mystery cult might well suit her purpose. Surely the altar, golden cups, nectar, are more suggestive of a *sacrament* than of a conventional banquet. Is it a waking dream in which Sappho imagines Aphrodite pouring out for her alone . . . the nectar of joy, in an atmosphere suggestive of an initiation? Of the mysteries of Aphrodite . . . ?

THE POEM

We may approach the mood of Sappho's grove by comparing the only other long description of nature in early Greek lyric, Alcman's fr. 89. . . . This, it seems, is a night world, a world that is still and silent, but not empty. Beneath the silence a current of potential energy runs. It is full of images of beasts and comes alive from the contrast between their teeming activity at day and their sleep at night. But the emptiness of Sappho's grove is immensely deeper; it has a sense of unchanging trance-like stasis. The stillness here is neither the stillness of night nor of day but of timelessness—of the sacred. Nor is mere sleep the psychological condition for such stillness: it is a coma, or magic sleep, that drips from the tree limbs. It is a magical scene, like the house in the woods that is stumbled upon in fairy tales, where everything stands in readiness, but no one is home. It is surely as much (probably more) a description of an inner condition, a readiness in the heart, than of an outer scene.

The grove, like the house in fairy tales, stands ready for a feast—but a feast of some awesome and unseen power whose impending presence hangs over all. There are no celebrants, yet the sacred objects stand in order in the ritual place. There is no one who has lit the incense or tends it, yet it lies smoking on the altar. No voices sing the hymn, but the water of refreshment sings through the apple branches. There is no one either sleeping or waking, but from the flowers, leaves, and trees, a magic sleep descends. There is no one to drink the sacred drink, but golden cups stand ready on the smoking altar. There is only the invisible presence of an observer, who waits, slowly, methodically, with an almost obsessive sensitivity to detail, noting the rich features of the landscape.

If the poem is complete in four stanzas then it is clearly a symbolic picture, describing a spiritual condition. Sappho herself (or the observer, whoever it is) is defined by the invocation, by her desire to have Aphrodite come and grant the nectar of joy (the drink of gods—as in the Orphic communion the initiate becomes one with the god); Aphrodite, by her ability to do so and by her tendency to withhold herself, as her name is withheld until the end. The description of the grove unfolds under the increasing tension of the missing name, which the reader, or auditor, familiar with the conventions of Greek prayer, will listen for from the start. Finally the emptiness of the grove is filled and the lack of the name supplied simultaneously by the mention of the goddess. The second invocation is elaborated till it has the force of an apparition seen in intense detail; the prayer seems to be answered even as it is spoken. The goddess appears in the heart of the faithful devotee, pouring into ghostly cups immortal wine. At the same time the halting, enjambed rhythm of the poem is purified and, like a flower blossoming, the verse runs smoothly to its end. The poem itself becomes a visual pun, with Sappho (or the observer) at the beginning gazing across the intervening grove at Aphrodite, at the end.

Now if we ask again, where is this grove, we can see the immense suggestiveness of the poem and the naïveté of the question. The grove is a symbol and as such has not one identity only, but many. It lies not only (if, in fact, at all) in the external world, but in the imagination of the poet. Further, it *is* the imagination of the poet, the grove of transformations in which visions are seen and the breaches in reality are healed. It lies locked in the verses of the poem; but further, it *is* poetry itself, that primal affirmative act rising from the love of beauty. For Sappho the poem, as much as (or possibly rather than) the sex act, has become the primary rite of Aphrodite. Fragment 2, in fact, as it creates in the heart of the reader the trance of paradise and the vision of beauty, *is* the grove which it describes.

The poem presents a general picture of life through which, as through a lens, much of the rest of Sappho's poetry (probably all of the "normal" poems) should be seen. Finally it is the heart and what it longs for . . . that are signified under the images of invoker and invoked. The grove is the general image of a relationship of desire and withholding, of emptiness and fullness, of art and life, that is acted out in various specific forms in the other poems. The inner rite which the lone suppliant plays in this still place is the central rite of life itself—the rite of the vision that alleviates as in a magic sleep the tension between dream and reality. Somehow, the promise of happiness seems to have been fulfilled, but really it has only been imagined. Sappho gazes across the grove, at the goddess who gives joy in golden cups, eternally.

Source: Thomas McEvilley, Review of "Fragment 2," in *Phoenix*, Vol. 26, No. 4, Winter 1972, pp. 323–33.

Frederic Will

In the following excerpt, Will presents examples of approaching and parting in Sappho's fragments, including "Fragment 2."

THE IMPRESSION IS TANGIBLY CREATED THAT THE POET IS INVITING REAL PRESENCE TO NEAR HER."

The lyric can be viewed as an effort to 'objectify' or 'project' inner life. But such 'projection' is possible only in terms of the rules of language, and of one's introspective relation to himself. The question of rules of language, of linguistic limitations upon pure self-expression, is no less important than that of metaphysical (or 'psychological') limitations: ultimately the two questions are closely related. The rules of language, including not only the laws of grammar, but that body of tropes and verbal habits which constitute literary tradition, are deeply involved with the laws or limitations of the inner life: the inner life itself developing and ripening only in terms of language. That which must be projected is already unconsciously verbalized. Has the lyric poet, then, any inner life, in some degree independent of language, which he can project? How closely do language and subjectivity, in this case, come down to the same thing?

I content myself, in answer to this question, with the notion that there are certain dramatic tendencies in the poet which seek expression in the words of his lyric. One form those tendencies adopt is that of motion toward, away from, and of different kinds. There is a kind of inner *kinesis* in the psyche. The importance, in fact the *raison d'être*, of this *kinesis* is its power to dramatize certain attitudes, or constellations of feelings. Thus the inner drama of motion 'upward' will often be associated with the notion (or attitude) of spiritual ascension, and that of motion 'downward' with the notion of spiritual descent, corruption. It is obvious that the association between such felt inner patterns of movement, and actual spiritual conditions—the psychologically 'objective'—is imaginary. Such association has no grounding in 'physical' reality. Motion upward has nothing *real* to do with spirituality. Yet the kind of association involved here is a fact of the utmost importance in the operation both of ordinary and of 'literary' language. I turn my attention to the way Sappho manipulates, in her verse, a pair of these kinetic forces.

Motion 'toward' or 'away from' the presenter of the poem is constantly important in the fragmentary remains of Sappho's verse. This pattern is closely related to her erotic temperament. A single famous example of *stasis*, arrested motion, will introduce the point. Fr. 31.1–4 (Lobel-Page) goes this way:

> Beyond all heavenly fortune seems to me.
> the man who sits facing you and listens
> intimately to your sweet speech. . . .

The nearness of 'the man' . . . to Sappho's beloved is doubly emphasized by the use of both 'facing' . . . and 'near' . . . to describe his location. The emphasis fits the poet's double intention: to express jealousy of the 'nearness' of 'that man' to the beloved; and to contrast 'the man's' presumed ability to endure such radiant presence with Sappho's debility in that presence. 'The man's' 'location,' under the circumstances, is significant.

The amatory mood sustained by such treatment of 'location' is often associated, by Sappho, with motion toward the presenter of the poem. Frequently such motion is given the form of a 'conventional' supplication of divinity, usually of Aphrodite. (*Supposed* conventionality, that is: after all, the tradition was to call upon divinity of the Muse, as Homer did, to *speak*, not to approach.) Thus Sappho says, addressing Aphrodite (1.5–9):

> But come to me, if ever in the past, at other
> times,
> You hearkened to my songs,
> And harnessed the golden chariot, and left
> Your father's house and came to me.

Sappho really wants the goddess to come, as the goddess has done before. Lines 9–13 of the same fragment are devoted to fanciful, but in the poetic context 'real,' former descents of Aphrodite to Sappho. The impression is tangibly created that the poet is inviting real presence to near her. This sense is reinforced by a return to the invitation at the end of the poem. Sappho says (25–6): "So come to me now, release me from grievous care," and, at the last (28), "and be my ally." Goddess, stand by my side.

In another poem Sappho makes such an invitation, also to Aphrodite, even more tangible. This is no longer a verbal world in which the poet simply wants 'inspiration' from the Muse. The actual, always in terms of the literary illusion, the presence of Aphrodite, is invited with a

variety of sensuous details which makes the mood of approach and nearness unmistakable (2.1–4, my translation):

Hither to me from Crete
To this holy temple
Where you will find your lovely grove of apples,
And your altars perfumed with frankincense.

. . . At the end of the poem it appears that Aphrodite is wanted mainly to perfect some mood of festivity, where nectar is being drunk. But it is almost as though the goddess would *be* the perfection of that mood. Surely she will be no Ganymede, trotting dutifully from cup to cup.

Finally, a more 'objectified' example of verbal approach, the description of the wedding of Hector and Andromache (Fr. 44). Here the poet is not calling the wedding assembly *toward* her; she describes the movement of the newly married pair toward Troy, and their joyous reception in the city. Although the extant poem is badly mutilated, it is still suffused with a strong sense of 'arrival.' While projecting the situation into unlocalized objectivity, Sappho has miraculously taken the place, in feeling, of a Trojan woman welcoming home her leader and his bride. As she describes the sound of cymbals, the holy songs sung, the smell of incense in the streets, there is a sense of being there, of witnessing the 'coming.' There is awareness of the place *toward which* motion is taking place, though much less of the motion itself.

Motion 'away from' a set point is a less important dramatic theme in Sappho's verse. In Fr. 1 a brief passage of great technical refinement shows both motion 'toward' and motion 'away from.' Aphrodite is imagined having asked Sappho, formerly, how she can help her win over a recalcitrant lover. Aphrodite asks (18–24):

And whom must I now bend to your love—
Who is it, Sappho, who has wronged you?
For even if she flees you,
quickly will she pursue you,
And if she now refuses gifts,
tomorrow she will give them;
Yes, and if she loves you not to-day
soon will she love you, despite herself.

Departure from, and motion toward, an established point—the poet herself—are both dramatized. The interaction of the two activities is made especially tight through the embodiment, in a single person, Sappho's beloved, of both forms of motion. Now she is fleeing, tomorrow she will pursue.

Two of the major fragments of Sappho clearly emphasize the notion of parting, and with it, though not explicitly described, a sense of 'motion away' from the poet. Fr. 96 is addressed to Atthis, to console her for the loss of a girl who has gone to Lydia:

. . . how especially she loved your singing.
And now among the Lydian women she
shines. . . .

Most of the remaining poem involves a simile, comparing the absent girl to the moon, which is first among the stars, and shines placidly on the stilled world. All emphasizes the beautiful *distance* of the absent girl. Only in the lines quoted is her departure felt; the rest of the poem makes the loss tangible.

Fr. 94 presents a dialogue between Sappho and a friend who has left her. The dialogue is introduced by: "she wept bitterly when she left me and said to me. . . . " Most of the remaining poem, then, consists of Sappho's attempt to console her friend—as she has done for Atthis, in Fr. 96—for the parting. The consolation is a list of pleasures the lovers formerly shared. Yet, as is clear in the first line, "I wish in truth that I were dead," Sappho is not herself consoled. As Denys Page says of this line:

. . . that was not said at the time of parting;
it is what she says *now*, when she recalls the
scene of parting and all that it means to her.
At the same time, she played the part of the
stronger spirit, the comforter, in the presence
of her distraught companion: today she avows
a grief as great as her companion's, or greater.

The time difference between the introduction to the poem, and the events recorded in its dialogue, is telling. It dramatizes, as clearly as the dialogue, the mood of departure which is the whole theme of the poem. . . .

Source: Frederic Will, "Sappho and Poetic Motion," in *Classical Journal*, Vol. 61, No. 6, March 1966, pp. 259–62.

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Greek and Roman men thought of the role that women played in men's lives.

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This book is a compact, easy-to-understand social and cultural history that is designed for the nonacademic reader.

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The Hippopotamus

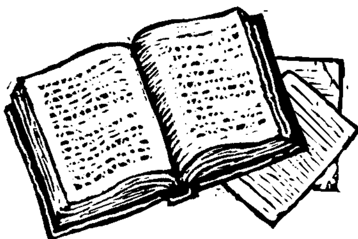
OGDEN NASH

1938

"The Hippopotamus" offers a prime example of the kind of wit that made Ogden Nash one of America's most widely recognized poets throughout the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. His works were published in popular magazines, his poems were quoted widely, and his face was familiar on television talk shows and game shows. As is the case with many of the hundreds of poems Nash produced in his lifetime, this one is a showcase for the poet's enthusiasm for wordplay and his unique view of reality.

The light tone and apparently silly subject matter of poems like this one have led readers and critics to dismiss Nash over the decades as a lightweight writer, a populist whose works bear as scant literary value as the advertising slogans that he wrote at the start of his professional life. Many students of literature, however, see in a work like "The Hippopotamus" a merger of form and function that is evident and necessary in the most serious and respectable works of art. Opinions of Nash's importance as a literary poet have always been widely varied, making him one of the twentieth century's most compelling writers to study.

"The Hippopotamus" was originally published in the 1938 collection *I'm a Stranger Here Myself*. It is one of Nash's most popular poems and is included in many anthologies and collections, including *The Best of Ogden Nash*, published in 2007.



Ogden Nash (*AP Images*)

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Ogden Nash was born Frederic Ogden Nash in Rye, New York, on August 19, 1902. He came from a long line of distinguished Americans stretching back to before the Revolutionary War. In fact, the city of Nashville, Tennessee, was named for one of his ancestors. His father, Edmund Strudwick Nash, was in the import and export business, and his mother, Mattie (Chenault) Nash, was a housekeeper.

The family was prosperous, and Nash lived in various locations in his youth. He attended St. George's School in Newport, Rhode Island, and then went on to Harvard University. After one year at Harvard, though, his father's business soured, and financial concerns forced him to drop out. He went back to his old school in Newport as a teacher but could not handle the stress of teaching, so he went on to a succession of short-lived jobs: salesman, adviser, and then editorial assistant. In 1925 he started in the marketing department of Doubleday, Page Publishing in New York, and there his talent with light verse helped him move up to the position of advertising copywriter. As his success in the advertising business grew, his literary career also took off. The year that he started at Doubleday also saw the publication of his first children's book, *The Cricket of Caradon*. Not until five years later did he break into the adult poetry market with the publication of his poem "Spring Comes to Murray Hill" in the *New Yorker*, which led to the publication of *Hard Lines*, his first book of adult prose. The book was a huge success, with seven printings in its first year, a remarkable achievement in the midst of the Great Depression. The *New Yorker* continued to publish Nash's poetry—he would present 353 verses in its pages over the next forty-one years—and after two years he left his advertising job to join the magazine's staff as an editor, a position that he retained for only a little more than a year.

In 1933 Nash married Frances Rider Leonard, and they went on to have two daughters. As his family grew, he focused more on writing for children, producing such works as *The Bad Parents' Garden of Verse* in 1936 and *Girls are Silly* in 1962. "The Hippopotamus" was originally published in the 1938 collection *I'm a Stranger Here Myself*. Nash also wrote briefly for Hollywood films but only produced three scripts before acknowledging that he was not cut out for screenwriting. Throughout most of his years, Nash lived the life of a celebrity and was familiar to radio and television audiences as a panelist on quiz shows. Nash died of heart failure on May 19, 1971, in Baltimore, Maryland, and was buried in North Hampton, New Hampshire.

POEM SUMMARY

Stanza 1

LINE 1

"The Hippopotamus" begins with an exclamatory statement, punctuated with an exclamation point, which is somewhat rare in poetry. The exclamation point does not necessarily make the statement it expresses a command; however, it serves to give readers the sense that the poem's speaker is surprised at the feelings that he has discovered. There is nothing very stunning about the poem's simple title, so starting it with the jolt of an exclamatory statement in the first line is effective in arousing the reader's interest. Readers who come to this poem expecting a heavy, massive, slow verbal style that would match the physical impression of the

MEDIA ADAPTATIONS

- "The Hippopotamus" is included with other poems read by Ogden Nash on a 1970 record album issued by Caedmon titled *Parents Keep Out*.
- The poem was put to music by William Perry and is included on the videocassette *A Zooful of Poetry*, which was released by Monterey Video of Thousand Oaks, California, in 1978.
- *The Nascent Home Page of Ogden Nash* at http://www.ogdennash.org includes a collection of Nash's poetry and a blog about Nash-related events.

animal itself are surprised at the energy with which Nash begins.

LINE 2

The second line of the poem is anchored by the author's use of first-person plural pronouns. In the discussion of what the animal looks like to "us" and how funny "we" think it is, Nash is putting forward the assumption that all, or at least most, people feel similarly about the hippopotamus's looks. Yet the communal first person that the poem uses is not as general as it might at first seem. The hippopotamus, with its wide mouth and small ears and flaring nostrils, its massive girth and short legs, would only look funny to people who are not familiar with it. This line would be more relevant to people of North America than to people in the animal's indigenous sub-Saharan Africa or other hot climates where such physical adaptations would be more common.

LINE 3

While the tone of the first line of the poem is amazement and the second line deals in playful humor, the third line takes yet another turn in tone, introducing a dark and foreboding element. Nash changes directions, contrasting the humorous looks of the hippopotamus with moments of somber reflection. Although the change in the mood of the poem can be expected, the negative words he uses may seem excessive. Their seriousness is part of Nash's style: he overstates the somberness of a moment of reflection, making it sound like more than it is, for comic effect.

LINE 4

As the first half of the poem comes to an end, the speaker refers to himself in the first-person singular, identifying the poem's particular point of view as the product of a specific "I." This word usage indicates more than just an identity; it leads right into the issue of self-consciousness. The speaker inverts the poem's perspective in this line and, instead of considering what the hippopotamus looks like to him, thinks of what the hippopotamus thinks about him, as well as humans in general. This kind of personification is common in poetry, though it is not common in ordinary discourse. In ordinary discussions, the idea that animals might form opinions about things and people that they see is usually not even brought up.

Stanza 2

LINE 5

The tone of the poem takes another turn in direction in the second stanza, this time emulating a religious tract. The first thing that gives the poem a religious aura is the fact that the speaker is imploring the hippopotamus to find peace. The fact that the word *peace* is said twice helps to give the feeling that the speaker is appealing to spirituality over logic. As the mood of spiritualism takes over in this line, Nash uses the word *thou*, which is most frequently associated with archaic biblical language, establishing without doubt that he is addressing the hippopotamus from a religious perspective.

LINE 6

The self-reflection begun in line 4 continues in this line, with the speaker offering the generalized assessment that human beings have no problem with the way that other human beings look to them. This is one question that the poet can answer, after finding no solution to the previously stated riddle about what human beings look like to hippopotamuses.

After the spiritual overtones of line 5, the poem returns in this line to a common, casual

tone. Nash does not use any formal language here, and the inclusion of the word *really*; implies that the speaker is talking informally, using an expression that is unnecessary to the sense of what he is saying but is standard in the use of slang. This use of an everyday idiom helps to promote the idea that the speaker is giving an honest, candid assessment of what humans think of each other, and it inverts the standard order of expectations: the hippopotamus is referred to with the lofty word *thou*; in line 5, while humans are discussed with humble diction in line 6.

LINE 7

Although the poem states early on that the looks of the hippopotamus can evoke laughter, in this line the animal's looks are considered delightful. Readers can guess where this line is leading because the speaker, who has spoken on behalf of the human race throughout the poem by using the first-person plural pronoun "we," does not claim to know whether what he is saying is actually true but is instead offering just a guess; if the hippopotamus were a delight to the human eye, he would say so, but since he is only guessing, then the eye delighted by the hippopotamus is clearly nonhuman.

LINE 8

In the end, the poem reaches a happy resolution. The fact that humans like the looks of each other is assumed to be mirrored in the emotions of hippopotamuses. Early on, the hippopotamus was spoken of in a derogatory way, with its appearance being mocked as humorous, but that, the poem implies, is really no problem as long as within their own species the hippopotamuses enjoy the looks of each other. The human race's opinion of them is implicitly declared irrelevant. It is the fact that they can transcend their ungainliness that makes hippopotamuses so remarkable and worthy of the bold exclamation that the speaker blurted out in the first line.

Nash underscores the happy resolution of the concern over the hippopotamus with a clever word twist. The preferred plural of "hippopotamus" is "hippopotamuses," but the speaker, in a spirit of playfulness, chooses the more seldom used plural form because it is funnier and also completes the rhyme structure. This plural form follows the rule that changes the "us" ending of some words from Latin origins into an "i," as seen when pluralizing "alumnus" to "alumni," "focus" to "foci," or "radius" to "radii." Ending the poem with a rarely heard and comically sounding word leaves readers with a sense of lightheartedness.

THEMES

Self-Image

"The Hippopotamus" is concerned with the images that people (and animals that have human emotions attributed to them) have of themselves. From the very first line, when the speaker instructs readers to take a close, serious look at the animal, the poem immediately begins to make implicit comparisons between the human and hippopotamus species. The poem indicates that it is a natural tendency to mock those that look unfamiliar to us. Mockery is not meant to be taken as a sign of self-confidence; though: when human beings think what the unfamiliar species that they have mocked might think of them, the moment is described as a dark and fearful one.

The idea that each species should have a secure self-image is enforced in the last half of the poem. In line 6, Nash makes clear the notion that human beings perceive their own looks as the standard of what is normal. He goes on to say, though, that regardless of humans' opinions, the hippopotamus would find another hippopotamus's features delightful. The desire to belittle those who look different might imply a lack of confidence, but the poem also shows that the ability to ignore the mockery of others can lead to a peaceful existence.

Pride

One aspect that this poem touches on but does not examine at length is the human inclination to view unfamiliar things as being flawed. The idea expressed in line 6 of this poem, stating that human beings look all right to themselves, belies a larger truth that the poem covers in its earlier lines: that people generally consider things they are unfamiliar with to be substandard. The laughter that Nash describes at the beginning of the poem is based on the way the hippopotamus looks, but the animal's looks would not be amusing if people did not somehow see them as a shortcoming. The hippopotamus is derided for failing to reach the physical standards set by human existence.

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY

- Make a list of words with irregular plurals and then another list with words that rhyme with them. Weave the two lists into a light-hearted song or poem that you can recite for your class.
- What are some of the most pressing issues facing the world today, and how do you think they might be solved? Compose a short, humorous poem that also presents a serious moral principle. How easy or difficult is it to fashion such a poem? Write a brief essay detailing how the exercise affected your understanding of "The Hippopotamus."
- This poem mentions how humans look to hippopotamuses. Look at yourself from the perspective of the next animal that you see, and write a report that it would give to other animals on what is and is not sensible about the human body.
- Do hippopotamuses really delight in seeing one another? Study what attracts one hippopotamus to another and other aspects of their mating life, such as whether they are monogamous beings. Make a chart of physical characteristics and behaviors that you think would make a hippopotamus a good prospective partner for another hippopotamus.

The poem can refer to human pride so casually because it is a concept that is familiar throughout most cultures. In the Western tradition particularly, people tend to think of the human being as the most important of all species, the most highly developed and worthy. If one sees the world as being organized in a hierarchy that puts human beings on top and all other animals below, then the hippopotamus, which has characteristics so far from those of women and men, would indeed be funny. But Nash also expresses the idea that the worldview of the hippopotamus likewise puts its own species at the center of the universe, thereby making the hippopotamus the universal standard of beauty. By attributing the same pride to the hippopotamus as to the human being, the poem shows pride not as a serious defect of character but instead as a natural result of each being's limited existence.

STYLE

Humor

There are at least three types of humor on display in "The Hippopotamus." The first and most obvious one is the kind of mocking humor mentioned in the second line: human beings laugh at the hippopotamus for what they perceive as the animal's shortcomings.

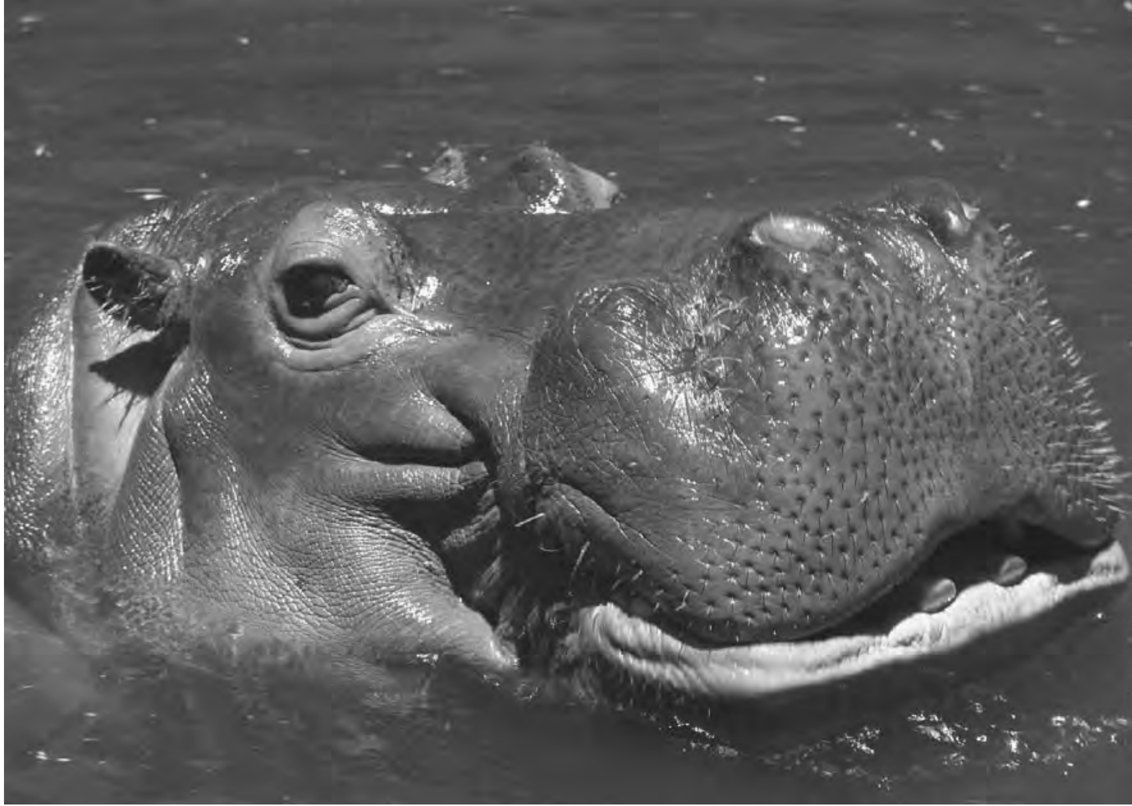
The second kind of humor derives from overstatement. In line 5, for instance, the poet addresses the hippopotamus with excessive formality, as if it were a spiritual being rather than an animal. By contrast, the poem's third line exaggerates the speaker's unhappiness when he thinks of how humans look to the hippopotamus, making a moment of embarrassment sound like deep, mortifying regret.

The most obvious source of humor comes in the poem's last word. Nash uses a word that sounds made up, one that has a cheerful, silly sound, to playfully poke fun at pride and self-importance. In ending the poem this way, he gently derides the complex laws of the English language and their reliance on tradition, which in itself reflects the attitude shown by the poem. In the poem, Nash presents the traditional view that the human figure is the standard of physical excellence, a standard other animals are expected to meet; in drawing attention to how language can sound odd, Nash reminds readers that pride and self-importance are just as arbitrary and situational as are the rules of pluralization.

Anthropomorphism

The viewing of nonhuman things as having human thoughts and emotions is referred to as personification. A particular subcategory of personification is anthropomorphism, which attributes to natural phenomena, and particularly to animals, characteristics that are associated with humans.

A classic example of anthropomorphism at work occurs here when the poet wonders what hippopotamuses think of human beings. Though it cannot be determined for certain,



Hippopotamus (*Image copyright K. West, 2009. Used under license from Shutterstock.com*)

there is no evidence to indicate that a hippopotamus would have any aesthetic opinion of human beings' looks or that one is even capable of formulating such a judgment. Furthermore, though hippopotamuses do show some sort of attraction to one another for mating purposes, it is presumably just a case of projecting human thought processes onto the animal to claim that their looks "delight" one another.

Rhyme

In each successive pair of lines in this poem, the two end words rhyme with one another, creating an *aabb* rhyme scheme. Nash's strict adherence to this simple rhyming pattern helps to establish that he is writing from a lighthearted perspective, showing that even the poet himself is not too serious about the poem's message. In line 3, for instance, his use of the word *grim* seems to be an inappropriately strong way of expressing the idea he is getting at: he is describing how a human would feel about how hippopotamuses view the human race, which might be baffling or embarrassing at worst. Reading line 4, though, shows that Nash chose such a bombastic word in order to match its sound to the word that ends the next line. If the ideas expressed in the poem are chosen according to how they sound, the implication is that the reader does not have to take them very seriously.

The culmination of the poem's rhyme scheme comes in its final word: with the rhyming pattern established, readers can expect the last line to end with the hard *i* sound, even though the most proper grammar would dictate that the standard plural form "hippopotamuses" be used. The poet chooses to follow the rhyme scheme to its comical conclusion, fairly flaunting the grammar rules. By doing this, he shows that the poem's priorities lie with its spirit of fun.

Iambic Tetrameter

This poem strictly follows a set rhythmic and metric pattern. The rhythm is iambic, meaning that it is composed of two-syllable units with every even-numbered syllable given greater stress

than the syllable before it, producing a "one-TWO, one-TWO" rhythm. Each line is composed of four iambs, which means that there are a total of eight syllables per line; poems in which the rhythmic pattern is repeated four times per line are in *tetrameter*. The only place this pattern seems to weaken is in the first foot of the fifth line, where readers would stress the first and second words alike. The well-calculated effect of this is both to slow the reading of the poem, as is appropriate for a juncture at which the poet is seeking to establish a sort of sentimental reassessment, and to place additional emphasis on the repeated word *peace*. In all other cases, the iambic tetrameter pattern presents itself quite clearly.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Great Depression and Interest in the Exotic

"The Hippopotamus" was published in 1938, at a time in U.S. history when much of the world still seemed exotic and strange. Travel was far more limited than it is today, and media were limited to print, radio, and motion pictures. While the people for whom Nash was writing would probably have heard of a hippopotamus and might have seen a picture of one, it is also likely that most Americans, except those living near an urban area with a zoo, would never have seen an actual hippopotamus with their own eyes.

By 1938, the Great Depression, which is considered to have started with the "Black Tuesday" crash of the stock market on October 29, 1929, had been going on for almost a decade. The worst of it came in the early 1930s, when poor economic conditions were exacerbated by a drought across the middle of the country, ruining the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of families that relied on agriculture for their basic subsistence. Between 1933 and 1934, a quarter of employable Americans could not find work, while another 25 percent of those who were working held onto their jobs with extended work hours and reduced wages. These conditions eased in the following years, as the government spent more and more money hiring the unemployed as part of the New Deal series of programs.

The difficult economic times meant that most Americans were focused on sustenance, not travel. Many had not been out of their own town or county, and the vast majority certainly did not have the means to travel across the world. Nonetheless, the average American citizen would have been familiar with what a hippopotamus looked like. Photojournalism magazines such as *National Geographic* (established in 1888), *Life* (established in 1936) and *Look* (established in 1937), along with dozens of others, sent photographers around the world to seek out images that citizens of the United States would find exotic and captivating. Although television existed, it was not in widespread use until the late 1940s; motion pictures, however, were a popular form of entertainment, and many movies were set in foreign locations specifically to cater to audiences' curiosity about the world beyond their own existence. Hollywood offered fictional versions of foreign cultures in such films as 1933's *King Kong* and the popular Tarzan series of the 1930s.

Isolationism and World War II

By 1938, the United States found itself being pulled into the international scene. In Europe, Adolf Hitler's Nazi Party, which was elected to power in 1933, was expanding beyond its borders. When Germany invaded the Rhineland in 1936, the question of American involvement in foreign affairs became one of the country's great political controversies. For the next five years, the voices of those who felt that involvement in world affairs was inevitable were outnumbered by those who felt that the country had enough troubles within its own borders, without joining fights in other lands. With each act of aggression by Hitler's Germany, Benito Mussolini's Italy, and Imperial Japan, the case for international involvement became harder to refute.

American isolationism was quickly discarded after the Japanese attack on the American military base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on December 7, 1941. Millions of Americans enlisted to fight overseas within weeks of the attacks, as followed by millions more in the years to come, and were disbursed around the globe. Most went to Europe or to the Pacific, but many were sent to battlefronts in Africa and throughout Asia. In all, the four years of U.S. involvement in World War II represented the largest movement of Americans around the globe in history. Few of these soldiers traveled to the hippopotamus's native land of sub-Saharan Africa, which was not a theater of war, but America's abrupt splash into international involvement matches the poem's reflections on self-involvement.

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **1938:** African safaris are only available to the very wealthy, who often undertake such excursions to kill animals for trophies.

  Today: Safaris can be booked through local travel agencies, and generally the populations of native species, especially endangered ones, are protected by strict laws.

- **1938:** The Great Depression, which started at the beginning of the 1930s, has driven audiences' tastes toward humor and fantasy in the arts, including poetry. Magazines are a major source of entertainment, and many national magazines publish some poetry.

  Today: With the rise of interactive events such as the slam poetry movement, poetry is again becoming a form of popular entertainment.

- **1938:** Many Americans feel that they can ignore the problems of the rest of the world. The Nazi regime in Germany expands into neighboring Rhineland and prepares for assaults on Czechoslovakia and Poland, but the noninterventionist movement still has strong support in the United States.

  Today: Travel and Internet communication have raised awareness about the cultures of distant lands and their problems. Many Americans keep themselves informed about conflicts throughout the world and advocate for U.S. involvement in international peace matters.

- **1938:** Most media strive to follow standardized rules of grammar, which makes a secondary usage, such as "hippopotami" as the plural of "hippopotamus," stand out.

  Today: In modern culture, traditional grammar is often fused with new words and new styles that have evolved with quickly emerging technologies, such as the abbreviated forms of language necessitated by text messaging and instant messaging.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

Ogden Nash's works have usually been considered a hybrid of two genres, and as a result they are seldom given serious consideration between the two. At the time that his works were being published in the *New Yorker*, Nash was considered a humorist and a celebrity; he was known as a poet, but, like the many others that he associated with, including James Thurber, Robert Benchley, and S. J. Perelman, with whom he collaborated on a Broadway musical in the 1940s, Nash was more often quoted than read. When his work was read as poetry, it was viewed with a skeptical eye. In general, critics who have approached his work with a sense of humor have been willing to forgive Nash some slight irregularities in his rhythms and some stiffness of imagery for the amusement he provides, while those who have dismissed his work as insubstantial have been critics who believe that humor is, by its very nature, less relevant than sober reflection in literature.

One writer who worked to make the case for Nash's reputation as a poet was Archibald MacLeish. MacLeish, a poet of serious repute, with three Pulitzer Prizes and associations with the great literary figures of the 1920s, objects to the description "light verse" in his introduction to a 1975 collection of Nash's poetry, *I Wouldn't Have Missed It*. Noting that what Nash wrote was neither "light" nor "verse," he explains that "his mastery, which was real enough, had nothing to do with a combination of the two. It consisted in the invention of a form, uniquely his own, which defied all the categories and, far more than that, altered the sensibility of his time." Thirty years later, in 2005, reviewing a new biography of Nash, Alexandra Mullen wrote in the literary journal *New Criterion* that one reason that Nash has been ignored by critics is that he did not fit the profile of the starving

artist that hit its nadir during his generation. She declares, "Nash had appalling luck for a poet: he was happy, prolific, and financially stable. Nash was especially unlucky because chronologically if not temperamentally he is in the generation of Modernist poets, whose standard for significance is measured in angsts." Like many of Nash's fans, both of these writers seem to feel that he has been underestimated by a literary establishment that has been unable to find a simple category for his unique talent.

NASH SOMEHOW MANAGES, WITHOUT BREAKING THE POEM'S POETIC OR SPIRITUAL RHYTHM, TO SLIP GUILT AND INADEQUACY, AND EVEN A LITTLE EXISTENTIAL DREAD, INTO A FUNNY POEM ABOUT A FUNNY ANIMAL THAT HAS A FUNNY PLURALIZATION OF ITS NAME."

CRITICISM

David Kelly

Kelly is a writer and an instructor of creative writing and literature. In this essay, he examines the psychological implications of "The Hippopotamus" and how they affect the poem's humor.

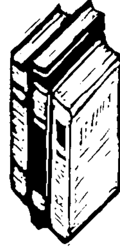
A mistake that is often made when studying the poetry of Ogden Nash comes from readers who dismissively think that what they are reading exists only for laughs and nothing more. It is true that most of Nash's poems are meant primarily to raise a chuckle. They focus on surprising readers with an unexpected turn of a phrase, showing off the poet's wit and general good nature through his willingness to use a nonsensical word or a needlessly obtuse expression when a common, sane one would work just fine. But it was Nash's particular genius, and his claim to ongoing relevance, that the fun in his poetry would not be sustainable unless it was supported by significant, substantial ideas. This is not necessarily because of anything that he planned to do; one can easily imagine that Nash, if asked, would claim with horror that the last thing he ever wanted was to make people think. But in poem after poem there is a core of reality that echoes after the verbal delight of the joke has leapt out and then faded away. Some poets might be tempted to use the forum of a well-crafted stanza and a supportive readership to unload their complaints about the miseries of life, and others might feel an obligation to add some misery to a happy poem to give it balance; clearly, this is not what Nash is up to. There is nothing very miserable in his vision of reality. His humor is not left to hold the readers on its own, but it is not balanced with sadness, either: in an Ogden Nash poem, verbal giddiness is anchored by solid truth.

A fine example of this effect at work can be found in Nash's poem "The Hippopotamus." It is a work that clearly aims to make readers laugh, and the focus of that laugh is in the poem's last word; while the animal being talked about is itself amusing in its strangeness, as is *hippopotamus*, an appropriately large and goofy word to describe it, the irregular plural *hippopotami* is a true plaything in the hands of a humor writer like Nash. His use of it is his way of having fun with the language, a sort of parody of the byzantine pluralization rules that turn *mouse* into *mice*, *goose* into *geese*, and *ox* into *oxen*.

Although the verbal twist at the end seems to be the reason that "The Hippopotamus" exists, it is not the only thing that makes the poem stand up. In order for Nash to take readers all the way down eight lines to the end, to keep them engaged along the trip, he had to give his poem, however brief, some twists and turns. And it was in doing this that, intentionally or not, he infused the lines with more wisdom than a simple sample of light verse needs.

The basic premise of "The Hippopotamus" is that hippopotamuses are so different in their basic structure than human beings that they are laughable. This much is an idea that most people can agree with. Nature has given them large mouths that seem stretched into permanent smiles and legs that are so short in comparison to their girth as to be almost pointless. They are too slow to pose any threat of attack. Unlike other strange species, their strangeness is neither beautiful nor dangerous, and to the human observer laughing seems to be the only option.

But to get from the hippo's funny appearance at the start of line 1 to the funny word at the



WHAT DO I READ NEXT?

- Nash wrote little about himself, but his letters to Frances Leonard, written during their courtship and eventual marriage, are collected in *Loving Letters from Ogden Nash: A Family Album* (1990), selected and introduced by the couple's daughter, Linell Nash Smith.
- Of the many poems Nash wrote about animals—among them "The Camel," "The Pig," and "The Wapiti"—his poem "The Duck" most resembles "The Hippopotamus," with an opening line that is almost identical. It was first published in *The Bad Parents' Garden of Verse* (1936) and has since been reprinted in *I Wouldn't Have Missed It: Selected Poems of Ogden Nash* (1975).
- Readers interested in seeing how this poem looks when translated into Latin can see it, along with dozens of other Nash poems, in *Ave Ogden! Nash in Latin* (1973), a collection translated by James C. Gleeson and Brian N. Meyer.
- Nash was a friend of the writer Dorothy Parker, who, though better known for her fiction, produced a substantial body of poetry. While Parker's poetic vision is much darker, she often wrote in an airy style resembling Nash's. One poem that Parker wrote that has similar themes to "The Hippopotamus" is "Thought for a Sunshiny Morning." It is included in *The Poetry and Short Stories of Dorothy Parker* (1994).
- Nash's sense of humor has often been compared to that of S. J. Perelman, who was famous about the same time Nash was for his articles in the *New Yorker* and other popular magazines and for writing theatrical comedies for the likes of the Marx Brothers. Some of Perelman's funniest works are included in his travelogue *Westward Ha!* which was originally published in 1948.
- One other humor writer often associated with Nash is Donald Ogden Stewart. Before earning his fame as playwright and screenwriter, Stewart wrote *A Parody Outline of History* (1921), which, as its name implies, is a parody of *The Outline of History*, by his friend H. G. Wells.

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end of line 8, Nash takes his readers through some interesting terrain. On the way to calming the hippo, to assuring it that the laughter that it might hear is from humans laughing with it, not at it, the poem projects human emotions onto the animal. Doing so changes the poem from a setup-and-punchline structure to an intelligent examination of the human thought process. The idea that Nash began to write "The Hippopotamus" to satisfy an urge to use the word *hippopotami* seems more likely than the idea that he wanted to talk about the hippopotamus's looks, given that this poem contains no description of the animal whatsoever. In truth, his starting point is no longer relevant any more. The poem exists now as a contemplation of human vanity and vanity's corollary, self-doubt.

Around the middle of the poem, Nash turns the tables on the readers who started out agreeing with him that the hippopotamus looks funny. The poem, which starts out being about the hippopotamus, suddenly, almost out of nowhere, becomes about the human observer. The poet who laughed at the creature wonders if the creature might also be looking at people and making unflattering judgments. This turn of events follows naturally; the spirit of the poem, its lighthearted nature, implies that this is the sort of work where representing the animal's viewpoint would not be out of place. At the very least, a reader cannot be too surprised to see the hippopotamus's perspective in a poem that starts with the mock-epic call to "behold" it. The tone of this poem would allow for an actual talking hippo, if Nash had felt the need to include one.

On a slightly deeper level, it is almost inevitable, psychologically, that a poem so strongly concerned with what its speaker thinks about another character would turn to the speaker's curiosity about what the object of his attention thinks about him. It would not be surprising to find out that a gossip is worried about being gossiped about, or that a police officer would see the world as a place filled with potential criminals. Nash is smart enough to know and to admit that psychological exploration is just another form of psychological projection.

It has to raise curiosity when a poem refers to anything with psychological implications by using such severe terms as *dank* and *grim*. Even a poem considered an example of light verse is still responsible for the words it uses, and these are some very potent words, especially given the context in which they are used. To some extent, these words could be taken only half-seriously, as could just about anything that Ogden Nash wrote. They might just be a bit of comic hyperbole, exaggerating the frustration of the moment when self-consciousness interrupts the poet's train of thought. But even if their tone is excused as being excessive for comic effect, these words still mark an important turning point in the poem's meaning. They show that being thought about, even when one is being thought about by a creature as slow-witted and unintelligent as the hippopotamus, is a heavy weight upon the human soul. This is the kind of awareness of one's self that has led philosophers such as the existentialists Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietszche, and Jean-Paul Sartre to look on existence itself as a terrible, crushing responsibility. The poem glides along smoothly when it is about the human poet thinking about the hippopotamus; when the tables are turned, however, and the poet thinks that he is being watched, the idea becomes dank and grim. Nash somehow manages, without breaking the poem's poetic or spiritual rhythm, to slip guilt and inadequacy, and even a little existential dread, into a funny poem about a funny animal that has a funny pluralization of its name.

The weight of the idea of being assessed is somewhat refuted later in the poem, when Nash has his speaker assure the hippopotamus that it is should not feel bad about staring because humans are comfortable with who they are. His words, though, raise doubts about how much self-confidence he really means to convey. A more reassuring word choice might be to say that we humans look "fine" to each other, as it expresses actual approval, while the words that Nash uses in line 6 only express acceptance. As with the heavier words already examined, the choice of mild words was probably driven by a judgment about which would sound funnier, spinning the poem around again in another unexpected direction. Still, what remains on the page is that human beings are deeply, profoundly concerned about what the hippopotamus (or, for that matter, anyone) might think of them, and the assurances that they are not concerned come out weak and unconvincing.

"The Hippopotamus" is a humorous poem about a humorous subject; delving into the truth beneath the words does not change that. Readers are likely to walk away from the poem feeling that the author's intention in writing it was, primarily, to use the silly but musical word *hippopotami*, and secondarily, to show that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. These are undeniably aspects of the poem, but they are only a part of the bigger picture. To give Nash the credit he deserves, a good reading of this poem requires a look at how vanity and shame are bound up in the ideas and emotions that humans ascribe to animals. This makes "The Hippopotamus" not a heavy poem but rather a light poem with a strong message planted in its center.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on "The Hippopotamus," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2010.

Frank Kermode

In the following review of Candy Is Dandy: The Best of Ogden Nash*, Kermode characterizes Nash's humorous poems as tedious and states that his oeuvre shows little variety or development.*

> I try to imitate him here, but he is probably quite inimitable.
> My own talent for this sort of thing being limited and his virtually illimitable.

So Anthony Burgess in his Nashian introduction to this rather large selection, first published in 1983 and now out in paperback. Burgess does pretty well, but is right to feel that he doesn't sound very like the real thing. As he points out, Nash, being American, wrote a slightly different language. He will consider 'despotic' and 'Arctic', a good rhyme, also 'want' and 'haunt' (though well-spoken Englishmen of a century back might not have questioned this one). Moreover, he goes in for rhymes that frequently entail the joky modification of a rhyme word, so that 'Hypochondriacs' calls for 'Adirondiacs', and 'cognac' for

'dipsomognac'. Burgess's exercise sticks close to full true rhyming, and his mimicry is best when he is imitating those long rambling lines which, after 50 or more words, finally discover their destination in a sometimes surprising but, by hindsight inevitable, rhyme word. In Burgess's pastiche the rhyme will be honest, while in Nash it will quite often be bent.

Nash went on doing this kind of thing from 1931 (*Hard Lines*) to 1972 (*The Old Dog Barks Backwards*), producing in all some 14 volumes of verses, with very little change of manner. Some of the Bellocian short pieces go well enough. The wombat

> May exist on nuts and berries
> Or then again, on missionaries;
> His distant habitat precludes
> Conclusive knowledge of his moods—

but you can't help noticing that 'moods' is not the *mot juste*—while 'The Python', 300 pages later, is in much the same vein, and still not quite a direct hit.

Most would agree that Nash's strength lay in those wantonly rambling couplets, often with a gross disparity between the length of lines that are always, in the end, married by predestined if comically distorted rhymes. But the repetition of this structural jest over 40 years makes, in a large selection (and perhaps especially in readers who loved the joke 40 years back), for a certain mild tedium.

> You all know the story of the insomniac who
> got into such a state
> Because the man upstairs dropped one shoe
> on the floor at eleven o'clock and the
> unhappy insomniac sat up till breakfast
> time waiting for him to drop the mate.
> Well . . .

So begins a rather early poem.

> Since the non-book and the anti-hero are
> now accepted elements of modern
> negative living
> I feel justified in mentioning a few examples
> of the march of progress for which I
> suggest a heartfelt non-thanksgiving.

So begins a late one. It may be superficially up to date but deep down it's a bit old hat; this may seem unfair, since the skills are the same and highly individual, but it was the success of the earlier work that made them too familiar. Perhaps we are so conditioned by the idea that poets change and develop over a lifetime that it seems strange to have a collection of this sort which you can open anywhere and be sure to find just the same sort of things going on.

Nash was self-consciously American in other ways than rhyming, writing about baseball and basketball (which he commendably despised), about the problems of living in New York, or dieting, or the way women always keep you waiting when you are going out; or taxes, middle age, and the general awfulness of children. These are all genuine matters of poetic concern, but the tone is often slightly defeated, wanly jocular, and sometimes even a reader who feels himself entitled to be described as genial and sympathetic may from time to time feel bloodymindedly inclined to niggle, and even withhold the expected tribute of a giggle.

Now and then Nash allows himself a small explosion of dislike for the British; no harm in that, especially in work that belongs to the isolationist, pre-war, pre-jet, pre-special-relationship age. However, I remember him performing at a South Bank Poetry Festival around 1971 and reading his poems in a rather British way, quietly, and with much success. In fact he went close to stealing the show from such stars as Ashbery, Auden, Bly, and so on down the alphabet. He seemed very pleased at the time, and perhaps wrote no more nasty things about us thereafter, just going on about how, in his holiday haunt, the birds kept him awake, or how confusing directions to other people's holiday haunts can be, with suitably facetious allusions to the major English poets.

If memory isn't deceiving me he read at his London appearance a funny poem called 'Very Like a Whale' about simile and metaphor, ridiculing Byron at considerable length for claiming that the Assyrian came down like a wolf on the fold. The poem, included in this volume, was published in a collection of 1935, and of course I don't say there's no point in reading on after that, but nothing more elaborately funny may be expected. Incidentally, the editors, who are his daughters, tell us that Nash constantly revised his poems, so he can't just have been churning them out to meet deadlines. Possibly, like Yeats, he tried in revision to make his early poems sound like his late ones. That could be one reason why they tend to sound rather similar.

Source: Frank Kermode, "Maturing Late or Simply Rotted Early?" in *Spectator*, Vol. 273, September 24, 1994, pp. 36–37.

George W. Crandell

In the following essay, Crandell examines the persona of the "poet-fool" in Nash's poems, including "The Hippopotamus."

For some readers, the term "humorous poetry" is an oxymoron. "Poetry" denotes something serious, while "humorous," by definition, means just the opposite. Equating "serious" with "good" and "humorous" with "bad," the same individuals use "humorous" in a pejorative sense to distinguish writing that has some of the formal characteristics of poetry, rhyme and meter for example, but which lacks the seriousness of lyric, narrative or dramatic verse. Likewise, the terms *vers de société* and "light verse" have sometimes been used synonymously with "humorous poetry" to denote a type of writing lacking both seriousness and significant aesthetic value.

This line of argument has even been carried to the point of dissociating humor and art. Immanuel Kant, for example, commenting on the "humorous manner," perceives a qualitative difference between humor and art such that the creative act of humor "belongs rather to pleasant than to beautiful art, because the object of the latter must always show proper worth in itself, and hence requires a certain seriousness in the presentation, as taste does in the act of judging." Similarly, Christopher Wilson argues that "art and humour have comparable form but differ in the significance of their raw materials," art, unlike humor, being "constructed from serious stuff."

Even among writers of "light verse" the serious/humorous characterization is an important one, significant enough, in fact, that American humorist and poet Ogden Nash made the distinction between serious and humorous poetry the basis of his art. Nash confesses that he gave up hope of becoming a "serious" poet after the fashion of Browning, Swinburne or Tennyson, and so "began to poke a little bit of fun at [himself], . . . accentuating the ludicrous side of [what], at first had been attempts at serious poetry." Early in his career, Nash decided "that it would be better to be 'a good bad poet than a bad good poet.'"

Nash's self-depreciating remarks may be seen as a defensive strategy similar to that employed by professional comedians studied by Seymour and Rhonda Fisher: "The comic defends himself against the accusation of badness by systematically proving that what is good and bad exists only in the eye of the beholder." The comic asserts his own goodness

IN THE GUISE OF THE POET-FOOL, NASH, FOLLOWING THE PATTERN OF HISTORICAL AND LITERARY ANTECEDENTS, IS BOTH TRUTH-TELLER AND BUFFOON."

by convincing "people that good and bad, like all classificatory schemes, are relative and that they may, in fact, blend meaninglessly to each other" (Fisher 70).

Although Nash uses the term "good-bad poet" jokingly and disparagingly, it characterizes two distinctive features of his work. The "good-bad" distinction serves equally well to describe 1) Nash's divided persona, the poet-fool, who, as we shall see, may be "good" or "bad" depending upon the perspective from which he is viewed, and 2) Nash's concern with problems of morality. An examination of these two characteristic features of Nash's work ultimately reveals that, in Nash's view, moral and aesthetic categories alike are relative.

In history and literature, the poet and the fool have not always been one and the same person, although both figures have long been associated with special knowledge and truth-telling. In many cultures, as Enid Welsford testifies, the fool is seen as an "awe-inspiring figure" who has "become the mouthpiece of a spirit, or power external to himself, and so has access to hidden knowledge. Likewise, the poet was first a kind of wise man who later expressed himself in verse. In tracing the connection between poets and fools, Welsford observes that in Mohammedan literature, "the *sha'ir* or poet-seer was not originally a man who possessed the art of expressing himself in moving verse, but rather a man endowed with supernatural power and knowledge, which he uttered in a peculiar type of rhymed prose called *saj*, which later developed into regular metre" (Welsford 79–80). Much later in time, Welsford relates, the *sha'ir* or poet-seer declined in influence and so became associated with the court fool. In the figure of Buhlul, Welsford writes, "we do have an example of an inspired poet-saint who was also a court fool," (Welsford 82), a prototype then of the poet-fool.

Characters like Buhlul, Welsford points out, also appear in English literature, beginning with *Beowulf*. In this early, English poem, for instance, Welsford identifies Hunferth as a *thul* (Old English *byle*) meaning a learned poet (Welsford 84). But Welsford also cites evidence to suggest that "the *byle* was a kind of court-jester" (Welsford 86). Thus Welsford concludes that "Hunferth is a *byle* and possibly also an abusive fool" (Welsford 87).

In the guise of the poet-fool, Nash, following the pattern of historical and literary antecedents, is both truth-teller and buffoon. As soothsayer, Nash imparts a kind of folk wisdom, or "horse-sense" to use Walter Blair's term, as when Nash's speaker reminds parents, "Many an infant that screams like a calliope / Could be soothed with a little attention to its diope." In a society in which royal courts have given way to democratic institutions, the poet-fool in Nash's twentieth-century, American society is an ordinary figure, but one with a special talent for expressing proverbial wisdom. The basis for the truth told by Nash's poet-fool is Nash's observation of people, his habit of "noting human traits and characteristics you might see in an elevator, at the dinner table, at a party or a bridge game" (Newquist 271). Like the professional comedian, Nash is someone who "prowls around looking for new patterns and new insights about how people behave" (Fisher 9). Many of Nash's poems begin with an observation, for example: "The camel has a single hump; / The dromedary two." From that starting point, Nash proceeds in a manner that again mirrors the method of some professional comedians who then "come up with a twist that highlights the relativity or absurdity of that perspective" (Fisher 70), as in "The Camel":

The camel has a single hump,
The dromedary two,
Or else the other way around,
I'm never sure are you.

Many of Nash's poems about animals follow the same pattern; the poet-fool presents us with one perspective of the animal and then comments upon that view. One example, "The Turtle," serves not only to show this pattern, but also to illustrate Nash's economical expression, and his dexterous manipulation of sound to compliment the sense of the poem:

The turtle lives twixt plated decks
Which practically conceal its sex;
I think it clever of the turtle
In such a fix to be so fertile.

Notice how slowly, like a turtle, the reader voices the first line, slowed by the series of nine phonological stops (/t/, twice each in "turtle" and "twixt"; /p/, /t/, and /d/, all in "plated"; and /d/ and /k/ in "decks"). The difficulty the reader experiences is perhaps not unlike that of the turtle trying to be fertile.

In making observations about animals, Nash's poet-fool often reveals a truth about himself, usually a foible or moral weakness characteristic of human nature in general. The spectator watching the camel reveals his ignorance. The observer of the turtle, we may speculate, imagines copulating turtles, while the person who defines the cow displays a delightful naivete:

"The cow is of the bovine ilk; / One end is moo, the other, milk".

As Nash himself confesses and as these poems illustrate, Nash is primarily concerned with "human nature, particularly the relationships between men and women, the relationships of humans to the world in which they live and their attempts to cope with it" (Newquist 269). In defining "The Perfect Husband," for example, Nash observes: "He tells you when you've got on too much lipstick, / And helps you with your girdle when your hips stick." Similarly, the poet-fool offers advice to parents about how to care for "The Baby": "A bit of talcum / Is always walcum."

At the same time that Nash's poet-fool expresses sage advice, the ludicrous form of his maxims belittles and ridicules the speaker. In particular, the phonological incongruity of rhymes such as "calliope/diope" and "talcum/walcum" gives the impression of an undereducated buffoon. Pretentiousness, suggested for example by the classification "bovine ilk" in "The Cow," is comically deflated by the speaker's innocent definition that follows it. The expression of wisdom, the incongruous sound effects, the comic deflation, all serve to endear the poet-fool to his audience.

In the endearing figure of the poet-fool, Nash found the mask from behind which he could express himself. In an interview with Roy Newquist, Nash comments on the persona he discovered: "In the verse I have a sort of disguise I can assume so that I'm not so vulnerable.... Therefore I was able to hide behind this mask, keeping people from knowing whether I'm ignorant or just fooling around" (Newquist 271–272). Having discovered this mask ("mask" comes from the Arabic *maskhara*, meaning clown, or buffoonery), Nash proceeded to speak. The voice that emerges from behind the mask is that of an ironic moralist,

exposing the absurdity of moral distinctions, and blurring the supposedly clear lines demarcating good and evil.

Upon examination, we see that a close connection exists between the figure of the poet-fool and Nash's concern with "good" and "evil." The relationship is best understood by first considering William Willeford's comparison of the fool to a child's toy known as "*Stehaufmännchen*" in German or "little getup man," and "a tumbler or roly-poly" in English:

> The toy, often painted to look like a clown, is weighted at the bottom; when it is hit, it rolls and bobs until it stands upright again. Neither in its motionlessness, when it is upright, nor in its failing to stand upright again is it for us an image of a moral agent acting on behalf of the "good." It is impressive, rather, for its detachment from any moral conflict that we might try to attribute to it with our imagination. The toy is not in conflict with the "bad" person who hits it. It simply reacts with simplicity and economy according to inviolable physical laws and without expending energy of its own. It can take any number of blows; it has endless time to find its upright position under a rain of them, and the "bad" person cannot win against it, so that the conflict between the two is illusory; its winning does not make it "good." Nor can we imagine it being caught in an inner conflict, since there is nothing in its mechanical construction that hinders it from regaining its balance. Whether anything about it is "good" or "bad" depends entirely on the moral perspective in which it is regarded.
>
> (Willeford 115)

Like the roly-poly that is neither good nor bad, the poet-fool, occupies an "objective" position, detached "from any moral conflict," and thus is able to comment, truthfully and objectively, on the relativity of "good" and "bad." From this standpoint, the poet-fool typically exposes the relativity of moral values by holding up two incongruous images representing the extremes on a moral continuum and viewing them, as it were, from its objective "point of indifference," or *punctum indifferens*. In "It Must Be the Milk," for example, Nash observes "how much infants resemble people who have had too much to drink" by comparing the way that infants and intoxicated people walk:

> Yet when you see your little dumpling set sail across the nursery floor,
> Can you conscientiously deny the resemblance to somebody who is leaving a tavern
> after having tried to leave it a dozen times and each time turned back for just one more?
> Each step achieved
> Is simply too good to be believed;
> Foot somehow manages to stay put;
> Arms wildly semaphore,
> Wild eyes seem to ask, Whatever did we get in such a dilemma for?

The similarity of toddlers and inebriates might be dismissed as coincidental if the speaker did not expose to view other likenesses which also serve to erode the distinction between pure and impure:

> Another kinship with topers is also by infants exhibited,
> Which is that they are completely uninhibited,
> And they can't talk straight.
> Any more than they can walk straight;

In these images, the incongruous and humorous pairing of "tots and sots" serves to blur the moral distinction between innocence and sullied experience. By suggesting a likeness between the infant and the drunk, Nash means to point out that good and evil are relative terms that depending on one's moral perspective can be applied to the same behavior, just as uncoordinated walking may be perceived as reprehensible and adorable: "in inebriates it's called staggerin' but in infants it's called toddling." Likewise, talking characterized by "awful" pronunciation and "flawful" grammar may be perceieved from morally opposite perspectives: "in adults, it's drunken and maudlin and deplorable, / But in infants it's tunnin' and adorable."

Nash's pattern of observation exhibited here is similar to the creative act that Arthur Koestler terms "bisociation," that is, "the perceiving of a situation or idea . . . in two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference." Here the idea, walking, is "bisociated" with the two frames of reference—the child and the drunk. As Koestler also remarks, "It is the clash of the two mutually incompatible codes, or associative contexts, which explodes the tension," and so results in a comic effect (Koestler 35).

As we have seen in "It Must Be the Milk," Nash typically pairs two incongruous elements to blur the distinction between opposites, especially objects representing moral extremes. In a similar fashion, Nash pairs candy and liquor, in "Reflection on Ice-Breaking," to comment on the relative appropriateness of types of courtship behavior:

> Candy
> Is dandy
> But liquor
> Is quicker.

Incongruous as candy and liquor may be, Nash nevertheless compels us to see both objects as means to an end. Ice-breaking is Nash's euphemism for seduction, and liquor is the more efficient of the two means to that end. In pairing candy and liquor, Nash contrasts a deliberate, manipulative and speedy means of coercion with a romantic, socially acceptable method of wooing. But by reminding his audience that both liquor and candy ultimately have the same end, and by suggesting that love can be bought, with either a drink or a box of candy, Nash calls conventional notions of acceptability into question.

The pattern of pairing incongruous ideas in "It Must Be the Milk," and "Reflection on Ice-Breaking" is duplicated in "Portrait of the Artist as a Prematurely Old Man." In this poem, Nash demonstrates how action and inaction are relative terms with respect to sinful behavior. In another variation on the theme of moral relativity, Nash points out the absurdity of distinctions between activity and passivity when both have sinful consequences. Nash begins by identifying two kinds of sin:

> One kind of sin is called a sin of commission, and that is very important,
> And it is what you are doing when you are doing something you ortant,
> And the other kind of sin is just the opposite and is called a sin of omission and is
> equally bad in the eyes of all right-thinking people, from Billy Sunday to Buddha,
> And it consists of not having done something you shuddha.

In this example, the idea of sin is perceived in incompatible frames of reference, "doing something you ortant," and its opposite, "not having done something you shuddha," or more simply: doing and not doing. The incongruous pairing of action and inaction has the intended effect of showing the absurdity of human behavior and its consequences. Ironically, intentional sinful actions are fun, hence "good" from the speaker's perspective, while unintentional sinful actions are not fun, hence "bad": "Sins of commission . . . must at least be fun or else you wouldn't be committing them," but

> You didn't get a wicked forbidden thrill
> Every time you let a policy lapse or forgot to pay a bill;
> You didn't slap the lads in the tavern on the back and loudly cry Whee,
> Let's all fail to write just one more letter before we go home, and this round of unwritten letters is on me.
> No, you never get any fun
> Out of the things you haven't done."

In exposing the absurdity of a world in which sinners who commit sins are rewarded by having fun, Nash's persona may be said to satisfy, vicariously, the audience's desire to voice or act out anarchistic impulses, as when Nash's speaker advises that sins of commission are preferable to sins of omission: "If some kind of sin you must be pursuing, / Well, remember to do it by doing rather than by not doing." Similarly in "Reflection on Ice-Breaking," Nash's poet-fool speaks for lovers whose principal motivation is the immediate gratification of physical desire. In another poem, "Epistle to the Olympians," Nash writes from the perspective of a child-adult to give voice to the child's objections to the seemingly arbitrary rules of conduct that govern the behavior of adults in disciplining children. In a pattern familiar to the reader, Nash pairs incongruous ideas, showing how, from the moral perspective of parents, "big" and "little" are relative terms.

> When one mood you are in,
> My bigness is a sin:
> "Oh what a thing to do
> For a great big girl like you!"
> But then another time
> Smallness is my crime;
> "Stop doing whatever you're at;
> You're far too little for that!"

In the vicarious, anarchistic role of wish-fulfiller, the poet-fool paradoxically serves as a stabilizing force in an otherwise unstable world. By defining the boundaries of what is proper, "Oh what a thing to do / For a great big girl like you!" and "Stop doing whatever you're at; / You're far too little for that!" the poet-fool thus has "the effect of encouraging the stability of a system by preventing it from consistently going too far in any one extreme direction" (Fisher 193). Nash's "Epistle to the Olympians" even illustrates how the poet may call for a modification to the seemingly arbitrary moral code (defined by the extremes of bigness and smallness) that governs proper behavior:

> Kind parents, be so kind
> As to kindly make up your mind
> And whisper in accents mild
> The proper size for a child.

In the school of American letters, Ogden Nash is the class-clown. As the eccentric who dares to say what his "classmates" are afraid, unwilling or incapable of saying, he is an object of admiration

and a source of delight. But as the deviant one who defies authority and mocks convention, he is the "bad boy" and an object of ridicule.

In assessing Nash's place in literature, we could note how closely his work matches a standard definition of humor such as C. Hugh Holman's: "Humor implies a sympathetic recognition of human values and deals with the foibles and incongruities of human nature, good—naturedly exhibited," or we could observe the degree to which his work confirms the work of scholars in the social sciences studying humor. The first approach fails to take into account almost thirty years of research into the nature of humor and laughter. Among social scientists and increasingly among literary critics, the move is "away from universal theories based on a single and too-simple definition of what all humor is, toward well-focused questions about aspects of humor." The latter approach, it seems, offers greater potential for understanding the complexity and multifarious nature of humor, including humorous poetry.

In the present examination, we have seen how Nash's humorous work is characterized by concerns with "good" and "bad." The persona through which Nash speaks is a divided figure who like historical and literary poet-fools combines "good" (expressing folk wisdom) and "bad" (subverting the regular rules of rhyme and meter) in a single figure, the poet-fool. Likewise, Nash's typical method of presentation often focuses on problems of "good" and "bad." From a point of indifference, poised objectively between "good" and "bad," the poet-fool then pairs incongruous objects for the purpose of exposing the relativity of moral distinctions. In these two characteristic aspects of Nash's humor, we can observe other parallels to points established by recent humor research and summarized by Paul Lewis.

Lewis points out, first of all, that "humorous experiences originate in the perception of an incongruity: a pairing of ideas, images or events that are not ordinarily joined and do not seem to make sense together" (Lewis 8). The starting point for many of Nash's humorous poems, as we have seen, is an incongruous pairing of objects or ideas: infant/drunk, candy/liquor, activity/inactivity, bigness/smallness.

Secondly, Lewis points out that "in most cases humor appreciation is based on a two-stage process of first perceiving an incongruity and then resolving it" (Lewis 9). In the poetry of Ogden Nash, resolution is achieved by means of the single concept through which each incongruous element is perceived. While readers may at first be perplexed by the incongruity of a drunk and an infant, the confusion is resolved by noting how much alike they are when they walk.

Third, "humor is a playful, not a serious, response to the incongruous" (Lewis 11). The incongruities that Nash points out to us are neither frightening, nor so complex that we are unable to solve the riddle of the poem. The poet-fool's playful antics, the deliberate mocking of poetry's rules of meter and rhyme, for example, remind the reader that the commonsensical wisdom of the speaker is offered in fun.

Fourth, Lewis remarks that "the perception of an incongruity is subjective, relying as it does on the state of the perceiver's knowledge, expectations, values and norms" (Lewis 11). As Lewis' comments suggest, the appreciation of Nash's humor depends upon a set of shared values between speaker and audience. Nash's great popularity for nearly four decades from the early 1930s to the early 1970s suggests that large audiences identified with the values expressed by Nash's persona. The explanation may be that the value shared, that which allows the audience to perceive the incongruity as humorous, is often the fact of being human. Nash's "The Hippopotamus" illustrates how the perception of incongruity may be subjective depending upon one's perspective:

Behold the hippopotamus!
We laugh at how he looks to us,
And yet in moments dank and grim
I wonder how we look to him.
Peace, peace, thou hippopotamus!
We really look all right to us,
As you no doubt delight the eye
Of other hippopotami.

Finally, Lewis writes that "because the presentation of a particular image or idea as a fitting subject for humor is based on value judgments, the creation and use of humor is an exercise of power: a force in controlling our responses to unexpected and dangerous happenings, a way of shaping the responses and attitudes of others" (Lewis 13). As we have already seen, Nash repeatedly exposes the relativity of values by blurring the supposedly clear lines demarcating good and bad, an action that has consequences both morally and aesthetically. By defining the limits of acceptable behavior, the poet-fool exerts a powerful influence in defining both a standard of morality and a criterion of art.

Source: George W. Crandell, "Moral Incongruity and Humor: The 'Good Bad' Poetry of Ogden Nash," in *Studies in American Humor*, Vol. 7, 1989, pp. 94–103.

Tom Disch

In the following review of Nash's Selected Poems*, Disch outlines Nash's limitations as a poet, stating that his poetic enterprise bears "the curse of sameness."*

For the forty years of Ogden Nash's career as America's foremost white-collar humorist, the popular success of his books of light verse expressed the consensus view of the reading public anent poetry: they, too, dislike it. Dislike, that is, the oracular assumptions that most poets make, their claims to a higher wisdom, a more finely-turned awareness and larger emotions than are found to obtain elsewhere in the middle class. Nash had no such pretensions. He wrote his verses about just those subjects that a well-behaved dinner guest might use for conversational fodder in mixed company. He was the very beau idéal that Emily Post commended to her genteel readers in her perdurable *Etiquette*: "What he says is of no moment. It is the twist he gives to it, the intonation, the personality he puts into his quip. . . . Our greatly beloved Will Rogers could tell a group of people that it had rained today and would probably rain tomorrow, and make everyone burst into laughter. . . ".

But while Mrs Post approved humour, she feared, justly, the subversive power of wit: "The one in greatest danger of making enemies is the man or woman of brilliant wit. If sharp, wit tends to produce a feeling of mistrust even when it stimulates. . . . [P]erfectly well-intentioned people, who mean to say nothing unkind, in the flash of a second 'see a point,' and in the next second score it with no more power to resist than a drug addict has to refuse a dose put into his hand!" It was by his shrewd abstention from saying anything that might give offence, by his spirit's entire accord with the principles set forth in the Post decalogue (the first edition of *Etiquette* appeared in 1922, when Nash was twenty), that Nash secured for his verses an audience (and for himself an income) larger than that enjoyed by any American poet of his time.

In the first poem he placed with the *New Yorker* (where he would soon after be employed), Nash already defined himself as the spokesman and representative of the white-collar audience that felt a kindred complacent malaise about the terms of their employment and the dimensions of their lives:

> I sit in an office at 244 Madison Avenue
> And say to myself You have a responsible job, havenue?
> Why then do you fritter away your time on this doggerel?
> If you have a sore throat you can cure it by using a
> good goggeral,
> If you have a sore foot you can get it fixed by a chiropodist,
> And you can get your original sin removed by St John
> the Bopodist,
> Why then should this flocculent lassitude be incur—
> able?
> Kansas City, Kansas, proves that even Kansas City
> needn't always be Missourible.
> Up up my soul! This inaction is abominable.
> Perhaps it is the result of disturbances abdomin—
> able.
> The pilgrims settled Massachusetts in 1620 when
> they landed on a stone hummock.
> Maybe if they were here now they would settle my
> stomach.
> Oh, if I only had the wings of a bird
> Instead of being confined on Madison Avenue I
> could soar in a jiffy to Second or Third.
> ("Spring Comes to Murray Hill")

Already in these first magazine verses Nash displayed all the tricks and tropes that were to become his trademarks: orthographic deformation for the sake of a rhyme-forced hyper-pun; the use of the archaic vocabulary and syntax of inspirational schoolroom poetry, a venerable gambit, which Nash deploys to mock his own pretensions and aspirations; and (a device that Nash virtually copyrighted, though he did not invent it) the elastic couplet, or Nash Rambler (TM), that can grow to any length provided it's stopped by a rhyme. Anthony Burgess gives the Rambler its due in his very brief pastiche "Introduction", in which he declares: "I am trying to imitate him here, but he is probably quite inimitable. / My own talent for this sort of thing being limited and his virtually illimitable". For Burgess

as toastmaster, Nash transcends all forms of criticism but polite applause: "In the face of the unanalysable I must not be analytical. / And when a writer is beyond criticism it is stupid to go all critical". Or, as Thumper's mother advised Bambi: "If you can't say something nice about someone, you shouldn't say anything at all".

Nash had another mode, not so patentedly his, but one no less essential to his position as laureate to Middle America—the mini-maxim. "In the Vanities / No one wears panities" and, apropos of Baby, "A bit of talcum / Is always walcum" are fair samples. The object of these Ad-Age adages is not so much to be witty and epigrammatic as to be remembered and produced at the appropriate cue, to become a supply of verbal small change for those whose sense of humour is limited to rote performance. In my childhood, in the 1940s in Minnesota, Nash's most famous mini-maxim, "Reflection on Ice-Breaking," ("Candy / Is dandy / But liquor / Is quicker") was trotted out on all occasions of ceremonial imbibing, always with the same preliminary chuckle of obeisance to the god of mirth and catch-phrases.

Time has not been kind to these jingles, since it is difficult to be at once pithy and innocuous, but even Nash's most skilful drolleries suffer for being heaped together into a *Selected Poems*. Candy may be tasty one piece at a time, but this is a gross of Snickers. Very soon the sameness of the product will cloy for even the avidest consumer. If there must be a big book, why not go whole hog and give us Nash's Complete Poems? There is no rationale given for the poems excluded (of the 101 poems from *Versus* of 1949, forty-one are reprinted) and no attempt to produce a semblance of variety by including the lyrics Nash wrote for the musical *One Touch of Venus* or any sample of his books for children. Anything to take the curse of sameness off the enterprise would have been welcome.

Measured against the general level of accomplishment in any standard anthology of humorous verse, Nash's limitations are glaringly evident. Narrative is not in his line, nor comic monologue (one must observe to be able to mimic), nor (least of all) satire, nor yet parody. His frame of intellectual reference remained, until his death in 1971, that of a well-brought-up eleven-year-old, and his allusive power is limited accordingly. His attention to public events is nil. He has no *bêtes noires*, only pet peeves: uncomfortable beds, incompetent caddies, anything smelly or noisy or odd-tasting. He has but a single persona—Dagwood.

What is left, and what Nash was best at, is word-play, as in "The Lama," where, after doubting whether a "three-lllama" anywhere exists, he caps his verses with a prose footnote: "The author's attention has been called to a type of conflagration known as the three-alarmer. Pooh." Yet for every poem that's genuinely risible, *I Wouldn't Have Missed It* offers a dozen that range from perfunctory to bromidic.

Finally it was not Thalia, that sharp-tongued shrew, who was Nash's muse, but Emily Post, who advised, concerning "The Code of a Gentleman": "Exhibitions of anger, fear, hatred, embarrassment, ardor, or hilarity are all bad form in public." No one can say of Ogden Nash that he was not a gentleman.

Source: Tom Disch, "With the Best of Intentions," in *Times Literary Supplement*, February 3, 1984, p. 118.

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The Algonquin Round Table was a famous daily gathering of humorist and literary figures who met at the Algonquin Hotel in New York City in the 1920s and 1930s. Though Nash is not generally considered to have been an active member, the group included many of his closest friends and associates, including S. J. Perelman, Harold Ross (his editor), Robert Benchley, and George S. Kaufman. This book offers a good look into the literary society that surrounded Nash.

Parker, Douglas M., *Ogden Nash: The Life and Work of America's Laureate of Light Verse*, Ivan R. Dee, 2005.

Parker's biography of the poet was published to much critical acclaim in 2005. With the benefit of years of research, he was able to write a more thorough account of Nash's life than is found in any previous biography.

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Stuart's biography is a thoroughly researched and documented scholarly work, telling the poet's story with all of the details that a student of his poetry might care to know.

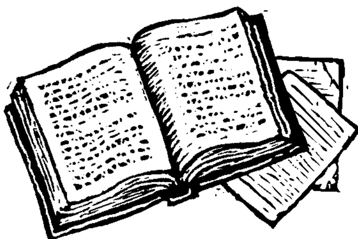
Huswifery

EDWARD TAYLOR

1939

The Puritan poet and minister Edward Taylor wrote "Huswifery" sometime in the late seventeenth century, probably in the mid-1680s, when he had begun writing verse again in earnest. It is a meditative religious poem in which Taylor's speaker becomes a metaphorical spinning wheel on which God will weave a fabric for his glory. It is a poem of submission and worship, with a sense of longing for relationship with God.

"Huswifery" is among Taylor's best-known works, and it is often anthologized because of its graceful treatment of an important theme in the literature and thought of its time. The poem conveys the Puritan mindset and expresses basic religious beliefs and how they were internalized by early Americans who adhered to them. The poem was first published in 1939 and appears in numerous collections, including *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* (1983), where the poem appears with the title's spelling modernized as "Housewifery." The title refers to daily domestic activities, such as weaving, suggesting the intimate connection between a Puritan's faith and his or her everyday life and thoughts. Taylor's own knowledge of spinning would have come at least from his life in rural settings, both in childhood and later in adulthood in America, but some historians also believe he worked in England for a weaver's shop in the nearby town of Hinckley. The specifics of the poet's background knowledge are less important than the elaborate metaphor that he creates in the poem.



AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

A minister and a poet, Edward Taylor is regarded as one of the most important voices of early American literature. Only a few stanzas of his poetry were published in his lifetime, but more of his poems and sermons as well were published in the twentieth century. Since then, their worth to history and literature has secured Taylor's place in American letters.

As best historians can tell, Taylor was born to Margaret and William (a prosperous farmer) in 1642 in Sketchley, Leicestershire, England. Margaret died in 1657, and William died the following year. Taylor continued his schooling and even worked as a teacher for a short period of time. As a staunch Protestant dissenter, he encountered political troubles during the Reformation, preventing him from being a teacher or worshipping as he pleased. Consequently, on April 26, 1668, Taylor set sail for the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

After seventy days at sea, Taylor arrived in Boston, where he was admitted to Harvard College as an upperclassman and even given a kitchen job on campus. Taylor roomed with Samuel Sewall, who would be the presiding judge at the Salem witch trials. Although Taylor's poetry from this time is not accredited much literary value, it does show his developing voice and his early interest in the form.

After graduating in 1671, Taylor was encouraged by Increase Mather to accept an offer to be a minister in a western Massachusetts farming community called Westfield. Although it was winter, Taylor journeyed a hundred miles in inclement weather to his new congregation. Within a few years, Taylor had a parsonage and a meeting house that additionally served as a fort against Indian attacks. On November 5, 1674, Taylor married Elizabeth Fitch. The couple had eight children, only three of whom survived infancy.

Once his life was established and he had safely led his community through a war with the Indians, Taylor resumed writing poetry around 1682. His efforts at this point—both poems and sermons—demonstrate more maturity and discipline than did his previous work in college and in wooing Elizabeth. Some of his poems express themes of spiritual warfare, salvation, grace, and Calvinism. Other poetry is occasional, as when he wrote about a flood, or observational and meditative, as when he wrote about a spider catching a fly. "Huswifery" fits into this latter category. From 1682 to 1725, Taylor worked on a massive two-hundred-poem collection titled *Preparatory Meditations before My Approach to the Lord's Supper*. The collection reads as a sort of spiritual diary and was not published until the twentieth century; although scholars find the verse uneven and a bit repetitive, they agree that this collection gives important insight into the colonial mindset and way of life. A few of the poems are categorized with the metaphysical poetry of the time.

On July 7, 1689, Elizabeth died. Taylor married Ruth Wyllys on June 6, 1692, and she bore six children. Over the years, Taylor continued to write poetry with fervent spiritual themes and theological explorations. He was involved in doctrinal disagreements of the time, having a particular dislike of the Quakers. He was also stern with his congregation, and his discipline even caused occasional uprisings, which he put down. Taylor's health gradually declined, and in January 1721 he wrote a poem bidding farewell to the physical world. Poetry had become for him such a natural form of personal expression, he wrote it to the very end. He died on June 24, 1729, and was buried in Westfield, where his gravestone still stands.

POEM SUMMARY

Stanza 1

From the beginning of this meditative poem, the speaker's desire to be used in God's service is clear. He uses an extended metaphor of weaving to express his servitude to the Lord, beginning with the spinning wheel image, then considering the loom, and finally describing the garment made from the cloth. In the first stanza, the speaker asks the Lord to make him a spinning wheel in the Lord's service. The distaff is the part of the spinning wheel that holds the wool in place so that it can be run through the wheel and spun into yarn or thread. He specifically asks that scripture be this distaff, the steady tool that holds the thread. The speaker acknowledges his own human traits and failings as he describes certain parts of the spinning wheel in human terms. The flyers, for instance (which turn so that they can twist threads into heavier yarn for weaving and then wind it onto the bobbin), are likened to the speaker's affections. This is a revealing comment about the speaker's self-

knowledge, indicating that he is fully aware of how fickle his affections can be. At the same time, he acknowledges a purpose in those affections because the flyers, though they spin and change position, accomplish the changing of thread into something more usable. The speaker refers to his soul as a spool (the piece on which the yarn is wrapped as it is spun) on which the thread is wound. He sees verbal interaction with the Lord, in turn, as the energy that winds the spun wool, making ready for use in whatever project the weaver chooses. This reel (which is the piece that holds the finished yarn so that it can be woven on a loom) represents the final preparatory step before the wool yarn takes on a unique shape and purpose according to the design of the weaver.

Stanza 2

Now the speaker becomes the loom upon which the thread created in the first stanza is made into cloth. A loom is a piece of equipment that enables the weaver to pass the yarn through its slats in an alternating pattern back and forth. The loom has an arm that pushes these rows together tightly to make the cloth stronger and more substantial. The process of weaving on a loom requires patience and skill. The Holy Spirit is to perform such tasks as winding the quills (which are spools on the actual loom) so that the Lord can weave the cloth into the pattern of his choosing. Taylor uses the word *web* to refer to the cloth, and this image reminds the reader that the cloth is natural while also carefully crafted and engineered. A web is a complex structure that is made with a plan for a purpose, as is the cloth. The speaker will add his faith to the cloth, connecting him to the weaver. This is all performed so that the cloth can be made into clothing of salvation.

The word *fulling* refers to the process of thickening the cloth by wetting it, then heating and pressing it between rollers. This gets the cloth to the point where it does not change over time. Taylor credits God's ordinances, or laws, with enabling this process. At this point, the cloth is ready to be dyed and made beautiful in heaven's colors. This makes the cloth readily identifiable as being God's handiwork and belonging to him.

Stanza 3

In the third stanza, the speaker asks that the garment made from the cloth cover his own human failings and flaws, specifically his understanding, will, affections, judgment, conscience, memory, words, and actions. Only then can those things be transformed in such a way that they shine with glory and in turn bring glory to God. The speaker's humility is clear; he expresses that the only way for glory to become part of his ways is with God's participation. It is also interesting to note that the speaker includes words among the things that, without the garment of salvation, would be hopelessly flawed. Because the current meditation is in poem form, the reader can consider whether or not the poem is a flawed human work or whether, through the weaving motif, Taylor's words have become something greater. Wearing this garment of salvation will not only enable the speaker to radiate God's glory in life but also prepare him for heaven when he dies.

THEMES

Transformation

The flow of the poem takes the reader from the origins at the spinning wheel all the way to a completed garment. Taylor relates how simple thread is spun into yarn, which is then woven on a loom to become cloth with certain colors and a pattern. Then the cloth is ready to be made into a garment. This is a dramatic transformation from thread into garment, and throughout each step of the process, the one bringing about the transformation must have a plan, a purpose, and the skills required.

In "Huswifery," Taylor portrays how God transforms the wool so that it can be used to glorify God and eventually secure the speaker's own salvation. The speaker asks to be part of this process, beginning in the first line when he asks God to make him his spinning wheel. By being part of the process, the speaker has not only a sense of divine purpose but also the privilege of seeing firsthand how God will transform the thread into a garment. In the second stanza, the speaker asks to be the loom on which the weaver puts the yarn to good use, creating a piece of cloth. Here the material is transformed again, this time from yarn into cloth; the cloth is even visually transformed from plain into dyed. In the last stanza, this piece of cloth is transformed into a garment of salvation that brings glory to God. At this point, the thread has not only been completely transformed but also has satisfied the purpose of God, who has been its spinner, weaver, and tailor.

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY

- Readers in Taylor's time were familiar with the process of using a spinning wheel, but few modern readers are. Research the spinning wheel and its parts, threads, products, and users. See how knowledge of this device adds a deeper level of understanding to your reading of the poem. Create a diagram describing the parts and functions of a spinning wheel and include excerpts of the poem in your display. Then write a one-paragraph summary explaining the significance of the spinning wheel in the poem.
- Who were the metaphysical poets, and what distinguished them from other poets? Identify two of the major poets in this movement, and read at least three poems by each. What do any of these poems have in common with Taylor's "Huswifery"? Would you categorize Taylor as a metaphysical poet? Why, or why not? Write an essay on the topic.
- "Huswifery" gives an overview of Puritan beliefs; was any aspect surprising to you, or was what you read consistent with your perceptions of Puritans? Read more about Puritan religious beliefs, society, customs, and motivations. Write a one-week journal from the perspective of an important member of that society (such as a pastor or successful farmer). Read one of your diary entries to your class and explain how Puritan life is similar to and different from life in modern society.
- Like Taylor, many early American writers were influenced by the metaphysical poets. Later Puritan writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, however, were more influenced by New England's transcendental writers. Read about these two movements to uncover how literary expression moved from metaphysical poetry to transcendentalism. Create a flowchart to show what you have learned, with examples of writings from both movements.
- Taylor left Harvard for the wilderness of a rural Massachusetts community. Research what life was like in such a town. Find out how the changing seasons affected daily life; what activities families performed alone and what they did as part of the community; how a town's economy was run; and who the most influential people in a community were. Take on the identity of the new newspaper editor of such a town and create your first edition. Then create a second edition for a different time of year.

The Common and the Divine

Taylor's choice to use domestic items to make a profound theological point demonstrates his desire to assign importance to everyday items. By developing a complex metaphor around the process of creating cloth and making it into a garment, Taylor elevates the common to show how he believes God's glory can best be reflected in something that is both humble and accessible. Throughout the speaker's description of the process, he describes the interaction between the common and the divine. His soul—the part of him that connects to the divine—is a simple spool, and the spinning wheel is operated by God. Items common in people's homes during Taylor's time are elevated in being used by God for his purpose, which unfolds over the course of the three stanzas. God's intention all along is to create a garment of salvation that will cloak the speaker in God's glory and prepare him to enter into heaven at the end of his life. This is where the poem becomes personal for the speaker. Just as the common wool has been elevated into something only God could see its potential for, the speaker is elevated from a common man into a reflection of God's glory who is ultimately worthy of heaven.

Spinning wheel *(Image copyright John S. Sfondilias, 2009. Used under license from Shutterstock.com)*

Submission

The speaker's attitude is one of humility and servitude. He never wants to be the one running the spinning wheel, weaving on the loom, or sewing the garment. Instead, he asks God to put him to use in the service of the one who does all those things. He is totally surrendered to the will of God, even outright asking that his own will be cloaked by the garment at the end. The speaker understands God's hierarchy, and his desire is to play his submissive role in that hierarchy, not to climb the hierarchy. The speaker is concerned only with glorifying God, not with vain or proud notions of seeking any glory for himself.

The final stanza reveals that the speaker sees how his submission to the purpose and will of God will ultimately give his life meaning and secure his place in heaven. He knows he cannot gain these for himself, which is why he does not want to be in control. He has faith that God will spin perfectly, weave perfectly, and sew perfectly, and the speaker's joy is to be a tool in his deity's hands as he creates the garment. The speaker also seems to believe that the garment of salvation is one that can only be created by God, and only God can put it on the speaker. His sense of humility is coupled with gratitude, so he never regrets his attitude of submission.

STYLE

Weaving Motif

The predominant stylistic feature of "Huswifery" is the metaphorical comparison (direct comparison made without using "like" or "as") of spinning thread, weaving, and sewing to spiritual transformation. This metaphor is so integral to the poem that it becomes a motif, a recurring symbolic or metaphorical element that is central to a piece of literature. Here, the poem's motif encompasses the spinning wheel, thread, flyers, loom, fabric, dye, and so on. It is significant that Taylor chooses to utilize a motif rather than a series of similes because a motif, like a metaphor, draws a sharper, more intimate connection between the speaker and his desire to be used by God as a participant in each step of the process of creating the garment. It is important to recognize the distinction between the tools used to create the garment and the materials it consists of. The speaker himself is not the thread, the cloth, or the garment but rather asks to be the spinning wheel on which the thread is made into yarn, the loom on which the yarn is made into fabric, and the wearer of the garment made out of the fabric. This is meaningful because the speaker asks God to be the parts used to make the garment, but the speaker does not see himself as the garment of salvation itself. However, he very much sees his need to wear that garment.

As for the particulars of the weaving motif, in the first stanza, the speaker wants to be part of the mechanism that begins to work on the thread, and he calls his human failings the flyers and his soul the spool. His participation is thus not guided by his own will but is directed by the one operating the spinning wheel. A spinning wheel needs a person to work it and make the thread into usable yarn; in this case, the speaker desires to be controlled by God as the one spinning. In the second stanza, the speaker wants to be the loom, a piece that has fewer moving parts than the spinning wheel and which is as useless without a user. Again, the speaker submits wholly to the will of God. And in the last stanza, the speaker admits his own human shortcomings as he asks to be clothed in the garment. He sees the garment as a gift, and he is bold enough to

say that he wants it. Without it, he misses being able to glorify God on earth and in heaven. Of course, the garment itself is a metaphor representing salvation. Describing it as something to be worn helps the reader to visualize a change in the speaker, particularly in light of the way the speaker describes the pattern and color of the cloth in the second stanza.

Meditative Poetry

"Huswifery" is a meditative poem because it conveys Taylor's religious reflections on a specific topic and connects introspection and self-understanding with inspirational truth. The speaker connects his own reality and humility with God's glory, and he does so through an extended metaphor of spinning, weaving, and sewing. The speaker describes his understanding of himself and his personal flaws in light of the greater divine. Meditative poetry is strongly connected to the metaphysical poetry of Taylor's time, and other poets who wrote in the meditative genre include John Donne, George Herbert, Richard Crashaw, and Henry Vaughan.

Formal Diction

The Puritans were not casual about their religion, and they certainly were not casual in their prayers or worship of God. In Taylor's poem, his formal diction is indicative of his reading of the King James Bible, his religious seriousness, and his deep respect for the God he serves. The tone and word choice are all formal without being pretentious. This balance of humility and formality brings the poem a sense of nobility and reverence. For its discussion of salvation and servitude and glory, the speaker keeps his emotions under control and his words carefully chosen. Modern readers may see this as his being aloof from the God he is addressing, but it is best understood as the speaker being well educated yet knowing his place with respect to divinity. This same balance is evident in the poetry of George Herbert, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and even William Shakespeare.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

American Puritanism

Few images are so closely associated with the early settling of America as are those of the Puritans. They originally settled in Massachusetts under the leadership of John Winthrop in 1630. They saw the New World not just as a place of opportunity where they could live in an ideal community but also as a wilderness where they could bring the gospel. Puritans were congregational, which meant that it was important that they lived very near to one another. With the community physically tight, participation in church, elections, and community support were accomplished more easily. It was also easier to keep members accountable, in consistency with the Puritan emphasis on morality and rule keeping.

Because their society was held together by their common beliefs and spiritual discipline, they opted to establish their communities as ones centered on their shared Puritan beliefs. Although the Puritans are often depicted according to sharp stereotypes, the roots of these perceptions are the Puritan intolerance for other belief systems along with their overall seriousness and emphasis on morality and justice. As Calvinists, Puritans adhered to "covenant theology," which emphasizes a person's covenant with God (called a "covenant of grace") and a person's covenants with other people. A Puritan person's covenant of grace secured his salvation, which he would share publicly in order to be made a member of the church. Church membership had spiritual implications (such as the right to participate in the Lord's Supper) and civil implications (such as the right of men to vote).

The Puritans left an important mark on early American literature because their writing captured the struggle and the spirit of these fledgling communities. The poetry and sermons aptly reflect the experiences of early settlers. Puritan literature is not spontaneous or experimental, but rather is carefully crafted and regimented. While poets like Taylor and Anne Bradstreet managed their personal expressions, their poems are rich with purpose and discipline. The sermons that have survived are historically significant in giving great insight into the beliefs, priorities, and passions of these communities. Drama is noticeably absent in Puritan literature because they regarded playacting as an immoral pastime, and fiction is largely absent until later writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–1864), who used the Puritan setting to explore human nature.

Metaphysical Poets

Taylor is often associated with the metaphysical poets, and "Huswifery" is an example of why

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **1680s:** Small Puritan communities, such as Taylor's parish of Westfield, Massachusetts, proliferate in the colonies. While smaller communities are addressing the basic needs of their towns (such as resources, crop planting, security against native attacks, town leadership, and buildings), larger Puritan communities are established enough that they are no longer concerned with mere survival and turn their attention to other things. By the end of the 1680s, the Salem witch trials of 1692 are just around the corner.

  Today: There are no longer Puritan communities in Massachusetts, but there are Congregational Churches, which were founded by the Puritans. Among Congregational Churches, there are denominational distinctions, but the main Calvinist doctrine remains the same.

- **1680s:** Spinning wheels and looms are common household items. Women use these tools to make clothing for their families, starting from scratch.

  Today: Very few women use spinning wheels or looms to make clothing for their families. Most families purchase clothing from stores and know little about the process by which it is made. Women who do make clothing for their families generally purchase the fabric and follow patterns to make garments.

- **1680s:** Puritan writers like Taylor and the minister Cotton Mather are prolific, and their writings reveal the demands of their jobs and their harsh circumstances as well as the heart of their faith and doctrine.

  Today: Many pastors also consider themselves writers and pursue writing as part of their careers. Unlike their Puritan forebears, who focused on doctrine, the most successful of these pastor writers (such as T. D. Jakes and Joel Osteen) write books to help readers merge their faith with their daily lives. Their material is more application oriented, akin to self-help books.

this is so. The metaphysical poets, primarily British, wrote during the seventeenth century, penning verse concerned with psychological and philosophical treatments of common experiences like love and death. Their poetry stood in marked contrast to that of the Elizabethan poets. The metaphysical poets were not afraid to explore the shocking or to look at things in decidedly unconventional ways. Consequently, their poetry's content, language, diction, and imagery seem rough or abstract to some readers. Their approach, even to subjects like passion, faith, and heartache, is logical and draws on seemingly unrelated images from everyday life. Metaphysical poetry is also characterized by attention to form and meter. The most well known of the metaphysical poets were John Donne, Richard Crashaw, Abraham Cowley, and George Herbert. Taylor is one of the very few Americans included in this category.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

Because Taylor was such a prolific writer and produced other lengthy works, there is not a great deal of critical commentary specifically on "Huswifery," despite the fact that it is frequently anthologized. Still, his reputation as an important contributor to early American literature is widely recognized among scholars. Writing in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Donald E. Stanford states that Taylor "is now considered the most important poet to appear in America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries."

Taylor's work is often discussed in the context of the metaphysical poets, and he holds the distinction of being one of only a very few American poets in this largely British category. "Huswifery" is especially relevant in this context, even

New England Puritan man (© North Wind Picture Archives / Alamy)

though it is something of a departure from so much of Taylor's poetry. Generally his poetry has more in common with his sermons, exploring themes of doctrine and scripture. "Huswifery," on the other hand, concerns domestic themes in a very personal spiritual way. Jeffrey A. Hammond writes in *Edward Taylor: Fifty Years of Scholarship and Criticism* that "Huswifery" is "Taylor's most Donne-like and perhaps least representative meditative poem." John Donne is considered the predominant of the metaphysical poets. Stanford goes so far as to remark that "Taylor is sometimes even more fantastic than Donne," adding that "in his diction Taylor combined the colloquial with the cosmic (again like Donne), employing abstruse theological or philosophical terms with the homely idiom of the farm or the weaver's trade." But "Huswifery" is not just an example of metaphysical poetry. Jeff Jeske comments in *The Tayloring Shop: Essays on the Poetry of Edward Taylor in Honor of Thomas M. and Virginia L. Davis* that the poem "derives entirely from the emblem tradition." An *emblem* is an image with a short poem or motto carrying a moral theme. Emblem books were popular in the fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries and derived from the emerging art of engraving. Emblem books were collections of emblems, giving readers short, accessible snippets of literature and insight. Jeske places "Huswifery" in this tradition because of the brevity of the poem, the spiritual content, and the strong visual metaphor.

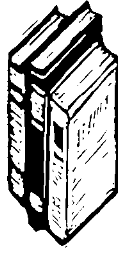
CRITICISM

Jennifer Bussey

Bussey has a bachelor's degree in English literature and a master's degree in interdisciplinary studies. She is an independent writer specializing in literature. In the following essay, Bussey compares "Huswifery" to Psalm 23 in the Bible.

Edward Taylor was a Puritan minister, poet, and writer. He authored volumes of sermons and verse, and he remains one of the most important literary voices in early American history. His poems, like his sermons, center on matters of faith and doctrine, although his poetry often takes on a personal, meditative character. In "Huswifery," Taylor's speaker longs to be used by God in the process of making a garment of salvation. The poem is shaped by the motif through which the speaker expresses a personal desire and by the exploration of spiritual truths. Similarly, David, in the biblical book of Psalms, writes poetry to express himself and his relationship to God. David's psalms are varied in tone and purpose; they are at times for worship, thanksgiving, longing, humility, confession, joy, and every other emotion and experience David went through. Perhaps the most famous of his psalms is Psalm 23. Many are familiar with the lines beginning, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want"; the psalm is often quoted at funerals or in times of tragedy and struggle. Like "Huswifery," Psalm 23 relies on a motif to relate personal longing and a pursuit of spiritual truth. A closer look reveals deeper similarities.

In "Huswifery," the speaker offers an extended metaphor of spinning wool into yarn, which is then woven into fabric and then dyed to be made into a garment of salvation. The speaker asks for God himself to be the spinning wheel, for his own soul to be the spool, and for his own desires and will to be the flyers. The speaker then



WHAT DO I READ NEXT?

- Elizabeth Wayland Barber's 1995 book *Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years; Women, Cloth, and Society in Early Times* provides historical and pictorial information about the history of spinning yarn and weaving cloth on looms all over the world. She looks at the history of the equipment and the process to reveal to today's ready-to-wear generation what kind of work went into making clothes for one's family.
- *The Poems of Edward Taylor: A Reference Guide* (2003), edited by Rosemary Fithian Guruswamy, is a single volume containing Taylor's poetry along with biographical, historical, theological, and literary commentary to help the reader better understand the poems, the poet, and his times.
- Edited by David D. Hall, *Puritans in the New World: A Critical Anthology* (2004) presents the Puritan experience in the words of the Puritans themselves. Well-known writers such as Anne Bradstreet and Jonathan Edwards are featured, alongside the writings of religious dissenters of the time, a narrative of a converted Native American, and descriptions of experiences by laypeople.
- *Errand into the Wilderness* (1956), by Perry Miller, is a historical exploration into the minds and motivations of the Puritans who journeyed to America (as Edwards did) in search of something they could not find at home. Facing numerous challenges, the Puritans were strong minded and individualistic, and Perry's account of their culture is often referred to as a counterbalance to the view of Puritans as rigid and unfeeling.

wants to be the loom on which the yarn is taken further through the process. In both metaphors, the speaker sees himself as a piece of equipment unable to function on its own, rather needing someone with the necessary skills to come and

BOTH POETS USE A SET OF ORDINARY IMAGES TO RELATE THEOLOGICAL TRUTHS AND TO EXPRESS THEIR DESIRE TO BE UNDER THE AUTHORITY OF GOD."

put him to good use. Finally, the speaker looks forward to being clothed in the strikingly beautiful garment. Throughout, the speaker's desire is not for his own greatness or importance but to glorify God in his time on earth and then in death, when he shall be worthy of entering God's kingdom.

David's Psalm 23 employs the motif of a sheep and a shepherd. The speaker is a mere sheep, wholly dependent on the Lord, his shepherd. Whereas Taylor's speaker asks to be the object in his metaphor, David already is the object in his metaphor. This difference is subtle, but it affects the tone of the poem. David trusts the shepherd completely, knowing that the shepherd is his source of provision, safety, and peace. He acknowledges that the shepherd keeps him on the right path for the sake of the shepherd's name. David goes so far as to say that staying close to the shepherd keeps him safe from his enemies, so safe that he is not afraid. He is comforted by the shepherd's tools (rod and staff), and his soul is so full of blessings and righteousness from being near the shepherd that he says his cup overflows. The psalm is rich with imagery and metaphor, even beyond the primary metaphor of the sheep and the shepherd. David refers to fearing mortality as a shadowy valley of death. He also describes the Lord setting a table for the speaker in front of his enemies, a visual expression of what it must be like for the speaker to feel God's favor over his enemies. The image of the overflowing cup is another well-known metaphor that depicts the speaker's experience of God's blessings. At the very end, David proclaims that he will live in the Lord's house forever, another metaphor describing eternity and heaven.

Both Taylor and David use imagery related to an activity that was common in their communities. Taylor relies on the reader's understanding of the domestic activity of weaving to understand the imagery in his poem. The terms

and the steps in the process that send modern readers looking for footnotes were readily grasped by seventeenth-century Americans living in rural farming communities. The tools and skills center on the process of transforming wool into a garment, a process Taylor's contemporaries understood very well. It is also an activity that was common, meaning it was both ordinary and humble. The poet looks no farther than what he already knows as a part of everyday life, and in this activity he finds spiritual insight.

Similarly, David relies on imagery of sheepherding, which his contemporaries understood well, as it was part of their everyday life and community. David's peers would have automatically grasped the relationship between a shepherd and his flock. And understanding this as well as anyone would have been David himself, who worked for years in his youth as a shepherd. He thus knew the lowliness, the dirtiness, the humility, the servitude, the solitude, the lack of status, and the hard physical work of being in charge of a flock. He also knew all about the helplessness of the sheep and their behavior, both individually and collectively. He knew about the importance of the flock to the survival of the individual sheep and about the shepherd's crucial role in overseeing his flock. Psalm 23 refers to the shepherd leading him to the best green pastures and the best still water. He also describes the comfort that the shepherd's tools—the rod and the staff—bring to the sheep. Order and leadership are what they need. Both poets use a set of ordinary images to relate theological truths and to express their desire to be under the authority of God. Taylor wants to be the spinning wheel and the loom in God's hands, used for his will; David wants to be the lowly sheep in total submission to the trustworthy shepherd.

Another similarity is that both poets refer to being peaceful in their thoughts of dying. Their faith and close relationships to God effectively neutralize fear of death. Taylor's speaker looks forward to wearing his garment of salvation before the Lord as he enters the kingdom of heaven for all eternity. Further, he understands that he did not create the salvation that gets him there, so he is not only peaceful about the afterlife but also grateful to God. David states that he is unafraid of evil as he walks through the valley of the shadow of death. He does not fear evil or death because the Lord is with him; God as the shepherd does not leave his flock because he knows that they are helpless on their own. Taking on the identity of a sheep, David realizes that where he is going and what he is facing are far less important than the fact that his shepherd has not left him. In both poems, then, the poets use their particular metaphors to address the universal and often frightening topic of death, and in both cases their peace about it springs from their faith.

While these two poems both reflect the great faiths of their writers, and do so with similar approaches, the poems are very different in terms of theme and application. "Huswifery" is about submission to God's will and making a conscious decision to be steered and used by him. The result is God's glory. Psalm 23 certainly carries a theme of submission to God's authority, but that theme is not the center of the poem as in "Huswifery." David describes being a sheep in need of a leader, but the poem is really about the contentment that experience brings. Taylor's poem would speak to a person seeking guidance in life or pursuing a desire to glorify God, whereas David's poem would speak to anyone in a time of trouble, whether it be death, tragedy, confrontation with enemies, or anxiety. Although the poems are tied together by a common faith, their purposes are different. Another important point to keep in mind when reading both poems is that neither was written for publication. David's psalms were his personal way of expressing himself *for* himself and his God. Taylor did not want his poems published, and it was not until the twentieth century that "Huswifery" became available to the public. Reading these two poems and realizing how different the poets and their purposes were, while still being able to see the parallels and the faith these two men shared, is revealing. At heart, these two men from very different times and positions shared the same desire to know God better and see his hand in the activities and struggles of their everyday lives.

Source: Jennifer Bussey, Critical Essay on "Huswifery," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2010.

Clark Griffith

In the following excerpt, Griffith explores Taylor's allegorical portrayals of the relationship between God and humans in his poems, including "Huswifery."

. . . So perceptive a reader as Austin Warren praises the originality of "Huswifery" and holds that its elaboration of one key figure is typical of the poetry of conceits which we identify with the metaphysical manner. But I find it necessary to demur on both counts. Actually, I suspect, the

IT WOULD SEEM THAT, EARLY AND LATE, THE INVISIBLE OPERATOR AND THE VISIBLE MACHINE HAVE STRUCK WRITERS AS BEING PERFECT EMBLEMS THROUGH WHICH TO EXPRESS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DIVINE POWER AND THE IMPOTENCE OF MAN."

poem appears original more because it developes an image that is no longer familiar to us than because of anything that is bold or especially impressive in the way the image is handled. Once we recover some sense of what a spinning wheel was, the association of this implement with man and the conversion of man into the implement of God is likely to seem a bit perfunctory. Every part of the cloth making process has simply been given a point-for-point resemblance to God's moral re-fabrication of the total self. And the somewhat dogged quality of the whole is perhaps indicated by its openness to being parodied. *Make me, O Lord, thy Printing Press compleate* or *Make Me, O Lord, thy Coach and Four compleate*. One feels that, with a minimum of ingenuity, the parts of these contrivances could also be itemized into symbols, and itemized in such a way that not much in Taylor's conception would need to be sacrificed.

Judged by the terms of our discussion, then, "Huswifery" would appear to be one of those relatively rare instances where Taylor employs the allegorical mode throughout. And the accuracy of calling the poem allegorical depends not only upon the kind of image that is presented; it derives as well from the thematic uses to which this image is put. What Taylor says about sovereignty is, for example, not essentially unlike the thought of Job—

> My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle, and are spent without hope

—or the idea set forth in a well known hymn:

> Have Thine own way, Lord, have Thine own way,
> Thou art the Potter, I am the clay. . . .

Nor does his figure function much differently from the one devised by Mark Twain, when in the bitterness of his old age he asked *What Is Man?*, and answered that man is a sewing machine, upon whose foot pedals the Fates pump and press in order to spell out his destiny. Nor, finally, is the operation of his spinning wheel beyond comparing with the similar, though better, trope that appears in Chapter 93 of *Moby Dick*, where Pip, maddened by life at sea, descends to the source of all experience, and beholds God's foot busily at work on the treadles of the loom. Among these conceptions, there is room—*mutatis mutandis!*—for a variety of responses to God, a large number of different attitudes toward His moral nature and toward the part He plays in human affairs. The point is, however, that the shaping of the conceptions has in every case been about identical. It would seem that, early and late, the invisible Operator and the visible machine have struck writers as being perfect emblems through which to express the relationship between divine power and the impotence of man.

For note that this *is* the relationship described by "Huswifery." Its speaker can progress toward Glory, only if God first consents to set him in motion. Unless divine intervention occurs, the speaker will be morally static; he must remain fixed and helpless, like an unworked wheel. In short, the direction of the poem is determined by its allegorical symbol: a symbol which points steadily downward from the majestic and quite arbitrary God who does things, to man's utter dependency in the world below.

And it is this sense of human triviality—this creation of a metaphor that abases man and shows, ironically, just how uncreative man is when considered apart from God—which I now wish to contrast with the tone and technique in the first half of Taylor's "Preface to Gods Determinations Concerning His Elect":

> Infinity, when all things it beheld
> In Nothing, and of Nothing all did build,
> Upon what base was fixt the Lath, wherein
> He turn'd this Globe, and riggalld it so trim?
> Who blew the Bellows of his Furnace Vast?
> Or held the Mould wherein the world was cast?
> Who laid its Corner Stone? Or whose Command?
> Where stand the Pillars upon which it stands?
> Who Lac'de and Fillitted the Earth so fine,
> With Rivers, like green Ribbons Smaragdine?
> Who made the Sea's its Selvedge and it locks
> Like a Quilt Ball within a Silver Box?
> Who Spread its Canopy? Or Curtains Spun?

Who in this Bowling Alley bowld the Sun?
Who made it always when it rises set
To go at once both down, and up to get?
Who the Curtain rods made for this Tapistry?
Who hung the twinckling Lanthorns in the
Sky?
Who? who did this? or who is he? Why, know
Its Onely Might Almighty this did doe.
His hand hath made this noble worke which
Stands
His Glorious Handywork not made by
hands. . . .

Here, in his longest, most ambitious work, Taylor begins literally in the beginning, with his own version of the Creation story. But since God's precise means of creating have never yet been vouchsafed to mankind (and are not even specified by Genesis), the poet is quickly troubled by the same dilemma he confronted in "Meditation 8." How, short of compromising his purpose, shall he undertake to state the unstateable? His method for trying consists in part of paradoxes, which underscore the sheer mystery of Creation, and in part of the constant questions, which are expressive of man's awe and sense of wonder in the face of the mystery. Chiefly, however, it is the allegorical mode that lets Taylor make headway against his impossible subject.

He opens with a tacit concession: no merely human wit can hope to say what happened when, without reference to tools or blueprints, God decided to build all things out of nothingness. Nevertheless, this fetching from the void can be represented approximately, or told through symbols. Beginning in line three, therefore, the gestures of God, as He shapes the raw materials of the universe, are likened to gestures performed by the human artisan: the builder, the sempstress, the embroiderer, the dressmaker, the carpenter, and so on. Hidden Deity is thus revealed through the same strategy—and, indeed, through much the same pattern of process-and-product metaphors—that existed in both "Meditation 8" and "Huswifery."

And yet, the more one reads the "Preface," the more one senses that after a while God and God's workmanship are not really the concern of the metaphors. The first noticeable break occurs with the simile in lines 9–10. Before the word *like*, the actions come from God, who, in the role of semptress has "Lacde and Fillitted" the earth with rivers. But not so the material after *like*. It tells how the poet contemplates God's rivers and—acting entirely on his own—converts them into green and bejewelled (or sparkling) ribbons. At this point, no real damage is done, since God's actions in making the rivers remain more interesting poetically than the poet's somewhat stereotyped image of what has been made. With the simile in the next two lines, however, a different effect is achieved.

Once again, God acts first, so that it is He, as a combination builder and embroiderer, who scoops out the ocean bed, fills it with water, and then embellishes the scene with a landed trim. But next comes the poet to observe this same shore line, and to be reminded that, for him, it resembles a "Quilt Ball" (a solid substance with a shaggy edge) set down amidst a "Silver (i. e., shimmering and watery-appearing) Box," in which it will not fray away. This time, the poet seems almost as ingenious as God; and now, without further recourse to simile, the succeeding lines go on to dramatize the possibility that human inventiveness can actually be superior to Heaven's. All that God devises is the world everyone sees. He is responsible only for the sky and gravity, for the stars and sun. On the other hand, it is the feat of the poet that he can survey this spectacle, proceed to refurbish each detail in the light of his special sensitivity, and out of the refurbishment bring into existence a new and daringly different order of reality. In his hands, the sky we all know has been transformed into a canopy with curtains; our familiar sun becomes a bowling ball; the laws that suspend us are turned into curtain rods; and the stars that have been around too long to be very surprising are re-cast as those "twinckling Lanthorns" which do astonish mightily.

The upshot, it seems to me, is a curious blurring of Taylor's intentions. Though he sets out (as a penitent) to celebrate God's creativity, he ends (as creator) by paying lavish tribute to his own. At the outset, he may struggle to find symbols that will adequately express how God wrought the universe. Even as he does so, however, the symbols come to reflect what he sees when he looks at the universe; and, in their freshness and novelty, they are images which allow for some striking innovations in God's original. As in "Meditation 8," then, metaphor liberates Taylor, only to involve him in what, for the Puritan, was the most serious offense that the artist could commit. In effect, two worlds are brought together in the "Preface": the world God made, and the one which is re-shaped by the poet. And not only does this arrangement endow the poet with the divine prerogative of creating; it likewise turns

him into the outright competitor of Heaven. His fabrication may be scaled down in size from God's. But as allegorical resemblances give way to conceits, there can be little doubt about its having all the better of it poetically. To the question, "who did this?", the only legitimate answer has to be *the poet did it*—did it, true enough, by working with materials that God gave him, but did it, all the same, through the power of his own unique insight and through the capacity he had for translating insight into language. . . .

Source: Clark Griffith, "Edward Taylor and the Momentum of Metaphor," in *ELH*, Vol. 33, No. 4, December 1966, pp. 448–60.

THE PROBLEM IS—AND THIS IS TYPICAL OF ALL TAYLOR POEMS—THAT THE FULL MEANING OF ITS TERMS IS NOT CONTAINED IN THE POEM ITSELF, BUT DRAWS FROM THE ENTIRE BODY OF TAYLOR'S WRITING, INCLUDING HIS PROSE."

Norman S. Grabo

In the following excerpt, Grabo examines the image of the robe in "Huswifery" in the context of Taylor's other writings.

"Huswifery" is perhaps Edward Taylor's best known poem, though certainly not his best. From its first appearance in 1937, it has been reprinted, anthologized, and alluded to more frequently than any of his other poems, and perhaps the spinning wheel image of the first line is the one most clearly etched in readers' memories. But Taylor is a poet of striking first lines, and his readers tend to forget, if they did not from the beginning ignore, the remainder of the poem. And in this sense, of those poems available to readers, "Huswifery" might as readily be described as Taylor's least known poem.

Certainly the poem is clear enough. Its three-fold division is neat, orderly, more-or-less logical: first yarn spun on the poet-wheel, then that very yarn woven, fulled, and ornamented upon the poet-loom, and finally the finished garment worn upon the poet's soul as a holy robe for glory. Moreover, no more than ten words are recondite, quaint, or technical enough to merit close attention—words pertaining to spinning, weaving, and decorating cloth—and once they are made clear, one feels somehow that the poem as a whole makes sense. In fact, the language of "Huswifery" is common and direct, without syntactic tricks or flourishes, and really quite ordinary. And although the intricacies of his conceit challenge understanding, they yield readily to analysis, for Taylor spells out the psychic and religious equivalents of his images in the poem itself. For these reasons, most critical remarks on "Huswifery" occupy no more than a paragraph of random observation or structural résumé. The "meaning" of the poem is ordinarily dismissed in a sentence, as self-evident. In short, "Huswifery" simply does not seem to need explication.

Yet I would declare that in spite of the transparent obviousness of Taylor's language, or perhaps because of it, readers have not recognized "Huswifery's" very specific meaning and use. I would further suggest that this meaning hinges upon Taylor's "Holy robes for glory," that no critic has yet explained what these robes are, and therefore that "Huswifery" is not yet understood according to Taylor's probable intention. No matter how ingeniously the poem's other details are explored, the poem is meaningless until its "Holy robes for glory" are clearly identified. The problem is—and this is typical of all Taylor poems—that the full meaning of its terms is not contained in the poem itself, but draws from the entire body of Taylor's writing, including his prose. Nevertheless, the key to this meaning *is* in "Huswifery," in the weaving or cloth-making image itself, which Taylor was very fond.

Several reasons are frequently advanced to account for Taylor's use of weaving. In the first place, his Leicestershire birthplace lay near the heart of England's weaving industry. Then, too, a spinning wheel and loom were common household objects, both in England and on the American frontier, where he lived from 1671 on. Moreover, especially in England, he could not have missed the devotional devices wrought into clothing and hangings for all manner of uses. And besides, there were Biblical precedents for the image, some of which found their way into theological works known and used by Taylor. But regardless of its sources, one may learn what weaving meant to Taylor by examining those passages in his writing where the garment-making process functions structurally.

Taylor's earliest known use of the image has no specific religious associations, but stands for the interweaving of love and language in the fabric

of a poem. In a kind of greeting-card verse sent to one of his English schoolmates, Taylor wrote:

> What though my muse be not addornd so rare
> As Ovids golden verses to declare
> My love: yet it is in the loome tyed
> Where golden quills of love weave on the web
> Which web I take out of my loome and send
> It, as a present unto you my friende
> But though I send the web I keepe the thrum
> To draw an other web up in my loome.

These lines were almost certainly written before 1668; apart from their occasional nature, crudeness, and forced sentiment, they evince Taylor's full appreciation of the usefulness of the weaving conceit long before he began his major poetic endeavors—his *Preparatory Meditations*—in 1682.

When at Harvard in 1671 he declaimed publicly upon the nature of the English language, he called upon the conceit again. The "Declamation" introduces approriate, but rather general, religious implications. Addressing an audience at once intellectual and religious, Taylor presents the commonplace argument that speech is the mind's clothing, or, more particularly, that the god-like particle in man, his intellectual faculty, as Taylor elsewhere calls it, communicates with other "Sparks Divine" in its very best attire:

> Speech therefore is their Holy dayes attire.
> Now that Speech Wealthi'st is, whose Curious Web
> Of finest twine is wrought, not Cumbered
> With Knots, Galls, Ends, or Thrums, but doth obtain
> All Golden Rhetorick to trim the same,
> With which our English is as richly dresst
> As those last Oracles crackt o're this Desk,
> Whose Web is of the Purest-finest Twine.
> (ll. 48–55)

Other languages come from ill-twisted, knotty, and broken threads, impaired by elaborate inflections, while the twine of English, like the yarn of "Huswifery," is fine.

Taylor does not maintain the stages of cloth processing in this poem as clearly as in "Huswifery." In line 103, punning on the parts of speech and the technical vocabulary of grammar, Taylor writes: "But time Declines, I must Declentions leave, / And step into the Loom the Web to weave" (ll. 103–104). Eleven lines later his concern is still with the spinning process, and not the weaving, but by line 141 "Oratories noble Web" is ready to deck the "English Muse in Poetry." By line 170, Taylor's garment is so encrusted and "Spruc't up" with pearls, lace, "Silver Chits," and ribbons, that it could only suit Cotton Mather's "Russian ambassador." The curious thing is that Taylor should at this point describe the mind as clothed in "English Huswifry" (l. 172), ready "to set / Forth Majesty in e'ry single jet." The majesty Taylor's "English Satten" here sets forth may well refer to man's most majestic thoughts—his considerations of the mysteries of Christ—but Taylor carefully points out that English is not "Sacred Web," and abandons the weaving image in the conclusion of his "Declamation."

Such labored wit did not keep the weaving image from acquiring a new dimension of personal significance for the poet. In 1674 Taylor and his betrothed, Elizabeth Fitch, were exchanging verses. Those written by Mistress Fitch no longer exist, but Taylor's response to one of them, dated 27 October 1674, turns once more to poetic huswifery:

> Were but my Muse an Huswife Good and could
> Spin out a Phansy fine and Weave it Would
> In Sapphick Web and Cloath my Love therein,
> I'de Carde the rowls; She should the Phansy spin.
> But I no Rowling Phansy have to run,
> Nor she such silken Huswifry ere spun.

While the finished garment here promises to be, as in the other two poems, the language or poem itself, it quickly shifts to become "That long'd for Web of new Relation, gay, / That must be wove upon our Wedden Day" (ll. 13–14), and Taylor's attention focuses upon the decorations woven into or applied to the fabric—hearts, crosses, harps, threads of heart-strings, and an emblematic device of a pillar of prayer rising to a sun of glory whose golden threads "dart" the entire garment.

With this introduction of the word *glory*, Taylor moves in the direction of his most significant use of the weaving image. Here the finished garment is both the living state of marriage, a "Web of new Relation" between persons, and the poem expressing that longed-for state. Matrimony was not technically a sacrament according to the Westminster Confession, but it was not without spiritual implications for Puritans, and Taylor concluded his lines to the girl he married

two weeks later with a full awareness of the religious meaning of their new garment:

> Let's Cloath ourselves, my Dove,
> With this Effulgeant Web and our pickt Love
> Wrapt up therein, and lets, by walking right,
> Loves brightest Mantle make still shine more bright,
> For then its glory shall ascend on high
> The Highest One alone to glorify,
> Which rising will let such a glory fall
> Upon our Lives that glorify them shall. (ll. 53–60)

By this point the finished web is simultaneously the poem itself, the love between two people, their marriage, and an object like the robes of "Huswifery" giving glory to God and gaining glory unto itself in that act.

For Taylor, marriage was itself a convenient metaphor to designate various acts of union: "All Union being a making One of Severall, lyeth in joyning things together. Our Lord Styles marriage Union a joyning together. Matth. 19. 5. So the Mysticall Union is a joyning the Soule and Christ together. I Cor. 6. 17. and So this Personall Union, is a joyning the Godhead, and Manhood together." At six-week intervals Taylor contemplated these unions as he readied sacrament-day sermons for his Westfield congregation. And after composing each of these sermons (at least from 1682), he wrote a verse meditation based upon the doctrine of the sermon he had just written. These 217 "Preparatory Meditations"—beginning with "What hath thy Godhead, as not satisfide / Marri'de our Manhood, making it its Bride?" of Meditation One—naturally abound in references to marriages, and not surprisingly present those references from time to time in the garment image of "Huswifery."

In Meditation I:41, for example, composed in 1691, Taylor contemplates the "Clustered Miracles" of the hypostatical union of human and divine natures in the person of Christ:

> Here is Gods Son,
> Wove in a Web of Flesh, and Bloode rich geere.
> Eternall Wisdoms Huswifry well spun.
> Which through the Laws pure Fulling mills did pass.
> And so went home the Wealthy'st Web that was.

Here, of course, Christ is himself the glorious garment; that is, the garment of flesh and blood (the human nature) adorns the Person of the Son. We see—as we might only have guessed from "Huswifery"—that the fulling mills do not merely "finish" the fabric, but by abrasive action purify it. The image is used again in a very similar way as late as 1715, where, however, the stiffly bejeweled garment leads Taylor's imagination abruptly into the image of a temple. The opening lines of that poem—Meditation II:128—present the image clearly:

> My Deare-Deare Lord, my Heart is Lodgd in thee:
> Thy Person lodgd in bright Divinity
> And waring Cloaths made of the best web bee
> Wove in the golde Loom of Humanity.
> All lin'de and overlaide with Wealthi'st lace
> The finest Silke of Sanctifying Grace. (ll. 1–6)

Shortly after, we learn that the garment in this poem is the fabric covering the soul, as in "Huswifery" the faculties of the soul are adorned, though both soul and body belong to Christ. The significant addition in this poem to the ideas of "Huswifery" is the element of "Sanctifying Grace," which has not hitherto been associated with the garment imagery, but which has considerable importance for "Huswifery."

It is with regard to the other concept of union—the union between the soul and Christ experienced at the sacrament of the Lord's Supper—that Taylor's weaving image comes closest to the statement of "Huswifery."Meditation I:42, written in 1691, pleads with Christ to

> Unkey my Heart; unlock thy Wardrobe: bring
> Out royall Robes: adorne my Soule, Lord: so,
> My Love in rich attire shall on my King
> Attend, and honour on him well bestow.
> In glory he prepares for his a place
> Whom he doth all beglory here with grace.
> (ll. 19–24)

As in Meditation II:128, the garment intentionally fuses with the glorious aspect of a palace—"The Fathers House blancht o're with orient Grace" (l. 30)—and the word *blancht* establishes the connection, suggesting that once the soul is adorned with the "royall Robes," it possesses the heavenly kingdom through its "mystical" union with Christ:

> Adorn me, Lord, with Holy Huswifry.
> All blanch my Robes with Clusters of thy Graces.
> (ll. 37–38)

Again grace makes its appearance, as does glory, but a new association also arises, the more

specific suggestion that the element of righteousness is closely connected with the robes of glory. But the precise nature and place of righteousness in the allegory shows only nebulously; in fact, the word is not even used in this meditation.

But Meditation I:42 occurs near the beginning of what appears to be a series of related poems. Meditations I:41–49 all cite scriptural texts pertaining to Christ's preparation of the soul for its entrance into the everlasting state of glorification. Taylor often seems to have linked his meditations in sequential arrangements, and since the poems are based upon the subjects of his sermons, we may infer that Taylor was probably preaching a series of sermons on a related topic from at least 24 May 1691 to 26 February 1693. From the number of times the word *righteousness* comes up in this series of poems, I would suggest that righteousness was a major part of the subject of Taylor's sacrament-day sermons during that period, that Meditations I:41–49 are primarily concerned with that idea, and that the garments, crown, and other apparel described in the preparation of the soul stand for the idea of righteousness.

Three meditations following I:42 treat the "Crown of Life, of Glory, Righteousness," and then in Meditation I:46, upon an unknown doctrine drawn from "Rev. 3.5. The same shall be cloathed in White Raiment," Taylor again employs the imagery of "Huswifery":

> I'm but a Ball of dirt. Wilt thou adorn
> Mee with thy Web wove in thy Loom Divine
> The Whitest Web in Glory, that the morn
> Nay, that all Angell glory, doth ore shine?
> They ware no such. This whitest Lawn most fine
> Is onely worn, my Lord, by thee and thine.
> (ll. 13–18)

Here both Christ and His Elect wear the robe, not now the robe "Wove in the golde Loom of Humanity" (Med. II:128), but the "Web wove in thy Loom Divine." And the poem continues to develop the details of the garment-making conceit. Of the glorious robes worn by the angels, Taylor writes:

> Their Web is wealthy, wove of Wealthy Silke
> Well wrought indeed, its all brancht Taffity.
> But this thy Web more white by far than milke
> Spun on thy Wheele twine of thy Deity
> Wove in thy Web, Fulld in thy mill by hand
> Makes them in all their bravery seem tand.
> This Web is wrought by best, and noblest Art
> That heaven doth afford of twine most choice
> All brancht, and richly flowerd in every part
> With all the sparkling flowers of Paradise
> To be thy Ware alone, who hast no peere
> And Robes for glorious Saints to thee most deare.
> (ll. 25–36)

The fine twine of "Huswifery" now is said to be deity itself. Christ and His saints together wear the garment, and the "sparkling flowers of Paradise" pink these robes as they do the garment of "Huswifery."

But while Taylor's robe clearly prepares the soul for everlasting glory, it also has a more immediate purpose. All the "Preparatory Meditations" are designed to ready Taylor's soul for the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, where the marriage of Christ's divine and human natures is celebrated and where the soul itself performs the symbolic rite of becoming united to Christ. In Meditation II:71, written 20 October 1706, Taylor describes the sacramental feast "Where Saints are Guests and Angells waiters are":

> The Wedden garment of Christs Righteousness
> And Holy Cloathes of Sanctity most pure,
> Are their atire, their Festivall rich dress. (ll. 25–27)

Again the element of righteousness qualifies the garment, but as in all the other poems, the term is not described. Supposedly the sermons that originally accompanied Meditations I:41–49 would clarify not only Taylor's use of that term but the image of garment-making as well that seems connected with it. But these sermons are lost.

Another series of sermons, however, speaks pointedly to the image of the garment, its relationship to the Lord's Supper, the significance of righteousness, and therefore to the poem "Huswifery." These are not sacrament-day sermons, but grow out of Taylor's increasing concern for the disregard into which the sacrament was falling, especially because of the liberalizing activities of Solomon Stoddard, pastor of the church at Northampton, Massachusetts. When the first New England congregations gathered, all church members took the sacrament. After about 1650, however, participation fell off seriously, and a number of ministers—Stoddard the most notable—began to reconsider the requirements for participating in communion. In 1690, finally, Stoddard reformed the practice of his

own very influential congregation: (1) he proposed that the Lord's Supper was not merely a grace-strengthening, but a grace-begetting ordinance, a means of conversion; (2) he therefore admitted to the sacrament all persons of non-scandalous behavior who desired to receive it; and (3) he required no public relation of the special signs of God's grace working upon the souls of those seeking full church membership. Such apostasy "gastered" Edward Taylor, as he would have put it, and he turned his pulpit into a bastion from which to repulse the attacks of Stoddard's popular religion.

Chief among his retorts to Stoddard are his eight sermons preached in 1694 and later revised into a "Treatise Concerning the Lord's Supper." These are not, like Taylor's *Christographia*, sacrament-day sermons, but their main subject is the sacrament, and because of the scriptural parable which yields their central doctrines, they fall naturally into the imagery of "Huswifery." The "Treatise" explores the parable of the king who sends out messengers to invite guests to the wedding feast of his son. (Matt. XXII.1–14). One of the invited guests comes without a wedding garment, is discovered by the king, who reprimands him and has him bound hand and foot and cast into utter darkness. Taylor makes verse 12, that point at which the king asks the dumbfounded guest why he is present without the proper garment, the working text of his treatise. From it he draws four central doctrines, each developed in a separate sermon or chapter: (1) only the sacrament of the Lord's Supper fits all the conditions of the parable of the wedding feast; (2) a wedding garment is absolutely necessary for attendance at the sacrament; (3) God will judge most harshly those who appear without the garment; and (4) there is no reason for approaching the sacramental feast without the wedding garment. The remaining four sermons "apply" these truths.

One would rightly expect Taylor's second sermon to pertain most directly to "Huswifery," but it is the first sermon that introduces relevant imagery. "Why," asks Taylor, "is there a Wedden Feast to which all under the Gospell are urged to Come?" To this question he offers two answers. One is that the marriage of Christ to a human soul—the mystical and hypostatical unions mentioned above—is a marriage of great concern and must be celebrated in worthy human activity. The other answer, significantly joined with the question of union and the natural image of marriage to represent it, is that the feast is designed to stir men up to acts of preparation. And it is an aspect of preparation that calls forth the "Huswifery" imagery: "The fitting of a Person for the Celebration of this Wedden, is bought out of the Shops of Divine Grace. The trimmings are not of natures Husswifry. The Web that the Wedden Cloaths are made of is the rich and Well wrought Broadcloath of the Holy Ghost. The pure fine Cloath of Grace" (p. 12).

But the second sermon raises the question of most concern to "Huswifery." What exactly is this garment that makes it so necessary to the sacrament? Taylor answers by first declaring what the garment is *not*. It is not a civil, sober life and conversation (which forces us to reexamine Taylor's use of *conversation* in "Huswifery"). If it were, we should have to conclude that the unfortunate wedding guest of the parable suffered eternal condemnation for mere incivility. The garment is also not a doctrinal profession, that is, a belief in salvation through Christ, for the wedding guest's being at the feast indicates he probably has this. Affirmatively, Taylor then insists, "this Wedden Garment is nothing below a Sanctifying Work of the Spirit upon the Soule" (p. 22). And more particularly, "It is the Robe of Evangelicall Righteousness Constituting the Soule Compleat in the [Sight] of God. This is that which I take to be the Wedden Garment" (p. 22).

Thus we return to the idea of righteousness, but what does it mean to Taylor? He explains by calling Biblical witness to its existence, citing among other texts Revelation III.5, which he developed in terms of weaving and cloth-making imagery a year and a half earlier in Meditation I:46. This righteousness is called "imputed" when it refers to God's "accepting of Christ in our Stead for the fulfilling the Law and also for the Satisfying the Law broken by us, doth reckon Christs keeping the Law, and his Satisfying of it for us to be ours. And the Soule by faith receiving the Same, becomes hereby acquitted from the Guilt of his Sin: and Stands righteous before God" (p. 23). It is called "implanted" righteousness when it refers to "The Sanctifying Graces of the Spirit Communicated to the Soul" (p. 23). Sanctifying grace, then, adorns the souls of God's Elect and beautifies them. Imputed and implanted righteousness "both put together make up this Wedden Garment, in which the Soul Stands Complete before God" (p. 23).

Taylor then plunges into theological history for support of his contentions, finding it in the writings of Origen, Theophylactus, Haymo of Halberstadt, Grotius, and Paraeus. From them he derives another idea regarding the garment. By putting on the righteousness of Christ's satisfaction for man's sins, the soul in a sense puts on Christ, who, "as he adorns the Soul with his Righteousness is the Wedden Garment" (p. 24). When Taylor, then, in "Huswifery" and in the meditations petitions to be adorned in holy robes, he is asking for visible signs that he is sanctified, that his sins have been justified and he placed among God's chosen, that he has *already* attained the highest earthly spiritual state. He is asking for the righteousness earned for him by Christ and promised by the Gospels. This he makes clear by offering eight additional arguments that the wedding garment is evangelical righteousness.

Among these arguments, the Word of the Gospel holds a position of high importance, for it is through the Holy Word that evangelical righteousness comes to men: "this Wedden Garment must needs be the best accomplishments that the Gospell Shops afford.... Its Such a rich Web, that onely the Gospell markets afford: its Such a Web that is onely wove in the Looms of the Gospell, nay, and a richer web, and better huswifry it gets not up" (p. 27). The garment has such special value for Taylor because it is the only means whereby the soul secures fellowship, favor, honor, and familiarity with God. Not to have the garment is disastrous, for "the Shame of Spirituall Nakedness is Damning" (p. 29), and Stoddard, by opening the Lord's Supper to the unconverted in hopes that that ordinance would give the garment of righteousness to them, was sending them naked to hell. For the garment must be on the soul *before* one approaches the sacrament, and that garment is secured, according to Taylor, primarily through "the Looms of the Gospell." "The preaching of the Word is ordain'd for the Converting of the Soul to Christ. And so for the adorning of it with the Wedden Garment. The web of Grace is wrought in the Soule by the Shuttles of the word" (p. 31). It follows from this, then, that the "Ordinances" that are the fulling mills of "Huswifery" cannot be all Christ's ordinances, but only those designed to prepare the soul for the highest ordinance, the Lord's Supper.

Though Taylor nowhere in "Huswifery" explicitly declares the reason for which the robe is worn and the specific end for which it is intended, I believe that his "Treatise" necessitates our accepting "Huswifery" as a poem about the preparation for the sacrament. The "Holy robes for glory" in the last line of the poem are identified in these sermons with the wedding garment, which Taylor says "alone is the Robe to adorn the Soule for Glory. It is the White Robe to walk in with Christ for ever and ever" (p. 152). And there is no question but that this preparation is for Taylor the highest activity of the soul in this world. When one appreciates the eternal consequences of the robe for Taylor, to whom "the Web and its Needle work containe all," the last lines of Taylor's poem open such terrifying implications that one might well experience in them the "metaphysical shudder" Professor Williamson found so characteristic of the verse of Donne and his followers. For it is a robe on which *all* depends, and Taylor exhorts his congregation to search for it, making sure that it is the web woven by Christ himself (as "Huswifery" prays in line 9) and not the counterfeit garb of those who come to "the Feast in cloath of their own Web, and weaving" (p. 126).

"Huswifery," in short, is another preparatory meditation. It is, in fact, his only occasional or miscellaneous poem that uses the decasyllabic, *ababcc* stanza form of the *Preparatory Meditations*. More important, if, as I have assumed and tried to demonstrate in this paper, the image of the garment and its function is closely related throughout all of Taylor's writing, then the apparently simple poem "Huswifery" is only fully understood when one explores the cumulative associations of its imagery in his other poems. But one must go even further, tracing the imagery in Taylor's prose, where it often originated (the sermons especially reveal unexpected meanings behind Taylor's language or make apparently adventitious associations an integral part of Taylor's reasoning)....

Source: Norman S. Grabo, "Edward Taylor's Spiritual Huswifery," in *PMLA*, Vol. 79, No. 5, December 1964, pp. 554–60.

Sidney E. Lind

In the following excerpt, Lind evaluates Taylor's status as a poet and, based on poems such as "Huswifery," concludes that Taylor's "most rewarding" instances of expression occur when he "has lapsed from Puritan standards."

THE ENDS TO BE REACHED EXPLAIN WHY SUSTAINED PASSAGES OF REAL BEAUTY ARE NOT TO BE LOOKED FOR: THE TRANSMISSION OF THEOLOGICAL TRUTH TRANSCENDS THE ESTHETIC NECESSITY FOR THE FLAWLESS BLENDING OF COMMUNICATION AND ART."

. . . It has been stated that Edward Taylor was an inferior poet whose only lasting virtue would probably prove to be occasional flashes of poetic inspiration. Certainly, the sincerity, fervor, and religious exaltation justifiably claimed for him by all his readers and commentators cannot be considered virtues; if anything, they are artistic prerequisites which have no necessary bearing upon the quality of his verse. Taylor could have been much worse than he is, and yet could have possessed these same qualities to the same degree. But poetic imagination counts for very little unless it be accompanied by a poet's art, a poet's power to sustain his flight of song on the high level demanded by his exalted imagination. We cannot marvel too long over a poet who at one moment lifts us beyond ourselves with dazzling imagery, and at the next drops us into the abyss with as halting a line as can be found in the entire body of English verse:

> Who Spread its Canopy? Or Curtain Spun?
> Who in this Bowling Alley bowld the Sun?
> Who made it always when it rises set:
> *To go at once both down and up to get?*

However, to examine Puritan poetry with a twentieth century mind, without understanding the purpose of such poetry, to find in Edward Taylor's verse lines which appeal to our modern appetite for provocative imagery, is to attribute to the poet virtues which he clearly, and to a large extent successfully, strove to suppress. Puritan poetry was intended primarily for moral and religious edification. The written or spoken word was the utilitarian vehicle for the reinforcement of Congregational dogma. Its purpose was to keep the Puritan in the path of righteousness. The most important effect of the poet's activity was to be the achievement of the ideals of moral behavior and orthodoxy of belief, and only after this might the poet utilize what we would call esthetic expression. "That key is to be chosen," said a great Puritan preacher, "which doth open best, although it be of wood, if there be not a golden key of the same efficacy." Hence the verbal atrocities unblinkingly committed in the first version of the Bay Psalm Book. This principle, carried into practice, deprived the poet of esthetic criteria against which he might test the poetic quality of his verse. It left him with but two scales of values, both mandatory: theological doctrine (inextricably combined with rhetorical doctrine), and the test of intelligibility. His poetry had, first of all, to conform to dogma, and second, it had to be absolutely comprehensible to his audience. The foregoing extract from Taylor's verse is therefore good and bad verse combined only by our standards today. How else can we explain the lack of discrimination shown by Taylor in the following excerpt, where a gentle lyric is begun, but disappointingly soon yields to a rougher music?

> Peace, Peace, my Hony, do not Cry,
> My little Darling, wipe thine eye,
> Oh Cheer, Cheer up, come see.
> Is anything too deare, my Dove,
> Is anything too good, my Love,
> To get or give for thee?
> If in the severall thou art,
> This Yelper fierce will at thee bark:
> That thou art mine this shows.
> As Spot barks back the sheep again,
> Before they to the Pound are ta'ne,
>
> So he, and hence 'way goes.
> But if this Cur that bayghs so sore,
> Is broken tooth, and muzzled sure,
> Fear not my Pritty Heart.
> His barking is to make thee cling
> Close underneath thy Saviours wing
> Why did my sweeten start?

The homely imagery may be explained on the basis of the principle of intelligibility. If the purpose of Taylor's verse was guidance for his flock, what better and more direct mode of communication than images drawn from the crude daily life of the colony: the spinning wheel, the distaff, the honeycomb, traps, anvil, the poker, all the objects of a life vividly omnipresent? And it is this very aspect of his verse which causes us to wonder why Taylor released to allow his work to be published. Why, if such verse was fashioned in the fire of his faith, did the poet keep it

in manuscript? Surely, he could recognize its superiority to any then being written in the colony! It may be that the answer can be found in a further brief consideration of doctrine and artistic practice.

The opening stanza of "The Accusation of the Inward Man," a section of *Gods Determinations*, contains the following lines:

> The Understanding's dark, and therefore Will
> Account of Ill for Good, and Good for ill . . .
> The Will is hereupon perverted so,
> It laquyes after, ill; doth good foregoe.
> The Reasonable Soule doth much delight
> A Pickpact t'ride o' the Sensuall Appetite.
> And hence the heart is hardened, and toyes
> With Love, Delight, and Joye, yea Vanities.

We here find ourselves confronted by such phrases as "Understanding's dark," "The Will," and "The Reasonable Soule." If we apply to them their present-day acceptation, we undoubtedly derive a certain amount of sense from the passage. The fact is, however, that our interpretation of these lines has no connection whatever with the meaning intended by the poet, for whom these terms were the copestones of a complex and involved philosophy collected and codified from almost innumerable writers going back through the Renaissance to Aristotle. Here we are presented with the psychological theories which reinforced technologia; here we have "science" consciously and deliberately wedded to theology. In Professor Miller's words:

> . . . reason, free and independent, is the king and ruler of the faculties, and its consort, the will, is queen and mistress. Puritan theologians made these two the symbol of the soul's high station in the aristocratic society of the cosmos, and explained that by their voluntary coöperation the soul becomes both intelligent and responsible.

It is with such massive weight that the innocent phrase, "Reasonable Soule," becomes invested, and if we go a little deeper, this is what we find: the brain, ruled over by Reason (synonymous with Understanding), is divided into three areas—the forward area contains the imagination; the middle, common sense; and the rear, memory. Reason (Understanding) is the agent which selects proper perceptions from the memory or imagination (both of which have in turn complicated functions of their own), and transmits these to the Will, which lodges in the heart. Therefore when "The Understanding's dark," mistaking evil for good and good for evil, the Will is corrupted, with the inevitable sinful consequences indicated in the last two lines. To go beyond this in explication of Taylor's text is unnecessary; for the reader who possesses a working knowledge of Puritan doctrine the meaning is clear, and for the reader who does not, Professor Miller's book is required reading. Where the concepts are not specified, we can be certain that their literal sense pervades the poetry. They are never merely the mortar holding the structure together; they *are* the structure. What we find, in short, is not poetry which embodies doctrine, but doctrine cast in poetic form. It is the unqualified primacy of doctrine over poetic expression which in Taylor's case spells the difference between mediocrity and greatness.

Similarly, Taylor's imagery, basically metaphysical, was conditioned and shaped at the source of his imagination by the Puritan theories of rhetoric and psychology. There is no doubt that within these severely narrow limitations he was successful, as becomes clearer if we define the area of his success. Metrical skill and even grammar were subordinated to the idea to be conveyed, and the idea existed exclusively in terms of Puritan theology. The homely imagery, if regarded as a virtue, may therefore also be interpreted as a deliberate effort to keep to the broadest level of communication. The ends to be reached explain why sustained passages of real beauty are not to be looked for: the transmission of theological truth transcends the esthetic necessity for the flawless blending of communication and art. Even what we today call the arts, or as much as remained after the *trivium* and *quadrivium* were modified to fit the Puritan curriculum, possessed little value beyond their ability to contribute to *eupraxia*, a concept which reduced the realm of beauty to practical purposes.

Of all the poems at present in print, the group entitled "Five Poems" in the *Poetical Works* is the most rewarding. Taylor in these poems displays his technical and lyrical virtuosity at their best, and somehow, wonderfully enough, manages to combine art and message more felicitously than anywhere else. Yet, how great is such praise when it is recalled that the original manuscript of his verse runs to four hundred pages quarto? *Gods Determinations* inescapably invites comparison, no matter what Taylor's intentions or the apologies of his critics, with *Paradise Lost*, and the "Preface" to *Gods*

Determinations reminds us that William Blake was to ask *his* questions with even more penetration and amplitude of reference. Taylor has given us sufficient evidence of what he might have done had the major control of his poetic genius rested on a basis broader than the theological compulsions of his community.

But he was, first and foremost, a Puritan clergyman; it may therefore be taken for granted that both his orthodoxy and his clerical knowledge were impeccable. There is no record of his having aroused the antagonism of his fellow clergymen; on the contrary, the available information indicates that from the time of his disembarkation in Boston in 1668 until his acceptance of the Westfield post in December, 1671 (after refusing a choice position at the Second Boston Church tendered him by Increase Mather), he was unusually well regarded. There is nothing in his later life to alter this belief.

This means that he was extremely sensitive at all points of contact with, and at all times to deviations from, orthodoxy; yet he had at the same time the heart and impulses of a poet. Is it therefore too much to suppose that there were occasions when the poet transcended the clergyman, even if such occasions were limited to a phrase or a sparkling metaphor? We may well imagine that Taylor then looked at his verse with a sense of dismay, that he realized it had somehow strayed from the narrow path set out for it by theology and logic, and that his verse "suffered" from being poetic at the expense of direct meaning, as in this excerpt from the "Preface" to *Gods Determinations*, already quoted in part:

> Infinity, when all things it beheld,
> In Nothing, and of Nothing all did build,
> Upon what Base was first the Lath, wherein
> He turned this Globe, and rigall'd it so trim?
> Who blew the Bellows of his Furnace Vast?
> Or held the Mould wherein the world was Cast?
> Who laid its Corner Stone? Or whose Command?
> Where stand the Pillars upon which it stands?
> Who Lac'de and Fillitted the earth so fine,
> With Rivers like green ribbons Smaragdine?
> Who made the Sea's its Selvedge, and it locks
> Like a Quilt Ball within a silver box?
> Who spread its Canopy? or Curtains Spun?
> Who in this Bowling Alley Bowld the Sun?

It may perhaps be that Taylor's sense of the imperfection of his verse—from the Puritan standpoint—caused him to suppress it in its entirety. It may be he felt, ever-watchful shepherd that he was, that there was more in his lines than should be presented to a reading public as sensitive as he was. All of which brings us to the major paradox in Taylor's verse: it is precisely at those places where Taylor has lapsed from Puritan standards that we find his poetic expression most rewarding to the modern reader; yet his lapses are exceptions; the rule is that he writes acceptable Puritan verse. Therefore, from the Puritan point of view he must be considered a fine poet who made certain regrettable slips, whereas from our point of view he is a mediocre poet—although the best American Puritan poet known to us—who has infrequent and incomplete passages of beauty. To put it somewhat less seriously, Taylor is a Puritan poet who did not, unfortunately for the modern reader, fail in his appointed task often enough.

Source: Sidney E. Lind, "Edward Taylor: A Revaluation," in *New England Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 4, December 1948, pp. 518–30.

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FURTHER READING

Bloom, Harold, ed., *John Donne and the Metaphysical Poets*, Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2008.

The well-known literary critic Harold Bloom turns his eye to the metaphysical poets, with John Donne as the recognized leader. With historical and cultural context, Bloom gives the serious student insight into the metaphysical philosophy, how it plays out in verse, and how it has been received over time.

Hall, David D., *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England*, Harvard University Press, 1990.

Hall writes about religion as it was practiced and understood by the laity in early America, including how the religious events in Europe led to an Americanized version of Christianity.

Middlekauff, Robert, *The Mathers: Three Generations of Puritan Intellectuals, 1596–1728*, University of California Press, 1999.

Middlekauff tells about the lives of the influential Mather family in early Puritan America. Along with biographical and historical information, Middlekauff includes excerpts from the Mathers' writings to illustrate the beliefs and thoughts of these writers and ministers.

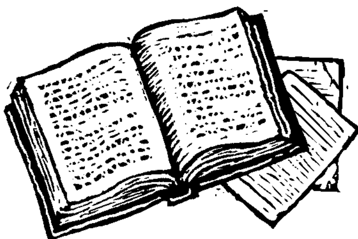
Rowe, Karen E., *Saint and Singer: Edward Taylor's Typology and the Poetics of Meditation*, Cambridge University Press, 1986.

For the reader who wants a much deeper look into Taylor's theology and how his poems' imagery points to key doctrinal issues, Rowe provides an in-depth analysis.

Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías

FEDERICO GARCÍA LORCA

1935



Federico García Lorca's poem "Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías" was written and published in Spanish in 1935 as "Llanto por Ignacio Sánchez Mejías." The poem was never attributed to any of Lorca's Spanish-language poetry collections and was instead released as a stand-alone piece. Lorca's poem was first translated into English in 1937 as "Lament for the Death of a Bullfighter," though it is more commonly known today as "Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías." Its first appearance in book form in the English language likely occurred in 1955, when the work appeared in *The Selected Poems of Federico García Lorca*. (A 2005 edition of the volume is also available.)

"Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías" was widely popular in Spain at the time of its release. This was due to the topical nature of the poem, which is an elegy for the famed Ignacio Sánchez Mejías, a celebrated matador who was gored to death in the bullring in 1934. In fact, several poets of the day wrote elegies dedicated to the bullfighter's death, including Miguel Hernández and Rafael Alberti. Yet, neither poet's work is as celebrated as Lorca's. This is likely because Lorca's poem transcends the real-life matador's goring, encompassing such universal and timeless themes as the simultaneous pointlessness and beauty of a violent death. It does so, also, in a lyrical manner that attempts to capture the very voice of grief itself.

Federico García Lorca *(AP Images)*

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Federico García Lorca was born on June 5, 1898, in Fuente Vaqueros, Granada, Spain. His mother, Vicenta Lorca, with whom Lorca was close, was a pianist and teacher, and his father, Federico García Rodriguez, was a wealthy landowner. Lorca studied law at the University of Granada from 1914 to 1919, though he was also closely affiliated with the Granada Arts Club. His first book, the travelogue *Impresiones y paisajes*, was inspired by a 1917 trip to Castille that Lorca took with his art class. The book was a critical success, if not a popular one, and in 1919 Lorca moved to Madrid, where he wrote plays and poetry. Lorca was also a great lover of folk music and folklore, and he collected and compiled folk materials as a semiprofessional hobby. He additionally drew and illustrated as a hobby throughout his life.

In 1920, Lorca's controversial play *El maleficio de la mariposa* (title means "The Butterfly's Evil Spell") was first staged, launching Lorca into infamy. The play was universally panned. The following year, Lorca released his first collection of poems, *Libro de poemas* (title means "Book of Poems"). The collection was based entirely on Spanish or Gypsy folktales. Lorca's love for folk music next led him to found the Cante Jondo festival of Spanish music, the first of which was held in 1922. Lorca was also studying at the University of Madrid at this time, and he received his law degree there in 1923. Throughout the 1920s, Lorca produced two additional poetry collections: *Canciones (1921–24)* (1927; translated as *Songs*, 1976) and *Primer romancero gitano (1924–27)* (1928; translated as *Gypsy Ballads*, 1951). The latter collection was an immense success. Lorca's play *Mariana Pineda: Romance popular en tres estampas* was also produced in 1927. An English translation of the play was published in 1962 as *Mariana Pineda: A Popular Ballad in Three Prints*.

During this prolific period, Lorca and his work became associated with the Generación del 27, a group of luminary Spanish writers and artists including the filmmaker Luis Buñuel and the painter Salvador Dali. Indeed, Lorca's work reflects the surrealist mode of the day, which was embodied by the work of the Generación del 27. It is rumored that Lorca and Dali carried on a romantic affair, though the two are believed to have had a falling out around 1929. Following that time, Lorca was no longer as closely associated with the surrealist group. In fact, he traveled to New York City in 1929, where he studied briefly at Columbia University. His posthumous 1940 poetry collection, *Poeta en Nueva York*, was based on this experience. (A bilingual edition of the volume was published in 1955 as *Poet in New York*.)

Lorca returned to Spain in 1930, the same year that the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera was vanquished and the Spanish Republic was reformed. Under the Republic, Lorca served on the Second Ordinary Congress of the Federal Union of Hispanic Students. His service there led him to be assigned to the post of theater director for the state-sponsored performance group of *La Barraca*. Lorca worked in this capacity from 1932 to 1935. His most famous plays, *Bodas de sangre* (1933), *Yerma* (1934; bilingual edition published as *Yerma: A Tragic Poem*, 1987), and *La Casa de Bernarda Alba* (1936; title means "The House of Bernarda Alba"), were all first performed by *La Barraca*. Notably, *Bodas de sangre* was first produced in New York in 1935 as *Bitter Oleander*, though it is now more commonly known in English as *Blood Wedding* (1939).

In 1935, Lorca's poem "Llanto por Ignacio Sánchez Mejías" was written and published as a

stand-alone piece. The poem was first translated into English in 1937 as “Lament for the Death of a Bullfighter,” though it is more commonly known today as “Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías.” Its first appearance in book form in the English language likely occurred in 1955, when the work appeared in *The Selected Poems of Federico García Lorca.* To this day, it is one of Lorca’s more famous poems, and it was published only one year before his untimely death. Indeed, just before the Spanish Civil War began in July 1936, Lorca traveled from Madrid to Granada to escape the rising political pressure. By August, however, both he and his brother-in-law, Manuel Fernández Montesinos, the former socialist mayor of Granada, had been arrested by Nationalist forces. Montesinos was killed and his body was paraded through the streets. After a few days in jail, Lorca was taken to view Montesinos’s body. He was shot to death in the cemetery in Viznar (most likely on August 19), but the location of his remains is unknown. No official reason for his death has ever been given. Though Lorca was not an overtly political person, his loose affiliation with the Popular Front was enough to mark him out for assassination. Following his execution, Lorca’s books were burned and banned throughout Spain.

The olive tree where Lorca was believed to have been shot stands today as a shrine to the author. Lorca never married and had no known children. Yet numerous posthumous collections and compilations of Lorca’s poetry and plays abound, as do collections of his folk compilations, drawings, and letters. He is considered one of the foremost Spanish poets in world literature.

POEM TEXT

1. Cogida and Death

At five in the afternoon.
It was exactly five in the afternoon.
A boy brought the white sheet
at five in the afternoon.
A frail of lime ready prepared 5
at five in the afternoon.
The rest was death, and death alone
at five in the afternoon.

The wind carried away the cottonwool
at five in the afternoon. 10
And the oxide scattered crystal and
nickel
at five in the afternoon.
Now the dove and the leopard wrestle
at five in the afternoon.
And a thigh with a desolate horn 15
at five in the afternoon.
The bass-string struck up
at five in the afternoon.
Arsenic bells and smoke
at five in the afternoon. 20
Groups of silence in the corners
at five in the afternoon.
And the bull alone with a high heart!
At five in the afternoon.
When the sweat of snow was coming 25
at five in the afternoon.
when the bull ring was covered in iodine
at five in the afternoon.
Death laid eggs in the wound
at five in the afternoon. 30
At five in the afternoon.
Exactly at five o’clock in the afternoon.

A coffin on wheels is his bed
at five in the afternoon.
Bones and flutes resound in his ears 35
at five in the afternoon.
Now the bull was bellowing through his
forehead
at five in the afternoon.
The room was iridescent with agony
at five in the afternoon. 40
In the distance the gangrene now comes
at five in the afternoon.
Horn of the lily through green groins
at five in the afternoon.
The wounds were burning like suns 45
at five in the afternoon,
and the crowd was breaking the windows
at five in the afternoon.
At five in the afternoon.
Ah, that fatal five in the afternoon! 50
It was five by all the clocks!
It was five in the shade of the afternoon!

2. The Spilled Blood

I will not see it!

Tell the moon to come
for I do not want to see the blood 55
of Ignacio on the sand.

I will not see it!

The moon wide open.
Horse of still clouds,
and the grey bull ring of dreams 60
with willows in the barreras.

I will not see it!

Let my memory kindle!
Warn the jasmines
of such minute whiteness! 65

I will not see it!

The cow of the ancient world
passed her sad tongue

over a snout of blood
spilled on the sand, 70
and the bulls of Guisando,
partly death and partly stone,
bellowed like two centuries
sated with treading the earth.
No. 75
I do not want to see it!
I will not see it!

Ignacio goes up the tiers
with all his death on his shoulders.
He sought for the dawn 80
but the dawn was no more.
He seeks for his confident profile
and the dream bewilders him.
He sought for his beautiful body
and encountered his opened blood. 85
I will not see it!
I do not want to hear it spurt
each time with less strength:
that spurt that illuminates
the tiers of seats, and spills 90
over the corduroy and the leather
of a thirsty multitude.
Who shouts that I should come near!
Do not ask me to see it!

His eyes did not close 95
when he saw the horns near,
but the terrible mothers
lifted their heads.
And across the ranches,
an air of secret voices rose, 100
shouting to celestial bulls,
herdsmen of pale mist.
There was no prince in Seville
who could compare with him,
nor sword like his sword 105
nor heart so true.
Like a river of lions
was his marvellous strength,
and like a marble torso
his firm drawn moderation. 110
The air of Andalusian Rome
gilded his head
where his smile was a spikenard
of wit and intelligence.
What a great torero in the ring! 115
What a good peasant in the sierra!
How gentle with the sheaves!
How hard with the spurs!
How tender with the dew!
How dazzling in the fiesta! 120
How tremendous with the final
banderillas of darkness!

But now he sleeps without end.
Now the moss and the grass
open with sure fingers 125
the flower of his skull.
And now his blood comes out singing;
singing along marshes and meadows,
sliding on frozen horns,
faltering soulless in the mist, 130
stumbling over a thousand hoofs
like a long, dark, sad tongue,
to form a pool of agony
close to the starry Guadalquivir.
Oh, white wall of Spain! 135
Oh, black bull of sorrow!
Oh, hard blood of Ignacio!
Oh, nightingale of his veins!
No.
I will not see it! 140
No chalice can contain it,
no swallows can drink it,
no frost of light can cool it,
nor song nor deluge of white lilies,
no glass can cover it with silver. 145
No.
I will not see it!

3. The Laid Out Body

Stone is a forehead where dreams grieve
without curving waters and frozen cypresses.
Stone is a shoulder on which to bear Time 150
with trees formed of tears and ribbons and planets.

I have seen grey showers move towards the waves
raising their tender riddled arms,
to avoid being caught by the lying stone
which loosens their limbs without soaking the blood. 155

For stone gathers seed and clouds,
skeleton larks and wolves of penumbra:
but yields not sounds nor crystals nor fire,
only bull rings and bull rings and more bull rings without walls.

Now, Ignacio the well born lies on the stone. 160
All is finished. What is happening? Contemplate his face:
death has covered him with pale sulphur
and has placed on him the head of a dark minotaur.

All is finished. The rain penetrates his mouth.
The air, as if mad, leaves his sunken chest, 165
and Love, soaked through with tears of snow,
warms itself on the peak of the herd.

What are they saying? A stenching silence settles down.
We are here with a body laid out which fades away,
with a pure shape which had nightingales 170
and we see it being filled with depthless holes.

Who creases the shroud? What he says is not true!
Nobody sings here, nobody weeps in the corner,
nobody pricks the spurs, nor terrifies the serpent.
Here I want nothing else but the round eyes 175
to see this body without a chance of rest.

Here I want to see those men of hard voice.
Those that break horses and dominate rivers;
those men of sonorous skeleton who sing
with a mouth full of sun and flint. 180

Here I want to see them. Before the stone.
Before this body with broken reins.
I want to know from them the way out
for this captain strapped down by death.

I want them to show me a lament like a river 185
which will have sweet mists and deep shores,
to take the body of Ignacio where it loses itself
without hearing the double panting of the
bulls.

Loses itself in the round bull ring
of the moon
which feigns in its youth a sad quiet bull: 190
loses itself in the night without song
of fishes
and in the white thicket of frozen smoke.

I don't want them to cover his face with
handkerchiefs
that he may get used to the death he carries.
Go, Ignacio; feel not the hot bellowing. 195
Sleep, fly, rest: even the sea dies!

4. Absent Soul

The bull does not know you, nor the fig tree,
nor the horses, nor the ants in your own house.
The child and the afternoon do not know you
because you have died for ever. 200

The back of the stone does not know you,
nor the black satin in which you crumble.
Your silent memory does not know you
because you have died for ever.

The autumn will come with small
white snails, 205
misty grapes and with clustered hills,
but no one will look into your eyes
because you have died for ever.

Because you have died for ever,
like all the dead of the Earth, 210
like all the dead who are forgotten
in a heap of lifeless dogs.

Nobody knows you. No. But I sing of you.
For posterity I sing of your profile
and grace.
Of the signal maturity of your understanding. 215
Of your appetite for death and the taste
of its mouth.
Of the sadness of your once valiant gaiety.

It will be a long time, if ever, before there
is born
an Andalusian so true, so rich in adventure.
I sing of his elegance with words that groan, 220
and I remember a sad breeze through the
olive trees.

POEM SUMMARY

"Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías" is comprised of four parts, each of which is written in different configurations of meter, refrain, and stanza length. Notably, the poem is an elegy for the real-life matador Ignacio Sánchez Mejías, who was gored to death by a bull in 1934. While much of the poem's imagery is abstract and nonsensical, it can be associated with the more concrete images of this event.

1. Cogida and Death

The first stanza is an octet (eight lines), and the first line opens by stating the time, five p.m. The second line then repeats the time, emphasizing that it was precisely five in the evening. In line 3, the speaker describes a white sheet being carried in (though to or for what is not yet indicated). Notably, line 4 repeats line 1 in italics, as do lines 6 and 8. In the fifth line, the speaker states that lime, a chemical substance used for many things (including masking the smell of decomposition), has been readied. In the seventh line, following the references to the sheet and lime, it is clear that there has been a death. This death, to the speaker, is so important that it overshadows everything. Given the materials being procured, the death has just taken place. The sheet indicates the body that it will cover.

The second stanza is twenty-four lines long, and every other line (up until the last three lines) again repeats the italicized refrain from line 1. By now, it is obvious that the speaker is repeating the matador's time of death. The speaker mentions cotton fibers blowing through the air and elements of the soil being moved about. These images respectively evoke the materials of a shroud and the digging of a grave. The speaker also says that animals fight as prey and predator, and then mentions a horn embedded in a leg (presumably this is the bull's horn piercing the matador's body). Poisonous bells and mournful sounds ring out as quiet gathers on the outskirts of these sounds. Only the bull is happy. A symbolic essence of snow threatens to fall, and the speaker says that the matador's ring is drenched in iodine and that death has placed its offspring in the injury. This latter image seems to indicate death drawing itself together from the matador's injuries. The two penultimate (next-to-last) lines in the stanza repeat line 1. The stanza's final line presents a variation of the words in line 2. All three of these lines are italicized.

MEDIA ADAPTATIONS

- A dance performance based on "Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías" was first staged by the Limon Dance Company in New York City in 1946. The company staged a revival in 2006.

The third stanza is composed of twenty lines. Every other line (up until the last four lines) repeats the now-familiar italicized refrain. The speaker says that a wheeled casket will become the matador's bed. Sepulchral music will sound for him. The bull gores through the matador's head. Everyone is filled with grief. Rotting flesh will ensue and the bull's horn now attacks the matador's groin. The man's wounds are on fire. The people in the bullring are in agony. Notably, this stanza seems to presage the funeral before returning to the actual goring, as is evidenced by the mention of the casket in future tense and the mention of the goring in present tense. In the fourth-to-last line of the stanza, line 1 is repeated without italics. In the next line, the speaker references the time again, calling it deadly. The penultimate line of the stanza also references the time, stating that each and every clock showed the same exact time. In the last line of the stanza, the speaker yet again repeats the time, noting that it exists in the dimness of the late day.

2. The Spilled Blood

The opening stanza in the second section is one line in which the speaker refuses to look at something. In the next three-line stanza it becomes clear that that thing is blood. The speaker wishes for moonlight so he does not have to see it. For the first time, the speaker identifies the gored man as Ignacio. It is specifically Ignacio's blood that the speaker does not wish to see. The poem repeats the one-line stanza. In the following four-line stanza, the speaker talks of the moon and of an animal made of clouds, of the bullring cast into shadow like a fantasy, with plants growing around the ring. The section's first stanza is then repeated once more. In the sixth stanza (also three lines) of the section, the speaker asks that his recollection be allowed to light on fire and warn the flowers of a small blankness. Again, the first stanza appears in the refrain.

The section's eighth stanza is eleven lines. A cow from olden times moves her depressed tongue over blood splattered onto the ground. Ancient statues of bulls, though made of granite, are also made of death. They howl like two hundred years that have wandered the planet. The speaker repeats the sentiments of the refrain, albeit in a slightly different manner. The exact refrain is then repeated, though no longer as its own stanza.

Ignacio walks with his fatality weighing down on him. He looked for the morning, but it no longer exists for him. He looks for his courageous outline, but it is an illusion that confuses him. He looks for his perfect form and instead finds his mutilated body. The refrain appears in the middle of the stanza. The speaker describes the blood he does not want to look at, the lessening flow from the matador's body lighting up the stadium—its chairs, levels, and the crowd. The speaker asks who demands that he come closer and says he should not be asked to look.

The next lengthy stanza relates how Ignacio stared death in the face, keeping his eyes open as the bull attacked. Ancient herd keepers and heavenly bulls were awakened by furtive speakers. No royalty was equal to the matador in battle or compassion. The matador was as powerful as a multitude of lions, built like a statue. He was charming, smart, and funny, and a great matador. He was also humble, farming his own land. He was the life of the party. Even his death was astounding.

In the section's final stanza, the speaker says that the matador now slumbers forever. The soil will devour him and his blood will resonate in all the land, flowing over the bulls without souls, like a depressed tongue. It will flow into a puddle of torture near the Gaudalquivir River in Spain. Spain is a blank divider and sadness is a dark bull. Ignacio's blood is rigid. His veins are like songbirds. The refrain appears. The speaker says that no cup can hold the matador's blood. Birds cannot taste it, light cannot temper it. Music and flowers cannot envelop it or gild it. The refrain

repeats again as the last line of both the stanza and the section, effectively ending section 2 exactly as it began.

3. The Laid Out Body

This section comprises twelve stanzas. All but the seventh stanza are quatrains (four lines). The seventh stanza is a quintet (five lines). The section opens with the speaker stating that rock is a brow where fantasies mourn sans rivers or brooks and ice-covered trees. He says that rock is the back upon which time passes and it is carried along with trees made of crying and trimmings and worlds. The speaker says he has looked at dark rains moving toward the ocean, avoiding the duplicitous rock, which will tear the rain apart. This is because the rock collects kernels and the bones of birds and the wild dogs of light and dark. Yet the rock does not give way to noise or gems or flame, only to endless matador arenas that exist without barriers.

Ignacio the noble now lays on rock. Everything is over. The speaker asks what is occurring, as if he is confused by what he has just described. He says one should think about the matador's face; it has been filmed over with death. His head has become that of the minotaur (a mythical creature that is part man and bull). At the beginning of the fifth stanza, the speaker repeats that everything is over. Precipitation enters Ignacio's mouth, and the air has gone insane and escaped the man's lungs. Love, drenched with the crying of the snow, gathers above the crowd.

This latter image returns the speaker to the bullring. He wonders what the crowd is trying to say. The quiet that lurked in the corners earlier in the poem now pervades the bullring. All are there with a body that will disappear, changing from the visage of songbirds to something full of endless punctures. The speaker asks about the shroud; who will fold it? He refuses to believe that Ignacio is dead; it cannot be the truth. The only thing he wants is to see the matador alive again. He would rather see evil men dead. The speaker may also be indicating that he wants to see the men who have cheated death, so that they may tell Ignacio how to do the same.

The speaker wants these men to show him a mournful song that is like a brook, one that will carry Ignacio's corpse to a place where it can rest without being haunted by the cries of bulls. He wants Ignacio's body to find peace in the night sky, in all manner of lyrical places. The speaker does not want to see Ignacio's face covered by handkerchiefs. He does not want the matador to feel that he is dead. Instead, he should slumber, soar, and be at peace. Even the ocean passes away, says the speaker.

4. Absent Soul

The final section of the poem is six stanzas; all but the fifth are quatrains. As before, the anomalous stanza is a quintet. The bull (presumably the one who has killed Ignacio) does not recognize the matador. Horses, the vermin of his house, the young, even the late day, they also do not recognize him. It is because Ignacio is gone for all eternity. The rock, the satin-lined coffin in which the matador's body decomposes, even Ignacio's own recollection of himself, they do not recognize him because he is gone for all eternity. Here, the fourth lines of the first two quatrains repeat themselves. They repeat again at the end of the third stanza and the beginning of the fourth. The fall will come, the grapes will be harvested, but nobody will gaze into Ignacio's eyes because he is gone for all eternity. Ignacio is gone without end, just as all the dead who are no longer remembered, all forgotten like a pile of dead dogs. No one recognizes Ignacio, but the speaker still sings about him (he addresses Ignacio directly, as he has through much of the poem). The speaker does so for the sake of history, singing of the matador's beauty and charm, of his wisdom and lust for death, of the mournfulness that was once his liveliness.

In the final stanza, the speaker states that a great deal of time will pass before a Spaniard as noble as Ignacio will be born, if at all. The speaker says he declares the matador's perfection with painful terms as he recalls olive trees and a mournful wind moving through them.

THEMES

The Power and Permanence of Death

To say that death is permanent may be redundant, but this aspect of mortality continues to be one that challenges humanity, as is perhaps evidenced by the plethora of art and literature that specifically addresses the finality of death. Most world religions also attempt to address this topic. In "Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías," the permanence of death is communicated in several ways. Initially, it is addressed in the

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY

- Study the paintings of Salvador Dali by looking them up on the Internet, in a book, or at a local museum. How does the imagery in Lorca's poem compare to that in Dali's paintings? Give a class presentation on the topic, and be sure to use several visual aids.
- Do you think that Lorca is advocating bullfighting in his "Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías"? Is he criticizing the sport or is his stance on the manner of Ignacio's death neutral? In an essay, support your argument with examples from the poem.
- Select another artist from the Generación del 27 and study his life and work. Write a research paper on your findings and the artist's similarities with or differences from Lorca.
- Write a poem in the manner of "Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías." You can write an elegy, a surrealist piece, or one that relies upon repetition. Read your poem aloud to the class and lead a discussion about the poem's meaning.

opening line, which declares the time of Ignacio's death. The time is repeated again in the second line. It is then repeated another twenty-eight times, twenty-four of those instances appearing in an italicized refrain. In the second section of the poem, the speaker references Ignacio's endless slumber and his own unwillingness to gaze upon the matador's demise. The poem's third section describes Ignacio's body being laid to rest, and the speaker then says that everything is over, an assertion that is repeated twice. The final section of the poem also states four times that Ignacio is deceased for all eternity. In fact, all but one of the repetitions and refrains in the poem are related to the inalterable permanence of Ignacio's death. It is almost as if, by repeating it, the speaker will somehow come to terms with the terribleness and permanence of his loss. The repetition also affords death the weight and importance it rightly deserves.

Other aspects of the poem that further underscore the power of death are the numerous descriptions of the accoutrements (accessories) of death. By talking around death, the speaker lends it additional importance. It cannot be addressed directly but must be addressed through sheets and shrouds and decomposition. It is hinted at in the blood that spurts with lessening vigor from Ignacio's body, the lime that will hide the stench of rot, the elements of the soil that will soon envelope the matador, and the coffin that has become his final resting place. Other signs of death are Ignacio's horn-pierced body, the morning he will never see again, the film of death on the face of his corpse, the last of the air escaping his lungs, and the silence of the crowd. Additionally, as the speaker points out in section 4, the world will forget Ignacio, no longer able to recognize him. All of these oft-mentioned aspects are the signs and symbols of death, yet they are not death itself. In fact, as in the poem, death can only be described simply and straightforwardly. Notably, no attempts at personifying death are made in the poem.

Grief and Mourning

Though the speaker finds he is unable to define death and is able only to describe it, the process that takes place throughout the poem can be accurately described as mourning. Grief, a rather powerful word for sadness (specifically sadness for something lost), can also be felt throughout the poem. This grief is notably referenced in the image of depressed tongues (one of the only repetitions that occur in the poem outside of those regarding the permanence or denial of death). Grief is also evident in the poem's constant references to rain, the bass music that begins to play in the opening lines, the crowd's silence, and the speaker's constant vows to sing Ignacio's praises (even as he is forgotten by everyone and everything else). Grief can be found in the speaker's wish (in the seventh stanza of the third section) to see Ignacio still breathing. However, the speaker's grief is just one aspect of the mourning process. Indeed, the poem exhibits a rather halting progression as the speaker first begins to register the shock and horror of the death in section 1. From there, the speaker simultaneously refuses to look at the horror of Ignacio's death while remembering him in heroic past-tense terms in section 2. The

Bullfight (Image copyright Digitalsport photoagency, 2009. Used under license from Shutterstock.com)

use of past-tense indicates that the speaker does acknowledge the matador's passing, even as he refuses to do so. Section 3 finds the speaker imagining the matador's burial, the whole of the natural world raging. And yet, this section also finds the speaker hoping for Ignacio to be at peace. In the poem's final section, the speaker's anguish at Ignacio's death has somewhat lessened. The immediacy of the goring has also faded; the focus is more on the matador being forgotten and on time continuing to pass. This evokes a calmer tone than that evoked by the violent imagery of previous sections. It also signifies the close of the mourning process.

STYLE

Elegy

Simply put, an elegy is a poem of bereavement and loss. Though the bereavement in an elegy could be related to anything, it is most often applied specifically to death. An elegy can be about mass death, such as the loss of a battalion of soldiers; however, it is often more personal in nature. Indeed, most elegies are typically a poem of mourning for the death of a loved one or friend. This is the case in "Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías." Elegies are typically poems, but any mournful work of art, literature, or cinema can be described as such. The poetic form dates back to ancient Greece and Rome, and it traditionally consisted of metric couplets.

Refrain and Chorus

Simply put, a refrain is a repetition, though it is often a structured repetition, as is the case with the chorus in a song, poem, or play. "Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías" employs refrain in several ways, though in all cases, those repetitions serve to underscore the poem's themes. For instance, Lorca employs simple repetition when the phrase regarding depressed tongues is referred to twice. He uses a more overt and formal chorus with the italicized repetition of the time of Ignacio's death in every other line throughout the middle of section 1. A looser refrain also occurs in sections 2, 3, and 4. Like the elegy, the chorus dates back to ancient Greece. It was most commonly employed in plays and was meant to articulate the themes of the drama as well as express the thoughts and feeling that the play's principal characters were unable to speak aloud. Notably, the chorus serves a similar purpose in Lorca's "Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Surrealism

The surrealist movement first began in France in the early 1920s. The French poet André Breton is often credited with founding the movement, and he was influential in establishing surrealism's legitimacy well into the 1940s. An offshoot of modernism, surrealism sought to challenge traditional modes of expression, particularly accepted forms of both visual and literary narrative. The result was a style known for playfulness and fantastical imagery, and much art bordered on the nonsensical or dreamlike experience. In

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **1930s:** Bullfighting in Spain is a national pastime. Great matadors of the day, like Ignacio Sánchez Mejías, are treated as celebrities.

  Today: World views toward bullfighting have changed, and humane societies routinely object to the sport. Nevertheless, bullfighting remains a significant aspect of Spanish culture. Matadors are treated just as sport stars are treated in the United States.

- **1930s:** The Spanish Republic enjoys an uneasy peace from 1931 to 1936. The civil war rages from 1936 to 1939, as the Republic is toppled and a fascist dictatorship is established under Francisco Franco.

  Today: Spain is now a parliamentary monarchy (a system that places executive power in a democratically elected president, while legislative power is shared by the monarchy and the elected parliament). Spain has been governed under this system since 1978, the result of a three-year transition following Francisco Franco's death in 1975.

- **1930s:** The popular artistic movement of the day is surrealism. The movement includes the visual arts, film, and literature. Spanish leaders in each respective field are Salvador Dali, Luis Buñuel, and Federico García Lorca.

  Today: Though no universal artistic style can be readily applied today, the umbrella terms *post-post modernism* or *postmillennialism* are often applied. A more accurate term, *new sincerity*, has also emerged, indicating the recent backlash against irony, a mode that permeated the preceding era of postmodernism.

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this sense, surrealism sought to express a mode of being outside of mundane reality. Ultimately, it came to attempt the establishment of psychological truth through subconscious forms. Surrealism, notably, was the artistic movement born from Dadaist thought. The Dadaists believed that rationality was to blame for the world's ills, particularly World War I. Thus, they sought to undermine rationalism, exalting the subconscious instead. While Dadaism and surrealism are closely linked, they are still considered two separate movements. Well-known first-wave French surrealists include Marcel Duchamp (infamous for signing a urinal and presenting it as a work of art), Joan Miró, Max Ernst, and Man Ray. By the mid-1920s, the movement was growing in popularity throughout Europe, and it established a particularly strong foothold in Spain. It was at this time that Salvador Dali, Alberto Giacometti, and Luis Buñuel joined the movement. It was also at this time that the Generación del 27 was formed, of which Lorca was a part. Though the core group comprised ten surrealist poets, both Dali and Buñuel are often associated with it. Surrealism soon traveled to the United States and South America, gaining popularity there in the 1930s. The movement reached its peak during this decade, with Dali and René Magritte's most iconic surrealist paintings being produced at this time. Though Lorca had long since broken with the Generación del 27, his 1934 "Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías" exhibits aspects of surrealism in its loose narrative structure and abstract imagery. Notably, several international exhibits of surrealist artwork were staged throughout the 1930s. Both the London International Surrealist Exhibition and the New York Museum of Modern Art's *Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism* were held in 1936. Although the advent of World War II in the 1940s was disruptive to the movement, surrealism continued to influence art and literature well into the decade.

Bullfight ring and spectators *(Image copyright Vinicius Tupinamba, 2009. Used under license from Shutterstock.com)*

The Spanish Civil War

The second Spanish Republic was formed in April 1931 when King Alfonso XVII left the country on holiday. Spain had been in turmoil since 1930, when General Primo de Rivera's dictatorship ended. Yet the years immediately following the establishment of the second republic were peaceful and prosperous. Spain's 1931 constitution established the separation of church and state, gave women the right to vote, allowed easier access to divorce, and provided for freedom of speech and association. That peace, however, was short-lived, and the January 1936 parliamentary elections were hotly contested, with candidates divided among the parties who formed the Popular Front and those who formed the Nationalists. The socialists, communists, and republicans formed the Popular Front, while the fascist Falange Española formed the Nationalist Party. The Popular Front won the elections, taking power in the parliament, but violence between the two parties continued to increase over the ensuing months. By July 12 of that year, antifascist lieutenant José Castillo was assassinated, and the Popular Front responded the next day by having fascist leader José Calvo Sotelo killed. By July 17, the fascist regime carried out a military coup d'état, and Nationalist troops led by General Francisco Franco attacked Spain from Morocco. The ensuing civil war lasted until April 1, 1939, with the Nationalists claiming victory and establishing a fascist dictatorship under Franco, one that lasted until Franco's death in 1975. The years during the civil war were filled with the assassination of citizens believed to be a threat to the fascist cause. Lorca was only one such victim.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

"Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías" was deemed so important that it circulated as a stand-alone piece, much as an epic poem would. Yet the poem was no epic; it was only a long elegy. Widely popular in Spain at the time of its release, the poem was also highly topical, dedicated to the 1934 death of the famed Ignacio Sánchez Mejías. The celebrated matador, a friend of Lorca's, was gored to death in the bullring, and the country

universally mourned his loss. In fact, several poets of the day wrote elegies dedicated to the bull-fighter's death, including Miguel Hernández and Rafael Alberti. Yet neither poet's work is as celebrated as Lorca's is today. According to Peter Boyle in *Southerly*, "'Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías' is one of the great poems of the century: a formal elegy that takes up a thread going back to the Romans but incorporates the surreal into that." Boyle adds: "And with this big theme Lorca's touch never falters." In *Lorca: An Appreciation of His Poetry*, Roy Campbell makes a similar assessment, finding that "Lorca reached the height of his achievement in his 'Llanto por Ignacio Sánchez Mejías'; here he remained true to his native Andalusia, to the earth and the landscape from which his verse derived its strength, flavour and perfume." Miguel González-Gerth, writing in the *Texas Quarterly*, remarks that, "like *Poet in New York*, Lorca's 'Lament for the Death of a Bull-fighter' has a place in the development of his tragic symbolism." He calls the poem the "peak of Lorca's lyrical accomplishment," in which "one can find the tragic symbol of his whole vision of life and man."

CRITICISM

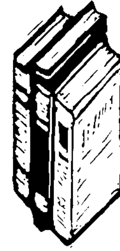
Leah Tieger

Tieger is a freelance writer and editor. In the following essay, she attempts to track the nonlinear progressions of time and emotion in "Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías."

The Swiss psychiatrist Elisabeth Kubler-Ross developed a framework for the five stages of grief in her groundbreaking 1969 text *On Death and Dying*. These five stages are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Even Kubler-Ross admitted that these stages are not necessarily linear or progressive, they can occur in any order or permutation. Indeed, while anger is not a particularly strong emotion in Federico García Lorca's "Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías," Kubler-Ross's framework for grief and mourning can be applied to the poem with interesting results. For instance, the first section of the poem captures the shock of death, of the silence and preparation that immediately follow it. Yet the first half of the poem is literally fraught with denial. This can be seen in the constant repetition of the matador's time of death. It is a piece of information that the speaker denies so strongly he is unable to process or understand it, thus necessitating the repetition. Furthermore, to the speaker, it is as if time stopped when the matador was killed.

The second section further exhibits the speaker's denial. It is entirely about not wanting to look at the horror of death, of refusing to look at that which the speaker fears most. Yet, the section also reflects the conflict of not looking, the contrasts of morbid curiosity. The speaker says he does not want to look and then describes exactly what he does not want to see as if he were looking at it anyway. At the same time, the

WHAT DO I READ NEXT?



- For a look at Lorca's work as a dramatist, read his three most famous plays, all written or performed between 1933 and 1936. The works are collected in English translation in *Three Plays: Blood Wedding, Yerma, The House of Bernarda Alba* (1993).
- To learn more about surrealist art, read Fiona Bradley's *Surrealism* (1997). This brief but liberally illustrated volume offers a comprehensive look at the roots of the movement as well as several prominent surrealist artists.
- For a more biographically centered and more literary exploration of the surrealist movement, see *Surrealist Parade* by Wayne Andrews. Published in 1990, the volume looks at the lives of the artists and writers who came to embody the surrealist movement, and how each influenced others in their sphere.
- The Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa (1888–1935) lived and wrote during the same period as Lorca, and both poets are held in equally high esteem today. Pessoa's work, like Lorca's, exhibits a great deal of lyricism and surreal imagery. His work in English translation can be found in the 2001 *Poems of Fernando Pessoa*.

speaker's refusal to look may be an admission of regret in retrospect. Perhaps the speaker did look and now cannot forget the horror. This is often why people choose not to look at a deceased friend or relative. They would prefer to remember the person alive and happy than forever have the image of their loved one's corpse as a final memory. The second section also exhibits the author's denial in the alternating use of the past and present tense when referring to Ignacio. Notably, denial, of all the five stages of grief, is perhaps the most prominent in the poem, rearing its head all the way through section 3. Indeed, the sixth stanza of the penultimate section finds the speaker claiming that the announcement of Ignacio's death cannot possibly be correct.

Though anger, unlike denial, is the least prominent of the emotions invoked by the speaker, it does appear at points. In the ninth stanza of the second section, the speaker indignantly asks who tells him to look at the body, and he follows up on this indignation with the repeated assertion that he refuses to do so. This same emotion, an offshoot of anger, appears when the speaker asks who declares Ignacio dead, and then the speaker goes on to call that person a liar. Anger could also be said to be the driving emotion behind the speaker's demands that the men who have lived beyond death stand before Ignacio's tomb (this occurs in stanzas 8 and 9 of section 3). The speaker's hubris in invoking their spirits, in demanding that they show Ignacio how to transcend death, can easily be said to be based upon anger. This latter instance is also a form of bargaining. The speaker will accept Ignacio's death as long as his legend lives on. Here, the speaker demonstrates the conflicting emotions typical of the bargaining process; he does not want Ignacio to know that he is dead, but the speaker simultaneously wants the matador to be at peace. The speaker does not want Ignacio to mourn his own death or rage against it, but to fly away instead. This compromise is suggested only a few stanzas after the speaker declares that he wants nothing more than to see Ignacio alive, unable to sleep for all eternity.

Of all the sections in the poem, section 3 most clearly demonstrates depression, the fourth stage of grief. The repeated statement that everything is over is a direct assertion of despair. The third section is also one of the most descriptive, and its imagery is undoubtedly dark and depressed. The speaker talks of rock and its properties, portraying a stormy and bleak world. The speaker evokes a world populated by the wolves and the skeletons of birds, of unyielding rocks and rain. The quiet that lurked in the corners in section 1 now descends in section 3. The snow referenced in section 1 now sheds tears in section 3. Notably, the depression that dominates section 3 actually begins to show itself toward the end of section 2. Once the speaker finishes his list of Ignacio's charms in that section, he next portrays the matador's skull decomposing, his blood stumbling in a mist without a soul. An act of bargaining may also be said to be taking place in section 3. When the speaker finally looks at Ignacio's body, a mythological act of transformation beyond death has occurred. Ignacio bears the head of the minotaur, half man and half bull. He has become part of that which vanquished him. In his death, Ignacio has become legend, a myth. Strangely, this is the very bargain the speaker attempts to make later in the very same section.

Only section 4 demonstrates any real air of acceptance, though traces of it appear briefly in other sections. These glimmers of acceptance occur often as one-line assertions that belie a moment of clarity. For instance, the seventh line of the first section indicates that after five o'clock, there is nothing but death. In the penultimate stanza of section 2, the speaker declares that Ignacio slumbers eternally. In section 3, the repeated statements that everything is over, and the description of Ignacio's body laid out on the rock, all exhibit the speaker's growing acceptance of his friend's death. In section 4, the speaker repeats four times that Ignacio is gone for all eternity. This is strongest indicator of acceptance in the poem thus far. The section also describes time moving on, of the world and the creatures and people in it finally forgetting the matador. All these occurrences are the natural consequences of acceptance. The recalcitrant speaker, however, states that he alone will remember. He alone will sing his friend's praises.

Yet the calm tone of the section continues to signal the speaker's growing acceptance of Ignacio's passing. Indeed, the sections calmest in tone (sections 3 and 4) are also the most uniform in structure. The form in section 1 is somewhat erratic, and it is even more so in section 2 (where the denial is greatest). Yet, as sections 3 and 4 progress, the poem grows more and more

uniform in its presentation, changing from broken and frantic stanzas to neat and near-uniform quatrains. This change in form may reflect the emotional state of the speaker: calm where he is calm, distressed where he is distressed. This progression, this split in form and tone between the first two sections and the last two sections, contributes to a sense of time and movement throughout the lament. While the narrative is not necessarily a linear through line, neither are the stages of grief. Time moves but does not move. It centers around the death but then references the funeral and the act of mourning. It returns to the death. It begins with a sheet in the first few lines of section 1, and then halfway through section 3 a shroud is finally folded over the matador's body. Lorca's "Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías" is in and of itself an act of mourning. Therefore, like Kubler-Ross's stages of grief, it can hardly be held to a linear account.

Source: Leah Tieger, Critical Essay on "Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2010.

William Carlos Williams

In the following excerpt, American poet William Carlos Williams illuminates Lorca's influences and identifies "Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías" as Lorca's greatest poem.

In 1936 Lorca was dragged through the streets of Granada to face the Fascist firing squad. The reasons were not obvious. He was not active in Leftist circles; but he was a power—he was a man of the people. His books were burned.

There are two great traditional schools of Spanish poetry, one leaning heavily upon world literature and another stemming exclusively from Iberian sources.

Lorca was child of the latter, so much so that he is often, as if slightly to disparage him, spoken of as a popular poet. Popular he was as no poet in Spain has been since the time of Lope de Vega. He belonged to the people and when they were attacked he was attacked by the same forces. But he was also champion of a school.

The sources whence Lorca drew his strength are at the beginnings of Spanish literature. In the epic conflict which the Spanish maintained in over four thousand battles for the reconquest of the Peninsula from the Moors, there stands out an invincible leader who was, and continues to be in the memory of the people, the great national hero: Rodrigo Diaz de Vivar, called *El Cid Campeador*. His popularity is justified not only by reason of his qualities as a man of audacity and power but also for his having been the champion of popular liberties in face of the kings, one who disdained and despised their sovereignty under the dictates of reason and protected the people. The periods of the greatest deeds of this hero make up the *Cantar de Mio Cid* or *Poema del Cid*, the oldest work that survives in the Castilian tongue. The types are intensely human, the descriptions rapid and concrete:

WITHOUT READING LORCA ALOUD THE REAL ESSENCE OF THE OLD AND THE NEW SPANISH POETRY CANNOT BE UNDERSTOOD."

> Martin Antolinez mano metio al espada:
> Relumbra tod' el campo.

The flash of a sword lights the whole field.

This *Song of My Cid* was written, tradition says, by one of his loyal followers, not more than forty years after the death of the hero it celebrates: and there Spanish literature gives a first and striking proof of its ability to make poetry out of the here and the now. This quality it has never lost. Lorca knew it in his *Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías*.

Not only is *Poema del Cid* the first preserved to the Castilian language but it sets at once the standard in point of form for all Spanish poetry to follow. Sometimes out of favor but always in the background, its meters have become imbedded inextricably in the songs of the people—and there is no western poetry in which the popular has a greater bulk and significance than the Spanish. Its line is famous. It is of sixteen syllables assonanced sometimes for long periods on the same vowel. This line, divided in half as usually written, becomes the basis for the *romance* or ballad, many of the *romances viejos* being, in all probability, as old as *Poema del Cid* itself or even older. It was a form much used by Lorca whose reassertion of its structural line, unchanged, forms the basis for his work.

Writing in the old meter eight hundred or a thousand years perhaps after its invention,

García Lorca was pleased, as he stood in the street one night before a wine-shop in Seville, to hear the words of a *copla* which he himself had written sung word for word by an illiterate guitarist, syllable for syllable in the mode of the 12th century epic.

And I remember one night in 1910 in Toledo listening in the same way before a cubicle opening onto one of the plazas where a few men were sitting drinking. One of them was singing to the beat of a guitar. I went in, a young man not very familiar with the language and an obvious stranger, but they became self-conscious so that I took my drink and left soon after. They looked like the shepherds I had seen coming in that afternoon across the narrow bridge with their big wolfish dogs.

Toward the middle of the 13th Century Alfonso X, called the Wise, first gave due honor to the language of the country by ordering all public documents to be written in the common tongue rather than in Latin as formerly. It is typical of Spain that many blamed precisely this change for the disorder and disasters which followed. It was Alfonso who, in 1253, gathered a whole book of *Cantigas* or *letras* to sing, in the *dialecto gallego*. He was dethroned by his own son and driven an exile to die neglected in Seville, after which for close to a hundred years, "in that miserable epoch," so it is said, "the men of Castile seemed to possess hearts only to hate and arms only with which to kill."

Yet it was appositely enough during this distressed period that there appeared the second of Spain's great early poems, *Libro de Buen Amor*, the Book of Good Love, the work of that most arresting personality in Spanish mediaeval literature: Juan Ruiz, arch-priest of Hita. This is the portrait he gives of himself among the many contained in his famous work: corpulent, a big head, small eyes under heavy eyebrows black as coal, a big nose, the mouth big also, thick lips, a short, thick neck, an easy gait—a good musician and a gay lover.

If Lorca has rested his poetic inspirations firmly in the structural forms established by *Poema del Cid* much of his mood and spirit can be discovered in the nature of the old reprobate archpriest of Hita.

Juan Ruiz was a priest of that disorderly type which his time tolerated, his favorite company the people, always the people, and particularly that part of the Spanish population, says Madariaga, "which it is so difficult to imagine today, in which Jews and Moors and Christians mixed in an amiable fraternity of mirth and pleasure." Such a population is perhaps less difficult to imagine today in the south, where Lorca was at home, than those not fully initiated might have supposed. For it is the home of the Andalusian folksong which Lorca so ably celebrated, that curious compound of the "philosophical desperation of the Arab, the religious desperation of the Jew, and the social desperation of the gypsy." With these elements he was thoroughly familiar.

The major work of the fourteenth century in Spain, Ruiz' *Libro de Buen Amor* is in reality a picaresque novel in verse and prose, much of it in dialogue full of laughter, full of movement and full of color, a vast satirical panorama of mediaeval society. The poet, for all the faults and indignities of the priest, is a great one. He knows the secrets of that direct plunge into action which is typical alike of *Poema del Cid*, of Spanish *romances* no less than of Spanish comedies, and, nowadays, of popular song, to all of which Lorca owes much of his inspiration.

To understand fully all that is implied in Lorca's poetic style, what he rejected and what he clung to, the development of Spanish poetry subsequent to the work of the early masters must be noted. There was a sharp revulsion from the "old taste" which they exemplified up to the time of Juan de Mena. As always in matters of this character geography must be recognized as playing a leading part.

Spain is a peninsula dependent from the extreme lower corner of Europe, cut off from Europe by the Pyrenees which make of it virtually an island. It is, besides, far to the west of all direct European influences. From the south the Moorish invasion, with its softening influences, failed, being driven back after four centuries of temporary supremacy into Africa whence it had come, though its mark remains still in a certain quarter of Spanish and all European thought. Lorca whose home was Granada knew this inheritance. The Moorish invasion stopped short and receded while Latin thought, following the tracks of Caesar, had in the main gone east of Iberia up the Rhone valley through France to the north. Thus the flexibility and necessitous subtlety of the French, their logic and lucidity of ideas, remained unknown to Spain. Enclosed within themselves Spaniards have remained basically limited to a reality of the world at their feet from which there was no escape (save across the sea, which failed

them) and that second steep reality of the soul in whose service they have proved themselves such extravagant heroes.

Little affected by the Renaissance and not at all by the Reformation, early Spanish literature reached a stop, just prior to the discovery of America, in the work of Juan de Mena (1411–1456). For two hundred years thereafter, during the 15th and 16th centuries or until the time of Góngora, the "old taste," characteristic in its resources, limited in its means, succumbed, and the influence of Italy held an ascendancy. As Quintana says in the introduction to his *Poesías Selectas Castellanas* (1817), "The old assonanced versification of octosyllabics, more suited to the madrigal and the epigram than to more ambitious poems, could not be sustained without awkwardness and crudeness—as Juan de Mena had found. It was unfit for high and animated conceptions. Force of thought, warmth of feeling, harmony and variety, without which none can be considered a poet, all were lacking." But Cristóbal de Castillejo in a violent satire "compared these novelties of the Petrarquistas, as he called them, to those Luther had introduced into the Christian faith."

Great names abounded in Spanish poetry following this breakdown of the old modes, some of the greatest in Spanish literary history, all under the newer influence, all working as they believed to enlarge and enrich the prosody and general resources of the language. Fernando de Herrera celebrated the majesty of Imperial Spain. There was the mystic Fray Luis de León and among the rest Saint Teresa, that greatest of Spanish mystics, whose few poems, not more than thirty in all, ignoring grammar, logic, ignoring everything but the stark cry of the spirit, wrung direct from the heart, make them seem its own agonized voice crying in our ears. It is the same recurrent, unreasoning note found in the strident, bright colors and tortured lines of El Greco. Escape! As ideas come into Spain they will stop and turn upward: "I proceed," Unamuno says still in the Twentieth Century, "by what they call arbitrary affirmations, without documentation, without proof, outside of modern European logic, disdainful of its methods."

But toward the end of the Sixteenth Century the typically Spanish reaction occurred. It is curious and interesting to note how the otherwise mildly acquiescent Quintana responds to it, how for the first time he really warms to his subject and his style glows when he records: "At this time (1570–80) corresponding with the youth of Góngora and Lope de Vega it happened that a new interest began to appear in the old romances. . . .

"Stripped of the artifice and violence which the imitation of other modes had necessitated; its authors caring little for what the odes of Horace or the *canciones* of Petrarch were like; and being composed more by instinct than by art, the *romances* could not possess the complexity and the elevation of the odes of León, Herrera and Rioja. But they were our own lyric poetry; in them music found its own accents; these were the songs one heard at night from windows and in the streets to the sound of the harp or the guitar. . . .

"There are in them more beautiful expressions and more energetic, ingenious and delicate sallies than in all our poetry besides. But curiously enough in a few years this revival of a taste which popularized poetry, and rescued it from the limits of imitation to which the earlier poets had reduced it, served also to make it incorrect and to break it down, inviting to this abandon the same facility as in its rehabilitation." Góngora was the man!

It was Luis de Góngora who as a lyric poet brought the new adventure to its fullest fruition and then attempted to go away, up and beyond it—to amazing effect.

Góngora is the only Spanish poet whose inventions, at the beginning of the 17th Century, retain a lively interest for us today, one of the few poets of Spain of world reputation and lasting quality of greatness. Look at his picture: chin deep in his cravat, his forehead a Gibraltar, the look on his face slightly amused but formidable, not to say invincible, his person retracted into an island of strength resembling nothing so much as the map of Spain itself. There you have the spirit that sustained Lorca in our day.

A master in his *romances*, one of the greatest masters of the burlesque and the satire, Góngora had already established a redoubtable reputation when toward the latter part of his life he set out to elevate the tone of Spanish poetry, illustrating it with erudition and new conceptions, enriching the language with those tones and turns which distinguish it from prose. It was the same ambition which had inspired Juan de Mena and Fernando de Herrera; but Góngora lacked, as they said, the culture and moderation possessed by those predecessors.

Be that as it may Góngora, who to the end of his days continued at times to write his lovely

romances, "developed a style—turgid and difficult, infuriating his age, which became known as *Culteranismo*. And inasmuch as Góngora was the great representative of Culteranismo it became known as *Góngorismo*."

What else but the same escape upward! As in the Poems of Saint Teresa! When Góngora found himself confined by the old, unwilling to go back to the borrowed Italianate mode, he sought release in an illogical, climbing manner, precursor of today. He could not go back to Latin, to Greek or the Italian. Never to the French—so he went up! steeply, to the illogical, to El Greco's tortured line. So that when Luzán and those other humanists (who after a century were restoring good taste) applied themselves to destroy the sect and its consequences—denouncing its founder—they took Góngora and detestable poet to be one and the same thing.

It was for Federico García Lorca, in our day, to find a solution. Like the young Góngora, Lorca adopted the old Spanish modes. I have taken his book *Llanto por Ignacio Sánchez Mejías* (*Lament for the Death of a Bullfighter*) to be touched upon for the conclusion of these notes.

There has always seemed to be a doubt in the minds of Spaniards that their native meters were subtle enough, flexible enough to bear modern stresses. But Lorca, aided by the light of Twentieth-Century thought, discovered in the old forms the very essence of today. Reality, immediacy; by the vividness of the image invoking the mind to start awake. This peculiarly modern mechanic Lorca found ready to his hand. He took up the old tradition, and in a more congenial age worked with it, as the others had not been able to do, until he forced it—without borrowing—to carry on as it had come to him, intact through the ages, warm, unencumbered by draperies of imitative derivation—the world again under our eyes.

The peculiar pleasure of his assonances in many of the poems in this book retains the singing quality of Spanish poetry and at the same time the touch of that monotony which is in all primitive song—so well modernized here: In the first of the *romances* which make up the book's latter half, "La Casada Infiel," the play is on the letter o; in "Preciosa Y El Aire" upon e; in "Romance de la Guardia Civil Española" upon a; etc., etc. This is straight from *El Cid*; but not the scintillating juxtapositions of words and images in the three "Romances Históricos" (at the very end), where the same blurring, of the illogical, as of refracted light suggests that other reality—the upward sweep into the sun and the air which characterized the aspirations of St. Teresa, of El Greco and the Góngora whom none understood or wished to understand in his day, the "obscurities" which Unamuno embraces with his eye toward "Augustine, the great African, soul of fire that split itself in leaping waves of rhetoric, twistings of the phrase, antitheses, paradoxes and ingenuities . . . a Góngorine and a conceptualist at the same time. Which makes me think that Góngorism and conceptualism are the most natural forms of passion and vehemence."

The first stanza of Lorca's greatest poem, the lament, has for every second line the refrain: *A las cinco de la tarde*—"at five in the afternoon."

That refrain, *A las cinco de la tarde*, fascinated Lorca. It gives the essence of his verse. It is precise, it is today, it is fatal. It gives the hour, still in broad daylight though toward the close of the day. But besides that it is song. Without reading Lorca aloud the real essence of the old and the new Spanish poetry cannot be understood. But the stress on the first syllable of the "CIN*co*" is the pure sound of a barbaric music, the heartbeat of a man's song, *A las* CIN*co de la tarde*. What is that? It is any time at all, no time, and at the same time eternity. Every minute is eternity—and too late. *A las* CIN*co de la tarde*. There is the beat of a fist on the guitar that cannot escape from its sorrow, the recurring sense of finality translated to music. The fatality of Spain, the immediacy of its life and of its song. *A las* CIN*co de la tarde*, Mejías was killed! was killed on a bull's horns. *A las* CIN*co de la tarde*, he met his end.

This is the brutal fact, the mystical fact. Why precisely *a las* CIN*co de la tarde*? The mystery of any moment is emphasized. The spirit of Góngora, the obscure sound of the words is there.

Much in the examples of Lorca must have been in the mind of the elder poet when he strained at the cords of the old meter, the old thoughts, refusing to adopt the Italianate modes of his immediate predecessors until the words broke like a bridge under him and he fell through among fragments—wisely.

Two years after the event the Spaniard takes a man killed in action—a bullfighter killed in Mexico—for his theme. No matter what the action, he was a man and he was killed: the same ethical detachment and the same freedom from

ethical prejudice which characterized *El Cid* and the *Book of Good Love*. The same power also to make poetry of the here and the now. The same realism, the same mounting of the real, nothing more real than a bullfighter, mounting as he is, not as one might wish him to be, directly up, up into the light which poetry accepts and recasts. That is Lorca. . . .

Lorca honored Spain, as one honors a check, the instinctive rightness of the Spanish people, the people themselves who have preserved their basic attitude toward life in the traditional poetic forms. He has shown that these modes, this old taste, are susceptible of all the delicate shadings—without losing the touch of reality—which at times in their history have been denied them. In such "obscurities" of the words as in the final *romances* in his book, the historical pieces addressed to the Saints, he has shown how the modern completes the old modes of *The Cid* and *The Book of Good Love*. He has carried to success the battles which Juan de Mena began and Góngora continued.

Federico García Lorca, born in 1899 in the vicinity of Granada, produced a number of outstanding works in lyric poetry, drama and prose between his eighteenth year and the time of his death in 1936 at the age of thirty-seven. He was a pianist, the organizer of a dramatic troupe, and a distinguished folklorist of Spanish popular songs of great distinction.

Many stories are told of him. He was loved by the people. His murder by the Fascist firing squad in Granada is perhaps as he would have wished it to be: To die on the horns of the bull—if a man does not put his sword first through its heart. Like most men of genius he went about little recognized during his life but he has left us a weapon by which to defend our thought and our beliefs, a modern faith which though it may still be little more than vaguely sensed in the rest of the world is awake today in old Spain, in proud defiance of destruction there. By that Lorca lives.

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This comprehensive bilingual anthology is an excellent introduction to Spanish literature dating from medieval times to the twentieth century. The volume includes poetry, drama, and prose.

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For a different take on the elegiac form, read Rilke's famous cycle of elegies. Written between 1912 and 1922, the collection is a landmark book in modern poetry.

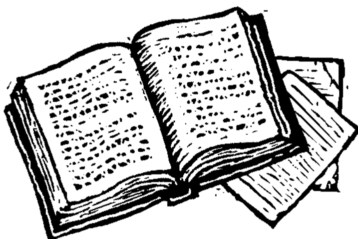
Lineage

MARGARET WALKER

1942

Margaret Walker's poem "Lineage" presents a perfect example of her writing style, demonstrating how well she can tell a story filled with emotion without seemingly expressing sorrow. In this poem, Walker focuses on the women of her ancestry who blazed a trail for her. These women, Walker states several times, were filled with strength. They worked through their hardships without allowing the torture of slavery to bring them down.

Walker, a black woman who bore her own challenges because of her race and sex, has often been praised for her strength, yet in this poem, she questions why she is not as formidable as her grandmothers. This final question is not answered, leaving the reader to ponder what the poet means. Walker has stated that although she addresses her grandmothers in this poem, she meant for the poem to have a universal element. The grandmothers in the poem, then, belong to everyone. In other words, she dedicates this poem to all women who lived and toiled before even the youngest of generations of this century. This is a poem dedicated to humanity's ancestry.



"Lineage" is not considered to be among Walker's greatest poems, but it is one of the more popular. The language is simple enough for an elementary-school student to grasp, and the images are easily envisioned. The depth of meaning and emotion, however, increase for readers who have gained experience with their own feelings and can

Margaret Walker *(AP Images)*

relate to the emotional content that Walker alludes to in her writing. So in a sense, the poem continues to grow along with readers. The poem's themes of memory and strength speak to every generation. Originally published in Walker's 1942 collection *For My People*, "Lineage" can also be found in Walker's 1989 volume *This Is My Century: New and Collected Poems.*

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Born on July 7, 1915, in Birmingham, Alabama, Margaret Abigail Walker was encouraged at a young age to read philosophy and poetry. Her father, Sigismund C. Walker, an educator and Methodist minister, and her mother, Marion, a music teacher, provided Walker with good examples of intellectual pursuit. After high school, Walker attended New Orleans University for two years. However, the writer Langston Hughes urged her to go to a northern school to seek more formal training in writing. Walker agreed and transferred to Chicago's Northwestern University, where at twenty, she received her bachelor's degree in English.

After graduating, Walker went to work with the Federal Writers' Project, a government supported work group created after the Great Depression, which caused extremely high unemployment. There were other prominent black writers also involved with the federal program at this time, including Gwendolyn Brooks and Richard Wright, who would both go on to become nationally recognized literary figures. Much later in her life, Walker would publish a biography and critical analysis of Wright's work called *Richard Wright, Daemonic Genius: A Portrait of the Man, A Critical Look at His Work* (1988). This biography of Wright caused a strain in their otherwise congenial relationship, a rift that neither Walker nor Wright completely explained.

In 1942, Walker earned her master's degree from the University of Iowa, where she majored in creative writing. Her thesis for her degree won the Yale Younger Poets Award, making her the first African American to win this prestigious award. The thesis was Walker's poem "For My People" (1942), which many critics consider her best work. This poem as well as the poem "Lineage" were published in 1942 in Walker's collection *For My People*.

Walker married Firnist James Alexander, an interior designer, in 1943. She and her husband eventually raised four children. Despite the demands of motherhood, Walker continued to work. She taught at several black colleges before accepting a position in 1949 at Jackson State University in Mississippi, where she remained until she retired. It was in Jackson that the poet founded the Institute for the Study of the History, Life and Culture of Black People in 1968. The center was later named in her honor.

It was while working for her doctorate at the University of Iowa that Walker wrote the book for which she is best known. *Jubilee* (1966), an award-winning novel set during the Civil War, was her doctoral dissertation. The protagonist is a slave and is based on Walker's great-grandmother. Walker's next publication was *Prophets for a New Day* (1970), her second collection of poems, which spoke to the civil rights movement. Poetry dominated her writing in the following years. She published *October Journey* in 1973; *A Poetic Equation: Conversations between Nikki Giovanni and Margaret Walker* in 1974; and *This Is My Country: New and Collected Poems* in 1988. Walker continued to work, writing, touring, and lecturing, until she died of cancer in Chicago at the age of eighty-three, on November 30, 1998.

POEM TEXT

My grandmothers were strong.
They followed plows and bent to toil.
They moved through fields sowing seed.
They touched earth and grain grew.
They were full of sturdiness and singing. 5

My grandmothers were strong.
My grandmothers are full of memories
Smelling of soap and onions and wet clay
With veins rolling roughly over quick hands
They have many clean words to say. 10
My grandmothers were strong.
Why am I not as they?

POEM SUMMARY

Stanza 1

Walker's two-stanza poem "Lineage" begins with a line that denotes the main theme of her work. This first line is repeated twice more, emphasizing the strength of the speaker's grandmothers.

The first stanza differs from the second stanza in form and text. In the first stanza, the poet presents the grandmothers as if she is envisioning them. The poet creates verbal pictures of strong women toiling in a field, and she provides very specific images of what the women looked like as they worked. The first image is of the women steadying a plow as it digs deep into the earth. In case it is not certain in the minds of the readers that this is hard work, the speaker indicates the effort these women made in bending their backs as they toil. It is not certain if the plow is being pulled by a horse or ox with the women mainly steering the plow, or if the plow moves through the efforts of the women pushing it. Either way, whether the women are helped or not by an animal, the work they are doing requires bending of the back, which insinuates great effort.

In the third line of the first stanza, the women change work positions. They are now scattering seeds. The planting of seeds can be done in two ways. Some seeds might be thrown from a standing position. The women might pass through the fields dropping seeds into the furrows that the plowing has left behind. In this situation, the women might have straight backs as they walk along. However, some types of seeds need to be manually planted. This means the women might be bent over the earth, pushing the seeds into the ground and covering them with soil. The seeding process might not be as physically demanding as the plowing, but it can be extremely tiring and hard on the body. Regardless of whether these women are slaves or tenant farmers, the nature of their job requires long, hard labor. The seeds must be planted within a window of time in order to take advantage of the growing season. So the women may work in the fields in a succession of twelve or more hours each day.

In the fourth line of the first stanza, the women are rewarded, at least in one way. They are also described in this line almost as if they are magical goddesses. The seeds they have planted, because these women have touched the earth, will now grow. The speaker does not provide enough detail in this poem for readers to know if these fields in which the women work are theirs. So readers do not know how the women are rewarded when the plants grow. It is not known if these crops belong to them or if they provide the labor and do not reap the benefits of the plants. The crops may well belong to someone else. However, there is still a sense of reward. The combination of the seeds, the earth, and the women's touch has made the fields come alive. The women have encouraged the seeds to grow. They have acted as creators of the food that the grain will eventually provide. They know that someone will benefit from their labor. If they do not share in the rewards of the crops, they at least know that if not for them, the fields would have lain fallow.

In the fifth line, the speaker subtly suggests that the women's true reward is internal. Although their labor is harsh, it also makes them strong, both physically and mentally. That is one reason why they are singing. They have learned to rise above their circumstances, no matter how harsh they are, and sing. The speaker does not state what kind of song they sing, whether it is sad or joyful. She seems to imply that it does not make any difference. The mention of their singing comes immediately after the speaker has mentioned how sturdy they are. Immediately following the song, the speaker repeats how strong her grandmothers are. It is possible to infer that the speaker believes that the songs the grandmothers sing make them even stronger.

Stanza 2

The way that the speaker remembers her grandmothers changes in the second stanza. Whereas in the first stanza, the images that the speaker provides are visual, as if she were watching her grandmothers working, in the second stanza, the speaker uses her other senses to remember these women.

In the first line of the second stanza, the speaker flips a statement around: rather than stating that she is full of memories of her grandmothers, she places the memories inside her grandmothers. By doing this, the speaker gives her grandmothers full credit for the memories, as if they are the ones carrying them, and it is the speaker's task to find

them. In a way, this makes the memories even more special. The memories are not just things that the speaker carries in her mind but rather are gifts that the grandmothers bring to her. The other aspect of the poem that makes the memories powerful is the speaker's use of images that readers can relate to. So as the speaker recalls the memories, the reader experiences them, too. This is especially true when the speaker remembers the scents of her grandmothers. She recalls the women through the smells of soap, onions, and clay. Largely these are common elements that almost anyone can relate to; they are also strong scents that can easily be brought to mind. All grandmothers have special scents about them that one can remember. The first scent that the speaker evokes, that of soap, is a personal smell. The second, of the onion, is more communal, as in the smell of dinner cooking. The third is more universal—the smell of wet earth. Almost anyone living in this world has a sense of what wet earth smells like.

In the third line of the second stanza, the speaker remembers the feel of her grandmothers' hands. In the fourth line, the grandmothers are remembered from the sounds they made, the words they chose, which were pleasant. After describing her grandmothers in this second stanza through the senses of smell, touch, and sound, the speaker repeats the phrase about how strong her grandmothers are. Then, in the last line of the poem, the speaker presents a question, one that in a way sums up her feelings for her grandmothers. Having shared in several of the speaker's memories of these women, readers sense her love and pride for her grandmothers. She looks up to them to the point that they make her feel small in comparison. It is almost as if the speaker is reprimanding herself. How could she ever complain about her life when her situation is so much easier? Why has she been made privileged to have this better life? Readers can even take this question one step further. The speaker might end the poem with this question to suggest that future generations of women, when they look back at the speaker's time, might also be moved to remind themselves not to complain.

THEMES

Memory and History

A sense of history is pervasive in Walker's poem "Lineage." Even the title evokes the past. The speaker of the poem is remembering people she has known as well as imagining those too far back for her to have met. Thus, she is speaking to her own personal history. Of those with whom she is familiar, the speaker recalls their scents of food and soap. She remembers touching their hands. She remembers how they talked. Sometimes when they spoke to her, they told her stories. It is through these stories that she has heard about her ancestors who were gone before she was born.

Walker's poem recalls times of hardship, times much more difficult than her own. It is in remembering this history that Walker appreciates how much stronger her grandmothers were than are the women of her own time. Without saying so in her poem, Walker insinuates that in grasping the history of her ancestors, she has gained a better perspective on whatever she is going through.

Human Potential

A theme that functions as a subtle undertone in this poem is the potential of human beings to rise above their situations. Walker writes about her grandmothers, including her great-grandmothers and on back into history. Some of her antebellum ancestors were presumably slaves, as indicated by her portrayal of their work, and yet Walker imbues them with the strength to carry on without complaining. She has them smelling of soap, not sweat, which implies that despite their condition, the women took pride in themselves. On one level, the grandmothers in this poem believe in physical cleanliness. On another level, cleanliness can represent a purity of thought, which the poet suggests when she mentions the grandmothers' clean language. They do not curse or bemoan their situation.

Walker evokes grandmothers who were determined to stay in touch with their own potential and resist feeling sorry for themselves or feeling less pride in themselves because they were captive slaves. Even for the generations of black women who were not slaves but still experienced harsh prejudice and discrimination, the poet implies that these women remained strong. People who discriminate against others tend to make them the target of insults and other degradations. These grandmothers, the poet suggests, did not succumb to any insults. They were defiant against them and would not surrender what they knew to be their potential selves.

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY

- Walker and the poet Nikki Giovanni often met to talk about their shared philosophies of life and literature. Read several of each writer's poems and compare them. How are their voices similar and different? What about their tone and the topics? Can you tell that there is a difference in their ages? How do the times they have lived in seem to affect their writing? Read some of the interviews between these two poets to help inform your research, then write an essay discussing your findings.
- Walker has stated that although she admired many of the black women writers who matured in the 1960s, she did not admire some of the writers' language. She said the language of the 1960s was too vulgar for her taste, specifically referring to Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* as an example. Read this novel, studying not only the specific language but also the way in which Alice Walker portrays the pain that is suffered by her various characters. Margaret Walker subdues her images, hiding the pain inside her characters. How does Alice Walker demonstrate the suffering her characters endure? Which narrative method do you prefer? You might want to read Margaret Walker's novel *Jubilee* to better inform your conclusions. Give an oral presentation on the topic.
- Ask four or five of your classmates to join a panel. Assign each member, yourself included, to a particular period in the history of black people in the United States. Periods might include the arrival of the first slaves; life for slaves on plantations leading up to the Civil War; Reconstruction and life for freed slaves; the period of Jim Crow laws in the South leading to the civil rights movement; and the progression from Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination to Barack Obama's election as president. Have each panel member prepare a ten-minute synopsis of his or her assigned era. After the presentation, take questions from the rest of your class.
- Hand out copies of "Lineage" to as many students as you can. Be ready with a survey of questions to ask them after they read it. Some questions you might ask are: Does the reader feel that his or her grandparents were stronger than him or her? Can they guess the decade in which this poem was written? Can they guess the gender and ethnicity of the poet? Add some of your own questions. After taking your survey, compile the results in a chart and discuss their implications in a report.

Strength

The speaker of this poem mentions the strength of her grandmothers in several different ways. First, she talks about physical strength. These women plow the earth, turning it up to reinvigorate it. Then they bend their backs as they sow the seeds. Her grandmothers' rough hands are proof of how hard they have worked.

The grandmothers possess more than just physical power, as they also have psychological and emotional strength. Whether they sing while they work or after they have eaten dinner and washed up, the fact that they can sing implies that they have the strength and perspective to objectify their experiences. They might sing sad lyrics, or spiritual verses, or even lively happy tunes. They might have sung alone or in harmony with others. The singing, no matter what type of song, is a creative act. The women use their voices to make music. While involved in a work of art, one tends to step out of the personal realm and enter a space that is more universal. Through song, people can forget their personal troubles and connect with others on a larger scale.

The poet further implies that the grandmothers do not curse their past circumstances. They use clean language, the poet says, to express themselves. This clean language is more than just not speaking

Women working in a field (© Friedrich Stark / Alamy)

inappropriately. It suggests that the grandmothers do not allow themselves to be weighed down by negative thoughts about the difficulties of their lives. They face their challenges and, by bearing clean thoughts and speaking clean words, motivate and inspire others to do the same. So these grandmothers also evince a spiritual strength.

STYLE

Imagery

Walker's poem "Lineage" is filled with vivid images that appeal to several senses. First are the visual images, such as those of the grandmothers working in the field. They work behind plows, and then they plant the seed. Readers can visualize these scenes. Next is the sense of touch, as the speaker mentions that the grandmothers reach down and touch the earth. Where they touch, or where they sow seed, plants grow. Thus, the images pass from early spring to the time of harvest. Readers can imagine an empty field evolving into a plot of land filled with tall green plants.

Then come images that stimulate the sense of smell. The speaker remembers not only through the visuals of her grandmothers working in the field but also through remembrance of fragrances. Here readers can imagine a child smelling a particular cake of soap and being reminded of her grandmothers. Soap also conjures a sense of cleanliness, suggesting another visual image of a neat grandmother who, despite her hard work in the field, is a cleanly woman, too. The speaker continues with the scent of onions. This could be another representation of a woman working in the field, digging up onions, but it could also remind the speaker of her grandmothers as women cooking in the kitchen. The next image related to smell is that of clay. Some southern fields are heavy in clay, so this reference is presumably not to a potter working with clay but rather to a woman whose hands are so often deep within the soil that the smell of clay is embedded in her skin.

There is another image associated with both sight and touch, and that is the image of the grandmothers' hands. The speaker points out that the veins in her grandmothers' hands are prominent

enough to see, protruding from the top of their hands due to aging as well as to the coarse treatment the hands have recieved. The reader infers that the speaker has touched her grandmothers' hands, as otherwise she would not know that they are rough.

Alliteration

Alliteration is a poetic term denoting the correspondence of two or more words beginning with the same consonant sound. These words must be in positions relatively close to one another. Alliteration enhances the feel and continuity of a work because certain words are linked through this device, usually words the poet wants to emphasize. The first instance of alliteration in this poem occurs at the end of the third line in the first stanza, where two words beginning with the letter *s* are found. In the following line, also at the end, are two words that begin with the letter *g*. In the fifth line of the first stanza is another instance of alliteration, where two words separated by the word *and* both begin with the letter *s*. In the second stanza, the poet uses alliteration twice more: in the beginning of the second line and in the middle of the third line.

Repetition

Walker uses repetition of phrases in her poem as wells as repetition of pronouns to draw attention to certain points she wants to make. For example, in the first stanza, she repeats the same line at the beginning and at the end of the stanza. Then she inserts the same line almost at the end of the second stanza. This line can thus be understood as the foundational line of the poem. The poet also repeats the pronoun *they* four times in the first stanza, at the beginning of lines two through five. These lines are also of somewhat equal length, so not only is the pronoun repeated but so, too, is the pattern of the phrase. This pattern is much like the beat of a drum. This is what the grandmothers did, the poet is saying; this is why they were so strong. It is within these repeated phrases that the poet describes the grandmothers' hard work, and only in these repeated phrases are the grandmothers active. As such, the repetition might evoke their footsteps as they trudge along behind the plow or the movement of their hands as they plant the seeds. The pattern can be looked upon as the rhythm by which the women worked.

Rhyme

Only in the second stanza of this poem is rhyme found. At the ends of lines two, four, and six of the second stanza, Walker uses words that rhyme with one another. The alternating lines in between do not rhyme. One effect of this is that the introduction of rhyme enhances the climactic buildup to the last line, where the poet wants to make a strong impression. Not only does the poem end in a question, but also the last line concludes the rhyming pattern. By linking lines together in the second stanza, the rhyme also suggests a growing sense of connection within the poem that heightens the contrast presented in the last line.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Slavery in the United States

Slavery is defined as an involuntary state of human servitude. People used as slaves are forced to work against their will and may be severely punished if they do not obey. During the early centuries of American history, when slaves were brought to this continent, they were bought and sold and were considered property of their owners with no rights of their own. Mothers were often separated from their children, husbands from their wives. Slavery in the United States was not the inception of such practices, as slavery has been practiced since ancient times. Often when one country defeated another in war, those who won took hostages from the defeated people and made them work as slaves.

When European settlers in the first American colonies needed cheap labor, slavery came to mind. The first African slaves arrived in North America in 1619, when twenty Africans were led off a Dutch ship to the Jamestown colony, in present-day Virginia. They were bound in chains and forced to work; thus slavery in America began. At first, the number of slaves was relatively small. However, as the business of agriculture grew, especially in the southern colonies, so, too, did slavery. Not all slaves were taken to plantations in the South, as slaves in the northern colonies often worked in private homes as maids, cooks, and butlers. In the South, most slaves were put to work in the fields. Although there were some laws in place to protect slaves, they were seldom enforced. Whipping, branding, and other harsh disciplinary actions were often performed, with law-enforcement officials looking the other way.

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **1860s:** The United States is involved in the Civil War, primarily over slavery.

  1940s: The southern United States is governed by Jim Crow laws, which ban African Americans from entering certain public places, such as restaurants, and from sitting at the front of city buses.

  Today: Despite some remaining prejudice in the country, the people of the United States elect Barack Obama, its first black president, by a substantial margin in 2008.

- **1860s:** Only a few African Americans are educated in the public-school system.

  1940s: African Americans are educated, but public schools are segregated.

  Today: Laws enforce school integration, but since many neighborhoods remain socioeconomically segregated, some schools, especially in large metropolitan areas, still lack racial diversity.

- **1860s:** Before the Civil War, southern slaves provide cheap labor in the fields and are a key component of the southern agricultural economy.

  1940s: As in the early part of the century, southern blacks, who face discrimination and threats to their lives, migrate to the North in large numbers in hopes of finding jobs.

  Today: Large numbers of African Americans are returning to the South in search of their roots, good jobs, and education.

For many years, European slave ships plowed the Atlantic Ocean between West Africa and North America, delivering shiploads of slaves. But in 1792, things began to change. Denmark abolished its slave trade, and fifteen years later, Britain did the same. Soon, other European nations followed suit. But the United States continued the practice. It is estimated that in 1860, more than four million slaves lived in the United States, the majority in the southern states. In states such as South Carolina and Mississippi, the ratio of free people to slaves was almost equal. In Alabama, Florida, and Georgia, slaves represented more than 30 percent of the population. The South, in particular, was dependent on the slave trade to keep its agricultural economy thriving. Slavery was a fundamental cause of the Civil War (1861–65). Southerners did not want officials in the North dictating whether or not they could own slaves, and they were willing to secede, or separate from the Union, rather than allow this. Ultimately, the South lost the war, and slavery was officially abolished on December 18, 1865, with the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment.

Federal Writers' Project

During the Great Depression, which caused economic chaos for many people in the 1930s, the U.S. government, under the leadership of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, created jobs to help stimulate the economy, as part of a broad recovery program called the New Deal. One of the New Deal arts programs was devoted to writers and was called the Federal Writers' Project. This project was established in 1935 and involved having writers collect stories from people from all walks of life, stories that might have otherwise been lost because they were not written down. Some writers also were commissioned to create fictional stories for children. In addition, the American Guide Series, a collection of books about the history of each state and about major towns and cities, with detailed descriptions, was produced by writers in this federal program.

Over six thousand people were employed through the Federal Writers' Project, including writers, editors, historians, and critics. A majority of these participants were women, but only a few African Americans were included. After the depression ended, many of the writers went on

Younger woman holding the hand of older woman (Image copyright Painless, 2009. Used under license from Shutterstock.com)

to secure successful professional careers. They included now-famous novelists, poets, and short-story authors such as Saul Bellow, John Cheever, Ralph Ellison, Zora Neale Hurston, John Steinbeck, Richard Wright, and Margaret Walker.

U.S. Race Relations during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s

The Great Depression, a time of tremendous economic stress, bank failures, and losses of jobs and homes, began with the crash of the stock market in 1929 and ran through the 1930s, and for some, into the 1940s. It was a difficult time for all Americans, especially African Americans. Discrimination was then rampant in the United States, such that African Americans, who had trouble finding jobs even before the depression, were especially hard hit as competition for jobs increased. Even though President Roosevelt had issued an executive order to prohibit discrimination in the armed services, African Americans continued to experience unfair practices in the military and business worlds. With many blacks migrating from the South to find jobs in the larger northern cities, such as Chicago and New York, tensions among the races spread. Discrimination was not just a problem in the South. There were reports of discrimination even in the government work programs, such as the Federal Writers' Project.

Discrimination was entrenched in southern society through what were called Jim Crow laws. These laws were created to enforce racial segregation and to deny blacks their civil rights. Through these laws, schools, restaurants, movie theaters, and other public places were either completely closed to African Americans or were open to them only under special rules. For example, if a movie theater allowed blacks to buy tickets, they had to sit in designated places, often in balcony areas, completely cut off from the white audience. Blacks attended segregated schools that were historically poorly equipped. Besides the Jim Crow laws, certain social understandings were observed. Black people were cursed, or worse, if they even made eye contact with white people. This was particularly true in the case of a black man and a

white woman. If black people wanted to buy food at many restaurants, they were not allowed to enter through the front; they had to go around to the back door. There were also signs on public drinking fountains. Over one fountain might be a sign reading "White," while on another fountain nearby would be a sign reading "Colored." Though Jim Crow laws existed predominantly in the South, many northern restaurants, hotels, and schools were also segregated.

African Americans began to be more vocal about deserving civil rights after returning from World War II. Many African American veterans believed that they had earned equal rights after fighting for the United States. The civil rights movement began slowly in the 1950s when African Americans staged sit-ins at local restaurants, demanding to be served. Martin Luther King, Jr., inspired large groups to protest nonviolently to demand rights for all black citizens. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, passed on July 2, at last made most forms of discrimination unlawful; yet it did not eliminate prejudice.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

Walker is considered one of the first African American writers and poets to portray what life has been like for black women. She did so, many reviewers state, without turning suffering into a melodrama, or an overly dramatic statement. Yet in her poems she does not glaze over the pain that black women experienced growing up in slavery and later in a segregated world; rather, she is subtle about the suffering, concealing it within her words. Her poems are noted for their vision, their promise of what the future holds. Exemplifying the sentiments that many reviewers have used to praise Walker's writing are the words of a literary award she received from the Feminist Press. As quoted in Florence Howe's essay "Poet of History, Poet of Vision," published in *Fields Watered with Blood: Critical Essays on Margaret Walker*, part of the award citation reads,

> You came of age in a world not friendly to women or black people. You helped lead the way towards changing that world. You offer all of us, whatever our race, a vision of possibility. Without diminishing the pain of prejudice, conflict and war, you also see past the suffering and sorrow into a different dimension.

Appreciation for Walker's poem "Lineage" reflects the overall consensus of opinion about her work. This poem, like many others of hers, is very popular and is taught in classrooms from elementary school to college. Like much of Walker's poetry, its language is simple, its images are easy to envision, and its message is comprehensible. For these reasons, this particular poem has been anthologized in several poetry collections and is posted on many Web sites.

The literary critic R. Baxter Miller, writing in 1981 in *Tennessee Studies in Literature*, finds that Walker's poetry "purges the southern ground of animosity and injustice which separate Black misery from Southern song." Miller later remarks, "She does not portray the gray-haired old women who nod and sing out of despair and hope on Sunday morning, but she captures the depths of their suffering." Miller, like so many other critics, is pointing out how Walker writes about suffering without actually being explicit about it. She does not shy away from the pain of the characters in her poems, but rather she portrays the suffering in subtle innuendos, such that the reader senses the pain. Indeed, Walker infuses her poetry with the suffering and sorrow of black women, especially those who witnessed slavery firsthand, but she does so without becoming morose. Looking ahead to better times, she is praised for her prophetic vision as well as for her steadiness, which allow her to look back at pain without flinching. As Miller puts it, "The prophecy contributes to Walker's rhythmical balance and vision, but she controls the emotions."

Another reviewer, Maryemma Graham, in her article "Margaret Walker: Fully a Poet, Fully a Woman (1915–1998)," in the journal *Black Scholar*, takes up the same theme of Walker's ability to make suffering known while promising a better future:

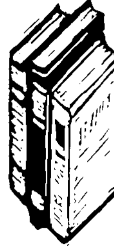
> It appears that Margaret Walker viewed her life as part of a poem that was constantly evolving. Because she respected the values of her own era—that defined womanliness primarily in terms of first a romantic, then a nurturing, maternal love—and transcended them at the same time, her story exemplifies the importance of authorial agency for a writer whose greatest gift was her capacity to imagine possibilities where none existed.

CRITICISM

Joyce Hart

Hart is a published author and freelance writer. In the following essay, she explores the quality of universality in "Lineage."

WHAT DO I READ NEXT?



- Walker's best-known work is her novel *Jubilee* (1966). Through this book, readers become witnesses to the lives of slaves during the Civil War and one slave in particular, the young woman Vyry. She is eventually freed at the end of the war, but that does not make her life any easier. She and her husband begin building a new life only to have members of the Ku Klux Klan terrorist group burn everything to the ground. Vyry's spirit prevails as the white community around her comes to her aid.
- Walker wrote a nonfiction book called *How I Wrote "Jubilee," and Other Essays on Life and Literature* (1990). In these sixteen essays, written over the last fifty years of her life, Walker reflects on her role as teacher, writer, and political activist and on her struggles with racism, sexism, and classism. This collection has been called a great example of serious study of black culture.
- Walker has said that Langston Hughes was one of the greatest influences on her writing and her life. *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes* (1990) presents some of his most celebrated verse.
- Walker met and worked with Gwendolyn Brooks in Chicago in the 1930s. The two poets are often considered as contemporaries. Brooks's *Selected Poems* (1999) demonstrates why she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1950 and was the recipient of the National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters. Brooks is often praised for devoting her attention to the lives of others, rather than writing about herself. She is called a compassionate writer.
- *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth*, by Richard Wright, who was also a great influence on Walker's life, was published in 1945. The book shook up Wright's white audience, as they were exposed to the harsh conditions faced by blacks living in the South. The book provides a glimpse into the era of Jim Crow laws and hateful discrimination that prevailed in the southern states around when Walker moved north to go to college.
- *The Collected Poetry of Nikki Giovanni, 1968–1998* (2003), provides readers with a comprehensive look at Giovanni's work. Though they came from different generations, Walker and Giovanni shared a similar philosophy and a common interest in portraying what it has meant to be a black female living in the United States.

Critics have often written about the universal tone of the poem "Lineage," as has Walker herself. Critics generally praise Walker for her universality, and the poet has declared that "Lineage" was written not just for her grandmothers but for everyone's. So what is a universal tone, and where is it found in this poem?

To begin with, a universal tone implies that anyone, no matter in what culture or during what decade, whether male or female, whether raised in the city or the country, in a home of any religion or no religion, can relate to the themes, the characters, or the general images. The elements of a piece of writing that are called universal are broad enough to embrace more than a narrow section of a population. They reach beyond a specific society or culture. As such, they can be seen as related to the basic elements or characteristics of what it means to be human. So when critics comment on the universality of a poem, they are referring to the poem's ability to traverse nationality and culture and have an effect on all kinds of readers from all over the globe. How does Walker's poem "Lineage" do this?

The universality of this poem begins with the title. Every human being can relate to the concept

of lineage. It is a topic that many people think about from the time they begin to talk and continue to think about throughout their lives. Lineage implies the question, Where did I come from? Though it is not necessary to know the answer to this question in order to survive, it is comforting to most people to have some idea of who their ancestors were. The term *lineage* itself suggests that there are lines that can be drawn from one's birth backward into the past. These lines go through the births of mothers, fathers, grandparents, and so on. Knowing one's lineage can provide hints as to a person's strengths and weaknesses, talents and skills. Lineage might also offer a way to compare oneself, to take stock of oneself, as the speaker in Walker's poem does.

Walker's lineage in this poem begins and ends with grandmothers. She skips over mothers and does not mention great-grandmothers, at least not overtly. However, if one takes a broader view of the poem, it is clear that mothers and great-grandmothers are all included. Walker is speaking not just of a particular grandmother but further of all women who have produced children, who have reared children and provided for them. Walker writes about the image of grandmothers and how they are remembered.

Those who are fortunate enough to have loving relationships with their grandmothers often store memories that are somewhat distorted. Many of the memories that are collected while a person isstill very young are tender. Traditionally, throughout many cultures, a grandmother's role is not disciplinarian, even if a grandmother often tends to the needs of a child. The mother and father provide the discipline, so grandmothers can bypass this role, which is often contrary to children's perceived interests, and therefore might be remembered in a more mythical manner. For instance, in Walker's poem, the speaker focuses on the grandmothers' strength and not on their weaknesses. Their strength is both physical and psychological, and it is obvious that the speaker is not only proud of her grandmothers' power but also somewhat in awe of it. One can sense that the speaker admires her grandmothers as one might a hero. The image of a hero is an archetypal one, a common universal figure. People need heroes to emulate, to act as models who will lead them through their own challenges. Stories of heroes are created in every culture.

Another image that the grandmothers bring is that of creativity. Readers can find images of creativity in the poem on several different levels. The grandmothers are not only out in the field working hard but also are making seeds grow. This image is one of the grandmothers providing nourishment. The seeds will grow into food. There is also the hint of creativity in the arts. The grandmothers create music, which one might say nourishes the soul. Another aspect is that of the human creativity of giving birth to children. A grandmother would not be a grandmother if she had not given birth to a child. So the grandmothers also stand for the universal image of procreation, as they are the creators of the lineage of the family. Few events are more universal than the birth of a child.

The speaker also shares gentle, sensual memories of the grandmothers. Cannot many children remember watching their grandmothers at work in the kitchen or smelling the sweet scent of soap that emanates from their grandmothers' skin? Through the speaker's sharing of her memories of her grandmothers, readers' memories of their grandmothers will be stirred. The memories might be of different scents and different words, so it is not the specific set of images that the poet offers but rather the idea of grandmother-type memories that is universal.

Finally, there is the closing question that the speaker asks. She wonders why she is not like her grandmothers. Grandmothers are necessarily from other times, other circumstances. The speaker and her grandmother are separated by at least thirty-five or forty years or more. Those years represent not only changes in culture, society, and the world but also distortions in memory. A child watches a grandmother move through the world from the perspective of someone not yet fully aware of the circumstances of that world. As the child grows older, those memories may remain somewhat askew of what the grandmother's reality was truly like. The child might have romanticized the attributes of his or her grandmother. The labor, for instance, is viewed by the child but not felt. Grandmothers are perhaps seen as being unfailingly strong, though surely they had times of weakness. The songs at the end of the day may express sorrows that the child does not understand. When the child reaches adulthood, these perceptions may be retained. In comparing herself to her grandmothers, the speaker of this poem questions why she cannot meet her challenges with as much fortitude as her grandmothers did. As anyone looks back through memories, it is common

Golden wheat ready for harvest *(Image copyright Alessio Ponti, 2009. Used under license from Shutterstock.com)*

for distortions to occur, making this sort of comparison another universal experience.

Walker's great-grandmother was a slave, so it is not difficult when reading her poem "Lineage" to imagine that the grandmothers she addresses are also slaves. However, people all over the world can relate to this poem because Walker creates images that could apply to any age of humanity, whether one hundred years from now or more than a thousand years into the past. Her poem is a collection of universally shared experiences.

Source: Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on "Lineage," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2010.

William Scott

In the following excerpt, Scott examines how the poems in Part 1 of For My People*, including "Lineage," portray the complex identity and history of African Americans.*

. . . Walker begins *For My People* with a poem that bears the same title. "For My People," originally published in 1937, consists of nine stanzas that describe the conditions of life for African Americans and a tenth stanza which concludes the poem by calling for a kind of renewal: "Let a new earth arise. Let another world be born. Let a bloody peace be written in the sky." The descriptions take the form of serial lists of characteristics, aspects, emotions, and events, which are either joined together by way of conjunctions ("and") or, more often, by apposition. The first four stanzas illustrate Walker's construction of serial associations throughout the poem:

READING THIS SERIES OF POEMS, IT IS CLEAR THAT WALKER IS NOT WILLING TO SETTLE FOR ANY SENSE OF HISTORY WHICH PRESUMES TO RECONCILE ALL THE CONTRADICTIONS THAT INHABIT IT."

> For my people everywhere singing their slave songs repeatedly: their dirges and their ditties
> and their blues and jubilees, praying their prayers nightly to an unknown god, bending their
> knees humbly to an unseen power;
>
> For my people lending their strength to the years, to the gone years and the now years and
> the maybe years, washing ironing cooking scrubbing sewing mending hoeing plowing
> digging planting pruning patching dragging along never gaining never reaping never knowing
> and never understanding;
>
> For my playmates in the clay and dust and sand of Alabama backyards playing baptizing and
> preaching and doctor and jail and soldier and school and mama and cooking and playhouse
> and concert and store and hair and Miss Choomby and company;
>
> For the cramped bewildered years we went to school to learn to know the reasons why and
> the answers to and the people who and the places where and the days when, in memory of
> the bitter hours when we discovered we were black and poor and small and different and
> nobody cared and nobody wondered and nobody understood;

In these stanzas, Walker is not just presenting a list of given "things," including individual and

collective characteristics, activities, thoughts, and ideas; she is linking all these signifiers to the notion of a "people," and thereby indirectly asking how they can be taken to cumulatively add up to and define a certain understanding of a people. I call this an indirect question because of the way in which it is posed in the poem. Along with various individuals and activities, Walker includes interrogative locutions that have no determinate referents: "to learn to know the reasons why and the answers to and the people who and the places where and the days when . . . " By rendering these questions into the syntactical elements out of which they are constructed in language, the meanings of the questions, the objects they ask about, are left to be decided. Their syntax, here, serves to index a wider system of referentiality, and thus of meaning in general, which is itself subjected to the poem's questioning. It is as if the speaker's unfinished questions were evoking "the perception of a field, a beginning or an opening which requires an endless production and reproduction." The "sense" of the questions, if it were revealed, would presumably evoke the "sense"—the meaning, sensibilities, and thoughts—of the people who ask them; but without specifying the relation between the questions and those people, Walker seems to be asking one to consider the very idea of a "people" as implying the problematic of the constitution of its meaning. How, then, does the meaning of "her" people relate to this series of appositions and open-ended questions? Conversely, how does the structure of apposition inform this meaning? What assures that these lists originate in, or refer to, a singular entity which she names a "people"? Finally, what meaningful entity can contain these various things, linking them together and underlying their apposite appearance in the poem, without, however, announcing itself as such, i.e., by doing no more than letting them "speak for" it?

I want to propose that, assuming these questions shape, to some degree, the formal structure of the poems of *For My People* (which of course does not exclude the possibility of other questions being raised from other perspectives), answers to them can be found when one reads the poems sequentially as Walker's attempt to think through the problem of historical representation. The second poem in the volume, "Dark Blood," signals such an attempt. It begins, "There were bizarre beginnings in old lands for the making of me." From the start, the poem announces itself as a kind of historical inquiry. The "bizarre beginnings" which have "made" its speaker consist, in part, of "sugar sands and islands of fern and pearl, palm jungles and stretches of a never-ending sea." Two stanzas later, the speaker proclaims that "Someday I shall go to the tropical lands of my birth," a journey which will enable her to "stand on mountain tops and gaze on fertile homes below." By traveling to these faraway lands, she suggests, it is possible to gain perspective on her historico-geographical origins. Such a perspective, in turn, entails a *meaningful* grasp or conceptualization of her bizarre beginnings. This is an imaginary journey, one that the speaker expresses more as a wish than as an accomplished fact, and for its articulation in the poem it relies, like "For My People," on a list of places and things. However, if these lists were more or less static catalogues in "For My People," here they become dynamic forms of the experience of traveling toward, through, and away from what is enumerated. They become located, spatially and temporally, in conjunction with the speaker's experience of them. "Sense" thus seems to emerge out of the spatial and temporal movement implied by the speaker's historical inquiry itself. But this is hardly a unified sense, or without its deeper contradictions, as the poem's ending reveals:

> And when I return to Mobile I shall go by the way of Panama and Bocas Del Toro to the
> littered streets and the one-room shacks of my old poverty, and blazing suns of other lands
> may struggle then to reconcile the pride and pain in me.

It is one thing to journey to the lands of one's origin, but quite another to come back to who and where one is, here and now; for the latter implies that one knows oneself in a profoundly new way—and perhaps for the first time—as the cumulative sum of those things that were revealed through the historical inquiry. On her journey back to her present circumstances, the speaker discovers that the "old poverty" so characteristic of the New World shaped who she is no less than the Edenic "wooing nights of tropical lands and the cool discretion of flowering plains." As a result, the idyllic perspective that was gained on her "bizarre beginnings" is shot through with the (perhaps more disconcerting) knowledge of its historical unfoldings in the diaspora. To grasp the *whole* of this history of her "dark blood" now means, for the speaker, a "struggle to reconcile the pride and pain in me."

If history is such a mixed bag, Walker suggests that this is due to two parallel, at times contradictory ways of approaching it: on one hand, an idealist-theoretical tendency that wishes to "gaze on fertile homes" through its totalizing recovery of ancient African origins, and on the other, a materialist-diasporic tendency that foregrounds displacement, dispossession, fragmentation, and conditions of poverty. While the third poem in the volume, "We Have Been Believers," may signal a critique of the former of these tendencies—"We have been believers believing in the black gods of an old land," but "Now the needy no longer weep and pray; the long-suffering arise, and our fists bleed against the bars with a strange insistency"—the fourth and fifth poems, "Southern Song" and "Sorrow Home," argue that history must be grasped first and foremost on the level of its materiality; specifically, the materiality of the body and its identification with the material environment.

"Southern Song" and "Sorrow Home" posit an identification between body and place that is premised on the threat of alienation. These poems use the figure of the body to emphasize the need to reclaim, to repossess one's history *as* the very condition of one's material embodiment. The first of these begins, "I want my body bathed again by southern suns, my soul reclaimed again from southern land." This form of identification is also figured as a kind of sleep or rest: "I want my rest unbroken in the fields of southern earth." Thus, to disturb the rest amounts to interrupting the coherence of the identification: "I want no mobs to wrench me from my southern rest." The speaker here imagines a non-alienated identification as a kind of possession that links together place, poem, the body, and the speaker's self:

> I want my careless song to strike no minor key; no fiend to stand between my body's
> southern song—the fusion of the South, my body's song and me.

"Sorrow Home" maintains this identification with the South (which, meanwhile, has become a proper name) while reestablishing it within the idealization of "bizarre beginnings" that was proposed in "Dark Blood." The speaker now asserts that "My roots are deep in southern life . . . I was sired and weaned in a tropic world," in contradistinction to the "walled in" life of the northern cities. Yet here again the threat of alienation seems not only imminent but inherent to this way of conceiving the speaker's identity with a historico-geographical region. In other words, identity-as-possession (Self = South = History) seems to *require* that the possibility of dispossession/displacement be ever looming around or at its margins:

> O Southland, sorrow home, melody beating in my bone and blood! How long will the Klan of
> hate, the hounds and the chain gangs keep me from my own?

Walker now offers a version of this history of claiming what is one's "own," tracing the movement from despair, through alienation, to the triumph of reclamation. The poem "Delta" is divided into three parts that roughly correspond to this trajectory. The first part, while reasserting the corporeal identification with place—"I am a child of the valley. / Mud and muck and misery of lowlands / are on thin tracks of my feet"—takes this condition as not exactly the cause, but as one of many symptoms of the misery of the Delta's inhabitants. The second part describes this misery in terms of the alienation of the Delta's people from the products of their labor, understood as their alienation from their "own" bodies (earth/place/self):

> We tend the crop and gather the harvest but not for ourselves do we labor,
> not for ourselves do we sweat and starve and spend
> under these mountains we dare not claim,
> here on this earth we dare not claim,
> here by this river we dare not claim.

Walker goes on to stress that this kind of alienation is akin to a state of sleep, revising her earlier use of this figure in "Southern Song" where it stood for a positive love for and possession of that which is one's own. In "Delta," sleep has become a state of unknowing, of suffering and dispossession. To gain knowledge, and thus to possess what is one's own (i.e., history), requires that sleep be *interrupted* and transformed into a state of wakefulness:

> for out of a deep slumber we are 'roused
> to our brother who is ill
> and our sister who is ravished
> and our mother who is starving.
> Out of a deep slumber truth rides upon us
> and we wonder why we are helpless
> and we wonder why we are dumb.
> Out of a deep slumber truth rides upon us
> and makes us restless and wakeful

and full of a hundred unfulfilled dreams of today;
our blood eats through our veins with the terrible destruction
of radium in our bones and rebellion in our brains
and we wish no longer to rest.

The third part of the poem describes the results of this wakefulness as "a dawning understanding / in the valleys of our spirits." It is a revolutionary state because, by questioning the material causes of a life that is alienated from its labor and environment, it elicits a consciousness of *reflective* possession; that is, a possession (and identity) that is thoroughly *mediated* by the experience of alienation, the non-identity between oneself and the material conditions of one's life:

Then with a longing dearer than breathing
love for the valley arises within us
love to possess and thrive in this valley
love to possess our vineyards and pastures
our orchards and cattle
our harvest of cotton, tobacco, and cane.
Love overwhelms our living with longing
strengthening flesh and blood within us
banding the iron of our muscles with anger
making us men in the fields we have tended
standing defending the land we have rendered
rich and abiding and heavy with plenty.

We with our blood have watered these fields
and they belong to us.
Valleys and dust of our bodies are blood brothers
and they belong to us . . .

What makes this form of possession unique is that it is founded upon the very experience of its absence: the lands have been "rent" by a labor that initially could not claim them as its own, just as the fields were watered with the blood of those bodies that had been legally rent from them. This might account for the "overwhelming" sense of longing that Walker associates with the newfound love for the materials of one's labor. Another of its aspects, however, is the explicit masculinization of this moment of appropriation, for she adds that it is "making us *men* in the fields we have tended." The musculature of the male body is identified with the material environment such that the "Valleys and dust of our bodies are blood *brothers*."

If appropriation, identity, and love for that which "belongs" to one are all equated here with the world of men, Walker suggests that this implies another form of sleep—one with "the hills beyond for peace / and the grass beneath for rest" (23)—requiring, therefore, another interruption to induce a state of wakefulness. That is to say, a reflective consciousness must once again intervene to disturb this historical "possession" the moment the latter begins to circumscribe and fix its sense into/as an idealization. History, in this particular instance, is rent or disrupted by the figure of the feminine just as it comes into possession of its masculine "self":

We are like the sensitive Spring
walking valleys like a slim young girl
full breasted and precious limbed
and carrying on our lips the kiss of the world.

What this amounts to, though, is not so much a translation of historical meaning-as-possession into the figure of woman, but a signal of critical consciousness in the insistence of the trace, the presence-as-absence, of the irreducible "other" of historical meaning itself. If the poem "Dark Blood" concluded with a "struggle . . . to reconcile" two conflicting, apparently exclusive senses of historical inquiry, "Delta" clearly relocates this conflict in order to critically examine the gendered and engendering structure of historical knowledge. What emerges from this disjunction—between reappropriated masculine labor and a newfound community metonymically associated with feminine bodies ("like a slim young girl")—is an awareness of history's radical opening. That is, an awareness not of history's complete lack of meaning, but of the interruption entailed by any attempt to contain its meaning within the definition of some timeless ideal—in this case, as implicitly either "masculine" or "feminine":

Only the naked arm of Time
can measure the ground we know
and thresh the air we breathe.
Neither earth nor star nor water's host
can sever us from our life to be
for we are beyond your reach O mighty winnowing flail!
infinite and free!

Also noteworthy here is that Time, like the South in "Southern Song" and "Sorrow Home," has become personified, given a proper name, and thus figured as a historical agent in its own right. In this poem, Time is what brings into relief and desediments the gendered implications of a revolutionary narrative coded as the story of

masculine appropriation ("Only the naked arm of Time / can measure the ground we know").

The following poem, "Lineage," announces itself, like "Dark Blood," as a historical inquiry; only this time the focus of the inquiry is explicitly gendered as feminine, beginning with "My grandmothers were strong," and then recounting, in a series of self-contained, periodic assertions, how "They touched earth and grain grew." Yet, as if to preempt any straightforward claim to sisterhood as a result of distinction by sex, the speaker concludes the poem by repeating "My grandmothers were strong," only to add, "Why am I not as they?" This can be read as another interruption, but this time as one which underscores the disjunction *within* the identification between the self and others; moreover, it is an interruption whose effects are located and felt precisely along the gendered axis where such an identification, in "Delta," had been postulated—that is, from the point of a critique of the gendering of history as masculine.

Reading this series of poems, it is clear that Walker is not willing to settle for any sense of history which presumes to reconcile all the contradictions that inhabit it. If the outcome of the historical process of racialization was initially proposed as a ground of identification for the individual and collective ("Dark Blood"), its internal (ideal) and external (geographic) coherence was disrupted by the speaker's consideration of class distinctions ("the one-room shacks of my old poverty"); if, next, a geographical region was proposed as such a ground ("Southern Song,""Sorrow Home"), its coherence was disrupted insofar as it was revealed to be mediated by the experience of dispossession, displacement, and fragmentation; if, in turn, this experience was contained and overcome in a revolutionary gesture of appropriation that promised to serve as a common ground for both class and racial identification ("Delta"), the coherence of this ground was seen to depend on its essentially masculine characteristics, and thus it was disrupted along the axis of its gendered implications; and if, finally, gender is proposed as the ultimate ground of identification between the speaker and her people via her grandmothers ("Lineage"), then its coherence is disrupted by the force of "Time" whose movement signals a discrepancy between the speaker and her foremothers within the very idea of a lineage. In all these instances, a reflective, critical vigilance intercedes in the poem (usually at the end) not entirely to dismantle the attempted idealization, but to reveal it as inadequate to its professed purpose—namely, to make sense of "my people"—by calling attention to its limits. In doing so, these disruptions open up what one might think of as a "third dimension, which would be a subterranean history or the genesis of ideality" wherein "a certain surplus of meaning over and beyond [the poem's] manifest or literal sense" becomes revealed the moment that an awareness of historicity enters the experience of Walker's individual characters (Merleau-Ponty 183) . . .

THE UNEVENNESS OF HER OWN PERSONAL HISTORY ATTESTS TO THE NEGATIVE IMPACT OF RACE AND GENDER PREJUDICE IN THE LIVES OF EVEN THE MOST TALENTED AFRICAN AMERICANS. NEVERTHELESS, WALKER'S VOICE BROKE THROUGH THE SILENCE OF WOMEN'S LIVES, HER LIFE ALWAYS MODELING THE IDEAS SHE BELIEVED IN SO FIRMLY."

Source: William Scott, "Belonging to History: Margaret Walker's *For My People*," in *MLN*, Vol. 121, No. 5, 2007, pp. 1083–1106.

Maryemma Graham

In the following excerpt, Graham discusses Walker's life and work, pointing out the views on history and the self that Walker expresses in "Lineage."

Margaret Abigail Walker was born in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1915, into a family of storytellers and musicians, ministers and teachers. The Walker family—three sisters and a brother, parents and maternal grandmother—lived as a closely knit group during her early years in Alabama and Mississippi, and finally Louisiana, the place that Walker always called home, the South of her memory before and after leaving it for the first time. Strong advocates of education as a means toward racial progress and individual development, her parents nurtured and encouraged each child's individual talents. The first-born in the family, she was her father's favorite child. He gave her a daybook at age twelve; it was her first writer's journal, giving her a way to

record her thoughts and the images that formed the basis for her poetry. The daybook quickly filled with numerous "ditties" and the details of the stories of slavery that were her grandmother's forte. While her father pastored churches and taught school and her mother finished college and taught music in New Orleans, Walker completed her elementary and high school education and began college.

As Walker has reported many times, it was a visit by Langston Hughes to New Orleans University (now Dillard University) that gave her the first opportunity to meet a famous "living Negro poet." Not only did Hughes comment upon and encourage her talent, but he also stressed the importance of formal training, which in his view could only occur outside of the South. A few years later, in 1934, Walker's first published poem appeared in *Crisis* magazine.

Two years after moving to Chicago, Walker graduated from Northwestern University. She was 20 years old and already had a collection of poems along with the 300 pages of *Jubilee* she had drafted in her first college creative writing course. Breaking from the mold of young women of her time, especially for young black women, Walker elected to remain in Chicago to pursue her writing career. She found work with the Federal Writers Project, which gave her access to an active literary community and sustained her financially during the middle years of the Great Depression. More importantly, she found herself in the midst of a renaissance among a growing group of black writers. With the Harlem Renaissance having waned some few years earlier, Chicago writers now developed a new, distinctly modern style of writing influenced by the proletarian literature of the Communist left and the populist realism of the midwestern writers Carl Sandburg, Vachel Lindsay and Edgar Lee Masters. New fictional urban heroes and heroines emerged for whom life in the "Promised Land" had turned into a nightmare. In contrast to the Harlem Renaissance, images became less romantic and the sounds more conflicted. The rhythms of black life had changed, and new writers were needed to capture these rhythms in prose and poetry. The core of a group—led by Richard Wright—who defined this new literature began meeting as the South Side Writers Group, and included most often Margaret Walker, Frank Marshall Davis, Edward Bland, Ted Ward, Marian Minus, Fern Gaden, and St. Clair Drake. Walker's strong Christian ideals and family values that stressed a life of sacrifice and service made her sympathetic to the socialist ideas about equality that influenced the group, and further intensified her disdain for all forms of discrimination and exploitation. Like many artists and intellectuals of the 1930s, Walker became familiar with Marxist thought and regarded herself as a "fellow traveler," although she was never a card-carrying member of the Communist Party. Almost always the youngest member of the left front organizations she associated with and often the only black woman participant, she earned an early reputation for her inquisitive nature, her intelligence, and her remarkable talent.

Between 1936 and 1939, working with the WPA, attending regular meetings of the South Side Writers Group, affiliating with left politics, and publishing in black periodicals and mainstream journals—at a time when most young women were either looking to marry and begin their families or settle into more conventional careers—Walker established herself as a leading literary voice of her generation. She completed her signature poem "For My People," after forming friendships with writers from *Poetry* magazine and working closely with Wright.

Walker returned to school in 1939, this time to complete her masters degree at the University of Iowa, where *For My People* became a full manuscript, which she completed to satisfy the degree requirements. After teaching at Livingstone College (North Carolina) and West Virginia State College, she received the Yale Younger Series of Writers Award. Less than a year later, she met and married Firnist James Alexander, settling down in High Point, North Carolina to begin a family. The Alexanders moved to Jackson, Mississippi with three children in 1949, where she would teach for thirty years at Jackson State College (now Jackson State University). After the birth of her last child, Walker became increasingly active as a pioneer in promoting intellectual and professional ideas about education and the teaching of literature and culture, just as yet another shift was occurring in the social order. Walker's work became critical in articulating the ideological concerns of the Civil Rights Movement and beyond: her 1966 novel *Jubilee* was one its most important markers; and her 1973 Phillis Wheatley Festival of Black Women Writers signaled the birth of the black women's literary renaissance. The years between 1970 and her death in 1998 were her most productive. In addition to the published volumes, speeches and readings, Walker

founded the Institute for the Study of Black Life and Culture, one of the earliest Black Studies formations in the nation and the first in the South. By the end of her life, Walker, a woman born of Victorian ideals, who had left the South and returned to it as one of its most radical black thinkers, had become a widely-known artist whose freely crafted prose and poetry left an indelible mark on the modern age. It is impossible to think about the Chicago Renaissance, the Civil Rights and Black Arts Movement or the Women's Movement without giving acknowledgement to her work. Perhaps her greatest legacy lies in her creative struggle as a highly conscious individual who found a way to balance a demanding professional life and full engagement as a wife and mother, challenging our contemporary conceptions of seemingly contradictory domains.

In fifty-two years, Walker published eleven books, including *For My People* (1942), *Jubilee* (1966), *Prophets for a New Day* (1970), *How I Wrote Jubilee* (1972), *October Journey* (1973), *A Poetic Equation: Conversations between Nikki Giovanni and Margaret Walker* (1974), *For Farish Street* (1986), *Richard Wright: Daemonic Genius* (1988), *This is My Century: New and Collected Poems by Margaret Walker* (1989); *How I Wrote Jubilee and Other Essays on Life and Literature* (1990), and *On Being Female, Black and Free: Essays by Margaret Walker 1932–1992* (1997). An untold number of poems, short stories, reviews, letters, and speeches remain to be collected. When Walker retired from teaching in 1979 at age sixty-four, she did so with the intention of continuing an active career as a writer, public speaker, and community reformer. It was at this time that she began the biography of Richard Wright, only to have the book interrupted by illness, a lengthy court battle, the death of her husband, and repeated publication delays.

Walker's two collections of essays, *How I Wrote Jubilee and Other Essays*, and *On Being Female, Black and Free*, published in the last decade of her life, best illuminate her importance to the history of ideas that has been reflected in black writing in America for half a century and to contemporary developments in literary and social thought. With the lead essay recounting the thirty-year journey to *Jubilee*, the remainder of *How I Wrote Jubilee and Other Essays* comments upon the culture of America and the ideas so central to it—religion, family, racial consciousness, the role of women—thereby serving as a useful introduction to Margaret Walker's thought. As much as any individual artist, Walker reflects the fusion of ideas that she inherited from the radical 1930s, tempered by her own cultural and social background, one that was rooted in a strong religious faith and belief in the ultimate goodness of humankind. In her essay "Willing to Pay the Price," Walker points out her major concerns as a writer:

> As a Negro I am perforce concerned with all aspects of the struggle for civil rights... Civil rights are part of my frame of reference, since I must of necessity write always about Negro life, segregated or integrated... I believe my role in the struggle is the role of a writer. Everything I have ever written or hope to write is dedicated to that struggle, to our hope of peace and dignity and freedom in the world, not just as Black people, or as Negroes, but as free human beings in a world community... I do not deny, however, the importance of political action and of social revolution... I believe that as a teacher my role is to stimulate my students to think; after that, all I can do is guide them.

Walker's comments bring to mind the works of three early Afro-American women, Ann Plato, Anna Julia Cooper, and Frances Harper. Like Plato, the earliest known Afro-American essayist, Cooper, a feminist intellectual, and Harper, the renowned antislavery poet/activist, Walker pursued her own sense of individual identity while at the same time committing herself to the stream of collective history. Like Cooper and Harper, Walker represented a small number of college educated women whose choice to develop and define a career put her at odds with the majority of women in her time. On the other hand, unlike her predecessors, Walker became a "working mother" who encountered throughout her life the typical social and economic hardships: poverty and unemployment, racial and sexual discrimination, and consistently poor health. The unevenness of her own personal history attests to the negative impact of race and gender prejudice in the lives of even the most talented African Americans. Nevertheless, Walker's voice broke through the silence of women's lives, her life always modeling the ideas she believed in so firmly. Frances Harper appears to be Walker's closest literary ancestor in her preoccupation with social issues while at the same time maintaining her reputation as a leading poet of her day.

The second collection of essays, published a year before Walker's death, is decidedly more autobiographical than the first. *On Being Female,*

Black and Free is conscious of shaping an image of a writer as a feminist and radical thinker. The volume tells what Walker learned as an artist in her sixty-year career and contains unabashed critiques of racist politics in her home state of Mississippi and the nation at large. Although Walker never traveled outside the continental US—she turned down her only Fulbright fellowship in 1971 for family reasons—she existed within a tradition that linked the local, national, and international concerns. Derived from some of her most popular speeches, the volume is written in Walker's characteristic apocalyptic and prophetic tone, one that is immediate and accessible. Both volumes together affirm how Walker saw herself at the end of her career: a woman who had begun to review the past and predict the future, calling a nation to order lest it fear Armageddon.

While the essays are useful for identifying the major strands of Walker's thoughts as a radical thinker and activist from the very beginning of her career, Walker's literary reputation rests primarily upon the four volumes of poetry that she published in her lifetime, and *Jubilee*, the historical novel that she had begun writing in college but did not complete until mid-life. *For My People*, completed as her Master's project at the University of Iowa, became the 1942 selection for the Yale Series of Younger Artists series. In introducing the collection, Stephen Vincent Benet spoke of Walker's poetry as "controlled intensity of emotion and language that, even when most modern, has something of the surge of biblical poetry." Composed of poems which Walker had worked and reworked since her days at Northwestern, the volume brought to the reader an understanding of the past together with her sense of the rhythm and "feeling tone" of black life. She wanted the poetry to have its own distinctive voice, one that was steeped in the folk tradition, but which could express itself in both vernacular and conventional literary forms. Although her training at Northwestern had been in classical English forms, Walker learned the forms of modern poetry in Iowa, a tradition that emphasized the work of Walt Whitman, Randall Jarrell, T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound as well as the experimentalism of e.e. cummings.

This training, along with her apprenticeship with the WPA and the South Side Writers Group, resulted in the twenty six poems of *For My People*, where Walker demonstrated her unique talents as a lyricist and modernist innovator who would not abandon her roots in the folk tradition. *For My People* took the reader on a psychic journey into the past, conjoining despair and hope, pride and pain, destruction and creation, separation and reunion. In the volume, the sacred and the profane merge as the reader grasps the profound and subtle significance of racial memory. Each poem becomes part of a "collective narrative of memory" as told through a black vernacular matrix which emphasizes the flow and rhythm of the myths, folk tales, legends, ballads and narratives as well as free verse forms, sonnets, odes, and elegies. Structurally, the volume emulates the call and response pattern inherent in traditional African American expression. Part I includes ten verse poems that explore the historical terrain of African American history: each stanza introduces a montage of scenes relating various historical moments in the late 19th and 20th centuries. Part II provides a vernacular response to the more discursive first section. Ten more ballads, folk tales and black hero/heroine exploits change the tone of the volume entirely. The effect is to give the "folk" an opportunity to speak for themselves in their own voice. Walker returns to traditional poetic forms in a third part, containing six poems which begin with a personal memory of childhood. The collection ends by emphasizing the importance of struggle in the physical world—a struggle that, historically, neither overshadowed nor diminished an African American spiritual sensibility bounded by love and compassion, one that connects us all through space and time. The call-and-response structure is complemented by the way in which Walker uses voice to establish a shift in her own poetic identity. Dramatically intense imagery utilizing contrasting metaphors is presented in the first person singular when Walker wants to define herself as part of the stream of history, seen, for example in this excerpt from "Lineage":

> My grandmothers are full of memories
> Smelling of soap and onions and wet clay
> With veins rolling roughly over quick hands
> They have many clean words to say.
> My grandmothers were strong.
> Why am I not as they?

The knowledge of that history becomes the individual poet's song, which "Today" illustrates:

> I sing of slum scabs on city faces, scrawny children scarred by bombs and dying of hunger,
> wretched human scarecrows strung against lynching stakes, those dying of pellagra and silicosis,

rotten houses falling on slowly decaying humanity.

The first person plural form is reserved for those moments when the self and history are completely merged, when Walker wants no separation between time and place in the collective memory, stressing instead the continuity of experience, the facts of history. "Delta" makes this shift in its second section:

We tend the crop and gather the harvest
but not for ourselves do we labor. . .
here by this river we dare not claim
Yet we are an age of years in this valley;
yet we are bound til death to this valley.
We with our blood have watered these fields
and they belong to us.

Finally, Walker is at her best when adopting the representative persona of her people: she symbolizes their voice, writing for all those who are silenced through hunger, despair, hypocrisy, and death. The human spirit is never crushed, evidenced by their "dirges and their ditties, their blues and their jubilees . . . their prayers . . . their strength," which Walker rhythmically announces, mindful of the need for this ceaseless faith to build a bridge to the future. By consistently offering before us a catalog of images that rush before us at a dizzying pace, Walker makes the volume visual and dramatic. The oft quoted final stanza of "For My People," represents the emotionally charged climax that we have been waiting for. The tone is assertive and uplifting; we are witnessing a world emergent, a new work-in-progress.

Let a new earth rise. Let another world be born. Let a bloody peace be written in the sky. Let a
second generation full of courage issue forth; let a people loving freedom come to growth. Let a
beauty full of healing and a strength of final clenching be the pulsing in our spirits and our blood.
Let the martial songs be written, let the dirges disappear. Let a race of men now rise and take
control.

Even though Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Jean Toomer and Countee Cullen had produced distinctive poetry that had claimed the attention of mainstream audiences, no one before Walker had approached African American poetry with the single-minded intensity and concern for craft as Walker had. In this sense, "For My People" was a coming of age for African American poetry, as it was for the author herself; signifying the dynamism and continuity of African American poetic expression that would extend through the emergence of the Black Arts Movement and performance poetry of the 1990s. "For My People"—by far the most widely anthologized poem in the African American canon—celebrated and commemorated the past in such a way that its continuous readings for over sixty years have helped to sustain the historical identity of the African American community . . .

Source: Maryemma Graham, "Margaret Walker: Fully a Poet, Fully a Woman," in *Black Scholar*, Vol. 29, No. 3, Summer 1999, pp. 37–46.

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FURTHER READING

Berke, Nancy, *Women Poets on the Left: Lola Ridge, Genevieve Taggard, Margaret Walker*, University Press of Florida, 2001.

Topics covered in this study of these three female poets include the Great Depression, the Great Migration, race discrimination, and the lives of the working class. Berke uses these women’s poetry as a starting point for a discussion of the social, historical, and political context of the times in which they wrote—the first half of the twentieth century.

Boehm, Lisa Krissoff, *Making a Way out of No Way: African American Women and the Second Great Migration*, University Press of Mississippi, 2009.

The Second Great Migration was a mass movement of about five million African Americans from the South to the North beginning in the 1940s. Boehm has collected stories from black women in this group, a segment that has in the past been overlooked.

Carmichael, Jacqueline Miller, *Trumpeting a Fiery Sound: History and Folklore in Margaret Walker’s “Jubilee,”* University of Georgia Press, 2003.

Carmichael deconstructs Walker’s novel, laying open not only the story itself and its critical reception but also Walker’s process of writing and rewriting, the underlying structure, and narrative techniques. Also discussed are the history and folklore that make *Jubilee* such a rich and truthful novel.

Dennis, Denise, *Black History for Beginners*, For Beginners, 2007.

Dennis provides a comprehensive overview for those who are new to the study of black history. From slaves abducted from Africa to the civil rights movement, this book will help readers understand some of the more significant historical events for the black race.

Graham, Maryemma, ed., *Conversations with Margaret Walker*, University Press of Mississippi, 2002.

In this book is a collection of interviews of Margaret Walker, covering the years 1972 to 1996. One of the interviews includes a dialogue between Walker and the famed poet Nikki Giovanni in which Walker discusses her relations with her family. Other topics include Walker’s relationship with the novelist Richard Wright as well as insights into Walker’s writing process and her love of history and language.

Moody, Anne, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, Delta, 2004.

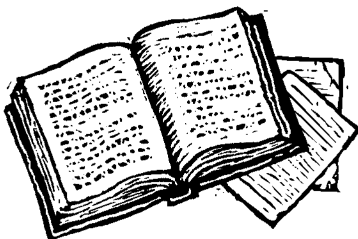
In this autobiography, the author relates what life was like for her in the Deep South almost one hundred years after the Civil War but before the victories of the civil rights movement.

Losses

RANDALL JARRELL

1945

"Losses," by American poet Randall Jarrell, was first published in Jarrell's second collection of poems, *Little Friend, Little Friend*, in 1945. In that year, World War II ended, and the poems in that collection are war poems. The title refers to the code that bomber crews used to call in fighter planes over their radios. The speakers in "Losses" are the young airmen who made up the American bomber crews in the war, flying their B-17s, B-24s, and B-29s over Europe and Japan in an effort to destroy the enemy's ability to continue the war. The title refers to the many deaths that resulted from these bombing raids, not only of the airmen themselves but also of the people in the cities on which the bombs fell. Jarrell is considered the finest American poet to write about World War II, and "Losses," with its unusual presentation of the way the young airmen think and feel about the tasks they have been called upon to perform, is representative of his work in this area.



AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

American poet and critic Randall Jarrell was born on May 6, 1914, in Nashville, Tennessee, the son of Owen and Anna Campbell Jarrell. The family lived in California from 1915 until Jarrell's parents separated in 1925 and his mother returned to Nashville with her two sons. Jarrell showed an interest in writing and drama while at school, after which

Randall Jarrel (AP Images)

he attended Vanderbilt University, majoring in psychology and graduating with a bachelor of arts degree in 1936. He then enrolled in a master of arts program at Vanderbilt. During his years at Vanderbilt, Jarrell studied under Fugitive poets John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, and Robert Penn Warren. The Fugitives were a group of southern poets whose goal was to preserve traditional values, as well as traditional poetic forms, in their work. Ransom became Jarrell's mentor, and in 1937 Jarrell followed him to Kenyon College, in Ohio, where he was a part-time instructor as well as sports coach.

In 1939, Jarrell completed his master's thesis and also taught English at the University of Texas at Austin until 1942. In Austin he met and married Mackie Langham, and it was during these years that his first collection of poems, "The Rage for the Lost Penny," appeared in *Five Young American Poets* (1940). Jarrell's next collection, *Blood for a Stranger* (1942), contained all these poems as well as more than twenty new ones.

In 1942, after the United States had entered World War II, Jarrell enlisted in the U.S. Army Air Forces and undertook aviation training at Sheppard Field in Wichita Falls, Texas. Later, he trained in Illinois as a flight instructor and celestial navigation instructor. From 1943 to 1946, Jarrell taught flight navigation in a celestial navigation tower (a kind of dome) at Davis-Monthan Field near Tucson, Arizona. Many of his poems from this period are about the men who fought in the air war. *Little Friend, Little Friend*, which contained the poem "Losses," appeared in 1945, followed by *Losses* in 1948. These two collections gave Jarrell the reputation as one of the foremost poets of World War II.

Jarrell taught for a year at Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, New York, and then in 1947 became associate professor at Woman's College (now the University of North Carolina at Greensboro). Jarrell published his next collection of poetry, *The Seven-League Crutches*, in 1951, and a novel, *Pictures from an Institution*, in 1954. He also continued to write literary criticism, including the collections *Poetry and the Age* (1953) and *A Sad Heart at the Supermarket* (1962). His *Selected Poems* appeared in 1955, and another collection of poetry, *The Woman at Washington Zoo* (1960), won a National Book Award. During the 1960s he published three books for children, *The Gingerbread Rabbit* (1964), *The Bat-Poet* (1964), and *The Animal Family* (1965). A final volume of poems, *The Lost World*, appeared in 1965.

Jarrell was divorced in 1951 and remarried, to Mary von Scharader, in 1952. He died after being hit by a car on a county highway in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, on October 14, 1965, at the age of fifty-one. The *Complete Poems* (1969) was published posthumously.

POEM TEXT

It was not dying: everybody died.
It was not dying: we had died before
In the routine crashes—and our fields
Called up the papers, wrote home to our folks,
And the rates rose, all because of us. 5
We died on the wrong page of the almanac,
Scattered on mountains fifty miles away;
Diving on haystacks, fighting with a friend,
We blazed up on the lines we never saw.
We died like aunts or pets or foreigners. 10
(When we left high school nothing else had died
For us to figure we had died like.)

In our new planes, with our new crews, we bombed
The ranges by the desert or the shore,
Fired at towed targets, waited for our scores— 15

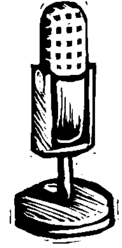
And turned into replacements and woke up
One morning, over England, operational.
It wasn't different: but if we died
It was not an accident but a mistake
(But an easy one for anyone to make). 20
We read our mail and counted up our missions—
In bombers named for girls, we burned
The cities we had learned about in school—
Till our lives wore out; our bodies lay among
The people we had killed and never seen. 25
When we lasted long enough they gave us medals;
When we died they said, "Our casualties were low."
They said, "Here are the maps"; we burned the cities.

It was not dying—no, not ever dying;
But the night I died I dreamed that I was dead, 30
And the cities said to me: "Why are you dying?
We are satisfied, if you are; but why did I die?"

POEM SUMMARY

Stanza 1

The first stanza of "Losses" is narrated in the first-person plural. The collective speakers are members of the American bomber crews of World War II who seem unable to accept the reality that many of their number died during the war. They seem to experience death as an anonymous, impersonal thing, something that happens all the time and does not have any emotional impact on them. They look back to their training days. There had been many crashes then, and men had died in them. The newspapers were informed of the deaths, letters were written to the families of the dead, and the number of casualties rose. In line 6, they start to give details of the many ways in which death came to them on these training expeditions. Sometimes it was because of faulty navigation, the failure to read an almanac correctly. This error could lead them many miles astray, and they would crash into a mountain. Other maneuvers could get them killed, too, such as engaging in mock combat with friendly planes or making an error when they dived onto targets laid out on a farm. Sometimes, as line 9 indicates, the planes simply caught fire. But there seems to be no meaning or real significance in the deaths, which register with them like the news of the deaths of a distant relative, or a pet. A parenthetical sentence, spread over the last two lines of the stanza, makes it clear that the bomber crews are very young, just out of high school, and have little experience of death.



MEDIA ADAPTATIONS

- A long-playing gramophone record, *Randall Jarrell Reads and Discusses His Poems Against War*, was released by Caedmon (TC 1363) in 1972 but is currently unavailable.

Stanza 2

This stanza begins as the bombing crew recall more of their training missions, ones in which they were not killed. The planes were new, as were the crew. They practiced their missions on specially built ranges in the desert or on presumably deserted areas of the shore. They also practiced hitting a moving target. Then they waited to see how their instructors assessed their growing skills. Eventually, beginning in line 4, they get called up for real combat action because of the losses that the air force has suffered. The young men travel to England, which is allied with the United States in the fight against Nazi Germany. (During the war, the United States maintained air force bases in England.) From England, they go on bombing missions over Germany, much the same as they had done in their training missions. Some of them would be killed, but their deaths would be described as resulting from a mistake on their part but not a mistake of which they should be ashamed.

During their time between bombing missions, they would sit around at the air force base in England reading the letters they received from friends and family and keeping a tally of how many missions they had flown. Beginning in line 10, the collective narrator then comments on the missions themselves. They had flown in airplanes that had been given girls' names (a common practice in the U.S. Army Air Forces during World War II), and they bombed cities (in Germany and other nations allied with Germany or under German control) that they had read about when they were school students. They had done this until their luck, and their lives, had run out. Those who were killed, shot down by enemy planes or anti-aircraft fire from the ground, ended up lying with the dead in the

cities they had bombed. They had killed these people from afar, without ever having seen them. Those of the crew who had survived were given medals, and even when the airmen died, the official story (as shown by the quotation marks used in the penultimate line of the stanza) was always that U.S. Army Air Forces casualties were low. The final line of stanza 2 refers back to the bombing missions they went on over Germany; they were given maps of the target areas, and they went ahead and bombed the cities as they were asked to do.

Stanza 3

The first line of stanza 3 refers back to the first line of stanza 1, denying the reality of the airmen's death, only with greater emphasis. But in line 2 there is a switch. The narration changes from first-person plural to first-person singular. It is now one individual who is speaking. It also transpires that he is one of the airmen who was killed, and he is recalling the night he died, during which he had a dream that he was dead. In the dream, the cities he had bombed spoke to him, asking him why he was dying. Their words are given in quotation marks and are therefore in the present tense. They say that they have no complaint about their fate if he, the dead man, has none, but they also want to know why they had to die.

THEMES

Denial of the Reality of Death

The airmen in the poem hear about death many times, but it does not seem real to them because it happens to someone else. This effect is created by the use of the plural pronoun "we" to refer to those who die; "we" is part of a collective body, the Air Force, which continues to exist and replenish itself, even if individual members of it die. Not only this, the men who make up the bomber crew do not see the deaths of others up close, so they do not experience the reality of death in any personal or immediate way. The deaths of other airmen seem to them no more momentous (or heroic) than the death of a pet, or someone from another country (line 10)—a person not seen, someone about whom nothing is known. The bomber crews cause the deaths of many in enemy cities, but those deaths occur many miles below them and they do not see the devastation they cause. Because death, understood in this impersonal, abstract way, seems like a routine event, hardly to be remarked upon, the first phrases of the first two lines can explicitly deny that death even takes place. The airmen seem to regard their own lives as like machines that are guaranteed to work properly only for a certain amount of time before wearing out like, say, an engine part, or a car tire. They appear not to feel the tragedy or the pain of death. In this sense, it might be said that they are out of touch with reality.

Reality, however, begins to intrude in the last stanza, paradoxically in the form of a dream. The

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY

- Read two or three more war poems by Jarrell, including perhaps "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner" (his most famous poem) and "Eighth Air Force." Compare and contrast these poems with "Losses." How are they similar and how do they differ? How do they enrich your understanding of "Losses"? Write an essay in which you present your arguments.
- Research the war poets of World War I, including Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, and read some of their most famous poems. What are the dominant themes of these poets, and how do their poems compare with those of Jarrell? Give a class presentation on the topic.
- Research the Allied bombing of Dresden and the American bombing of Tokyo and other Japanese cities in 1945. Thousands of civilians were killed in these raids. How did the United States and its allies justify these bombings? Were the bombings necessary? Write an essay in which you argue either that the bombings were or were not justified.
- Write a war poem. You can focus on any war, the present conflict in Iraq, the Vietnam War, the Civil War, or any other war that captures your imagination. Remember that Jarrell did not experience any combat directly but was still able to evoke convincingly the reality of war. You will need to research the causes of the war, how it was fought, and what the actual soldiers experienced in combat.

stanza begins in exactly the same way that the first stanza began, with the denial of the fact of death. But when in the second line of the final stanza the narration changes from first-person plural to first-person singular, there is a change. On the night of his death this particular crewman has a dream in which it seems for the first time that deeper questions about the war—the purpose of it all—start to appear. These are not questions or issues that have come up for the crewmen in their normal waking state of awareness. But the questions may have been present in the subconscious level of their minds, which many would argue manifests in dreams. The people who have been killed in the bombing raid on the cities ask in one collective voice why they had to die, and they also ask him, the individual airman who is dreaming of his own death, why he had to die as well. Thus indirectly, in the form of a question asked by someone else in a dream, the airman is brought closer to reality, closer to accepting not only the fact of his own imminent death but also to asking, if somewhat belatedly, why his death came upon him in the manner that it did, what the purpose of it was.

American military cemetary and memorial (Julian Herbert / Getty Images)

The Cruelty and Injustice of War

The airmen who speak in the poem appear to know nothing of the cause of the war or whether it is a just war; they simply do what they are told without understanding or question. They are given the maps showing the enemy city they are to bomb, and they do the job. They are neither enthusiastic about their cause nor critical of it. They do not swell with pride at the fact that those who survive are awarded medals; on the contrary, they seem indifferent to such things. They resemble cogs in a machine, without the power to evaluate or judge. The reader, however, is left with a strong sense of the callousness and cruelty of war, which is shown by the civilian casualties in the bombing raids, the deaths of the young airmen themselves, and the reduction of human lives and deaths to statistics, as when, for example, the official reports simply record that casualties were low. The reader also sees the cruel irony in the fact that the fliers whose luck ran out now lie dead and anonymous alongside the victims of the bombs they dropped. Death makes no distinction between them. Only in the final stanza do the participants in the war, both killers and victims, begin to ask the questions that might expose the futility, cruelty, and injustice of the war, in which some are destined to die through no fault or guilt of their own, and some, selected apparently at random, are destined to survive.

Wasted Youth

The airmen themselves do not bemoan their wasted youth, even though so many of them are killed, but the reader does. The reader notes that these crew members are barely out of high school, as the last two lines of the first stanza show. Their youth is also indicated by the fact that they have little experience of death. This is shown in line 10, in the examples they select of other deaths they have up to now been exposed to. It is a very limited list, understandably for those so young who lack life experience. They make another reference to their high school days when they say they bombed the cities they had read about in school. They had no firsthand knowledge of these cities nor of anything else beyond what the average eighteen- or nineteen-year-old man might be expected to have. The youth of the airmen gives a poignancy to the poem, a sense that life is being cut off before its natural time.

STYLE

Iambic Pentameter

The basic meter of the poem is iambic pentameter. An iambic foot consists of an unstressed or lightly stressed syllable followed by a strongly stressed syllable. A pentameter is a line that consists of five feet. Although this is the basic metrical pulse of the poem, the poet subjects the lines to so many variations that few lines are entirely regular iambic pentameter. Stanza 2, line 13, is an example of a line that is. Another line, stanza 2, line 9, is an iambic pentameter line with an additional unstressed syllable at the end of the line. This is known as a feminine ending.

One common variation is the substitution of a trochaic foot for an iamb. A trochee is a reversal of an iamb, in which a stressed syllable is followed by an unstressed one. In line 8 there are two trochaic feet, one at the beginning of the line and one immediately after the caesura (a pause that breaks up a line of poetry). The substitution of a trochee for an iamb allows the first syllable of the foot to stand out strongly as the poem is read, since it is a variation on the regular metrical base that the reader expects to hear.

In stanza 2, line 2, after the first iambic foot, the poet employs two successive anapests (two lightly stressed syllables followed by a strongly stressed syllable) to create a line of only three feet, a trimeter.

The poet varies the rhythm of the line in various ways, including the placing of a caesura, indicated by a comma, semicolon, colon, or dash. The first five lines of the poem all have caesuras of different kinds placed in the middle of the line. In other parts of the poem, the placing of the caesura, when it occurs, varies.

Tone

The tone of the speaker or narrator in a work of literature is an indication of his or her attitude to what is being conveyed, whether it is information, an opinion, or anything else. In this poem, the speaker (a collective "we") adopts a conversational tone, but does so in a flat manner. The speaker does not express any emotion but maintains a detached attitude to the account he is giving of the airmen and their experiences during the war. The flatness of tone suggests that the speaker is in a sense not fully present emotionally, as if he does not have, or permit himself to have, a fully human response to what is going on around him.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Air War in World War II

The United States entered World War II in December 1941, following the Japanese attack on the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. The U.S. Army Air Forces played a major part in winning the war. Early on, the emphasis was placed on achieving air superiority over the enemy. The theory was that the bombing of Germany would destroy its economy and either lead directly to victory or at least prepare the way for a successful invasion with minimum casualties. The U.S. Army Air Forces cooperated with the British Royal Air Force (RAF) in the bombing of Germany and German-occupied nations. The heavy bombers used by the U.S. Army Air Forces were the B-17, known as the Flying Fortress, the B-24 Liberator, and the B-29 Superfortress. Each airplane had a crew of ten. However, in 1943, before the Allies achieved air superiority over Germany, casualties on these bombing raids were high (despite what the official announcement in "Losses" declares). According to Stewart Halsey Ross, who cites U.S. Department of Defense statistics, an American airman in one of the heavy bombers had only one chance in four of completing twenty-five missions without becoming a casualty. The bombing raids in 1943 did little to curb the German war effort. But this changed in 1944, when the U.S. Army Air Forces reached maximum strength against Germany. German transportation networks and oil refineries were destroyed, greatly reducing Germany's ability to continue the war. By March 1945, 5,027 B-17s and B-24s were being deployed against Germany. Many of these attacks on German cities produced high civilian casualties. In a raid on Hamburg in July 1943 by the RAF and the U.S. Eighth Air Force, 50,000 civilians were killed. In February 1945, another joint British-U.S. operation bombed Dresden, resulting in the death of an estimated 24,000 to 40,000 people. In these bombing raids, high-explosive bombs were dropped that resulted in firestorms that raged uncontrolled in the stricken cities. (This is why "Losses" refers not merely to dropping bombs on cities but to burning them.)

In the war against Japan, Japanese cities were attacked in the same manner by the B-29 Superfortresses. At first the targets were industrial, such as aircraft production factories, but later the raids were directed against civilian populations. In March 1945, 334 B-29s firebombed

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **1940s:** In World War II, the heavy bombers of the U.S. Army Air Forces are the B-17 Flying Fortress, the B-24 Liberator, and the B-29 Superfortress.

  Today: The U.S. Air Force heavy bombers are the B-1 Lancer, described by the Air Force as the backbone of the long-range bomber force; the B-2 Spirit, which is also known as the Stealth Bomber because of its ability to penetrate sophisticated defenses and threaten heavily defended targets; and the B-52 Stratofortress. In 2007, 173 bombers are in service.

- **1940s:** In 1947, the U.S. Air Forces becomes a separate service from the U.S. Army. The Department of the Air Force is created when President Harry Truman signs the National Security Act.

  Today: The U.S. Air Force is the largest air force in the world. In 2007, it has about 5,778 manned aircraft in service (4,093 USAF; 1,289 Air National Guard; and 396 Air Force Reserve). The Air Force has a total of 333,495 military personnel.

- **1940s:** After World War II ends, the United States soon becomes committed to containing the Communist Soviet Union from further expansion. The cold war begins.

  Today: One of the goals of U.S. foreign policy is to defeat international terrorism. The United States fights two wars, in Afghanistan and Iraq, aimed at stabilizing those countries and preventing Islamic extremists from exerting any influence.

Tokyo, destroying about a quarter of the city and resulting, according to official reports cited by Ross, in 83,793 dead and 40,918 wounded. "It took 25 days to remove all the dead from the ruins," states Ross. Between May and August 1945, fifty-eight Japanese cities were destroyed by firebombing. The death and destruction caused by the bombing were major factors in the willingness of Japan to surrender, although it was not until after atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, and on Nagasaki three days later, that the Japanese surrendered.

War Poetry

The term *war poetry* was first used to describe poetry written about World War I (1914–1918) by those who had participated in it. The most prominent of the World War I poets are Siegfried Sassoon, Isaac Rosenberg, Rupert Brooke, Ivor Gurney, and Wilfred Owen, all of whom were British. The war made little impact, however, on American poetry. World War II also produced war poetry, although most of it is not as highly regarded as that of the World War I poets. Alun Lewis (1915–1944) and Keith Douglas (1920–1944) are the most distinguished of the British World War II poets. Among American poets of World War II, Jarrell is considered the finest, but other poets are also remembered for their war poetry. Like Jarrell, Richard Eberhart (1904–2005) did not see combat during the war but served as an instructor (in the U.S. Naval Reserve). Like Jarrell also, he watched as men he had trained—he trained recruits to shoot a machine gun from an aircraft—went off to war and were killed. "The Fury of Aerial Bombardment," perhaps his best-remembered poem, was written from that experience. Karl Shapiro (1913–2000) served in the Pacific from 1942, and in 1945 he published *V-Letter and Other Poems*, written while he was stationed in New Guinea. The book was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1945, although it is little read today. Louis Simpson (1923-) served with the 101st Airborne Division in France, Holland, Belgium, and Germany; his war poems include "Carentan O Carentan," "Memories of a Lost War," and "The Battle." Lincoln Kirstein (1907–1996) published his war poems, *Rhymes and more Rhymes of a P.F.C.*, in 1964, and the volume was praised by W. H. Auden, according to an obituary of Kirstein in the *New York Times*, as "the most convincing, moving and impressive"

B-29s in flight on bombing mission during WWII *(Loomis Dean / US Army Air Services-Pacific Arena Areas / Time Life Pictures / Getty Images)*

book he knew about World War II. Barely remembered as a poet today, Kirstein is best known for the cultural influence he exerted in New York City in a variety of artistic endeavors. Richard Wilbur (1921-), one of the most prominent American post–World War II poets, wrote two poems about his war experiences as an infantryman in France and Germany, "Mined Country" and "First Snow in Alsace."

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

"Losses" has attracted some comment from literary critics, although not as much as some of Jarrell's other war poems. Richard Flynn comments in his book *Randall Jarrell and the Lost World of Childhood* that the collection *Little Friend, Little Friend*, in which "Losses" appears, features "perpetually adolescent soldiers . . . who seem forced into adulthood unprepared, and regress to infantile states as a defense against the horrors of war." Richard Fein, in "Randall Jarrell's World of War," an essay in *Critical Essays on Randall Jarrell*, selects "Losses" as one of several poems in which Jarrell

> takes a soldier through wounds, fears, deaths, in order that the soldier will know that he has undergone some basic suffering because of which he can no longer deny not only the horrors and bitterness of war but the harshness of human personality and culture as well.

Sister M. Bernetta Quinn, also writing in *Critical Essays on Randall Jarrell*, notes that the airman in the poem, "horrified at the contrast between actuality and the stereotyped war reports, blends

dreaming and dying." For Suzanne Ferguson, at the end of the poem the flyer is starting to shake off his inability to accept the reality of death. As she points out in *The Poetry of Randall Jarrell*, "The individual 'I' at last, not 'we,' dreams his death, and at last accepts the deaths of the cities, personified—abstractions still, but real." However, Ferguson also notes that the flyer cannot "relate his death to any logical cause." Ferguson regards "Losses" as a not entirely successful poem, "partly because it lapses into a generalized rather than specific point of view, and partly because the reader accepts only with difficulty the naïvety of the speaker(s)." William H. Pritchard, however, has a more positive assessment of the poem. He remarks in *Randall Jarrell: A Literary Life*, "Avoiding the directly satiric as well as the solemnity of didacticism, the poem achieves freshness and surprise by its deadpan juxtaposition of things that don't, yet do, belong together."

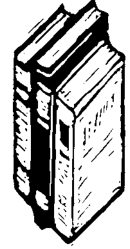
CRITICISM

Bryan Aubrey

Aubrey holds a Ph.D. in English. In the following essay, he explains how Jarrell's wartime letters reveal his attitudes about World War II and offer some clues as to why his poem "Losses" took the form it did.

It was the war poems of Randall Jarrell that solidified the poetic reputation he had started to build in 1942 with his first collection, *Blood for a Stranger*. His first collection of war poems, *Little Friend, Little Friend*, which contained "Losses," was published in 1945, during the last year of World War II. A collection titled *Losses* followed three years later. The poems were the result of Jarrell's thoughts about the war and his ability to imagine himself into the experience of those who had fought in it. Jarrell himself had not been in combat and spent the entire war in the United States. He had enlisted in the Army Air Forces in October 1942 and trained as a pilot; he completed about thirty hours of flying and on his failure to make the grade ("washing out" was the term used) had trained as an instructor in a celestial navigation tower. He moved to Tucson, Arizona, in November 1943 and gave navigators at Davis-Monthan field their last three months of training before they entered combat in the new bombers, the B-29 Superfortresses.

WHAT DO I READ NEXT?



- *Masters of the Air: America's Bomber Boys Who Fought the Air War Against Nazi Germany* by Donald L. Miller (2007) tells the story of the U.S. Eighth Air Force, which flew bombing missions over Germany from 1942 to 1945. Despite the title, Miller admits that the Eighth had a mixed record of success, suffering twenty-six thousand combat deaths. He constructs his account from oral histories, diaries, and government documents.
- Jarrell's *Poetry and the Age* is a collection of essays on literary topics. It was first published in 1953 (and was reissued in 2001 with two additional essays), when Jarrell was emerging as one of the foremost literary critics of his time. These essays show the range of his critical interests, including Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, Walt Whitman, and William Carlos Williams. His style is clear and often witty, and his essay "The Obscurity of the Poets," is as fresh and relevant today as it was fifty years ago.
- *American War Poetry: An Anthology* (2006), edited by Lorrie Goldensohn, covers war poetry from the colonial period to the twenty-first-century war in Iraq, including every major conflict the United States has been involved in. Nearly two hundred poets are included, and their poems reveal a startlingly wide range of attitudes toward war.
- In *Bomber Pilot: A Memoir of World War II* (1978), Philip Ardery describes his war experiences, beginning in flight school in 1940, and covering his time spent as a flying instructor, flying combat missions over Europe as a B-24 squadron commander, and later as an operations officer in the Eighth Air Force. It is a vivid picture of five tumultuous years and adds a great deal to the reader's appreciation of Jarrell's "Losses."

The B-29 first flew in September 1942 and was first utilized in the war in 1944 in the air attacks on Japanese cities. In fact, as the casualty

THE MEN SEEM TO DISSOCIATE FROM THE REALITY OF WHAT IS HAPPENING TO THEM AND TO THOSE WHO BECOME THEIR VICTIMS. THEY ARE MERELY COGS IN THE PITILESSLY TURNING WHEEL OF WAR AND HAVE NO POWER TO LEAVE THEIR APPOINTED PLACES, EVEN IF THEY WISH TO.”

rates show, the Superfortress was anything but a fortress. Because of the pressures of the war, it was rushed into production and had many mechanical glitches that cost its crews dearly. The biggest problem, according to Stewart Halsey Ross, was that the engines were liable to catch fire, “warming up on the ground prior to takeoff, in the air at all altitudes, but most often during acceleration on takeoff at full power.” If this happened, the entire crew would be killed. More B-29 crewmen died from failures of the airplane than by enemy action. Even Major-General Curtis LeMay, commander of the bombing campaign against Japanese cities, admitted in his later recollections that the B-29 was “the buggiest damn airplane that ever came down the pike” (quoted in Ross). A total of 414 B-29s were lost during the war; 147 of those were lost in combat. The B-17s, the famous Flying Fortresses, were less unreliable, although hundreds of them were shot down over Germany. The American government liked to present a rosy picture to the public of the almost indestructible nature of the B-17s, but as Paul Fussell notes, the truth was rather different, and “before the war ended the burnt and twisted bits of almost 22,000 of these Allied bombers would strew the fields of Europe and Asia, attended by the pieces of almost 110,000 airmen.”

This is the background for Jarrell’s poem “Losses.” During the war years he must have been witness to training accidents of the kind described in the poem (although none of his surviving letters from the period describes any such incidents), and he took careful note of the young men who did go off to fight, many of them never to return alive. It is this observation of the actual men who fought—their daily routines in training, their attitudes to the war—that gives his war poems their authenticity. Jarrell may not have been there himself, in the air over Europe or Japan, but he knew those who had been, and he used his poetic gifts to give them a voice in his poems.

Today, World War II is often referred to as the “good war,” fought by the “greatest generation,” as opposed to the war in Vietnam, the muddled war in which right and wrong, good and evil, were not as clear-cut as they supposedly were in the earlier conflict and from which the United States did not emerge victorious. But this understanding of World War II is not apparent from “Losses.” These speakers are not gung-ho fliers eager for the fight and the danger, reveling in their exploits, becoming living heroes or meeting heroic deaths. There is nothing glamorous about the killing that is described. Instead, “Losses” records the voices of those who are caught up in a conflict they do not understand and for which they are woefully unprepared.

Jarrell’s letters written during the war provide much insight into his views at the time and serve as interesting glosses on the poem. In August 1945, he wrote to his fellow poet Robert Lowell, who had commented about the “typical protagonist” of Jarrell’s poems. Jarrell explains how he regards those who found themselves caught up in the war:

> I’ve met thousands of people who’ve killed great quantities of other people and had great quantities of their companions killed; and there’s not one out of a hundred who *knows* enough about it to kill a fly or be stung by a fly. Talking about a slaughter of the innocents! And those are the *soldiers*, not the civilians.

The ignorance of the fliers in “Losses” is one of the most noticeable aspects of the poem. They have gotten caught up in the great war machine, and they do what they are told and what is expected of them. But they show no understanding at all of why they are doing it. Only at the last do their flat statements turn into a question, asked by one individual flier, about the purpose of it all.

One reason for the men’s ignorance is their extreme youth. The fliers in “Losses” are barely out of high school. With little experience of life beyond their families and hometowns, they are suddenly thrust into this disorienting situation in which they are asked to kill and be killed. Jarrell himself, at thirty years of age, was older than

the average serviceman he encountered, and he was very conscious of this. He wrote to Margaret Marshall, literary editor of the *Nation*, that most of those who died in combat were "kids just out of high school—[I] believe that [the] majority of such people that died were too young to vote." Jarrell was certainly right about the youth of the combatants. The United States began the war requiring that recruits be at least twenty-one years old, but this was dropped to eighteen, the same age that the British eventually settled on. Paul Fussell notes in his engaging book about the psychological and cultural milieu that enveloped those who fought in the war: "A notable feature of the World War II is the youth of most who fought it. The soldiers played not just at being killers but at being grown-ups."

Another of Jarrell's letters to Lowell, written just four months after the war ended, also provides illuminating commentary on "Losses," a strong feature of which is the passivity of the fliers, their active wartime lives notwithstanding. They are passive in the sense that they have no control over their destiny, which is shaped by something that is entirely out of their hands. This lack of freedom of action may account for the detached, unemotional tone of the poem. The men seem to dissociate from the reality of what is happening to them and to those who become their victims. They are merely cogs in the pitilessly turning wheel of war and have no power to leave their appointed places, even if they wish to. In his letter to Lowell, Jarrell explores the philosophical issue of free will and determinism. Although he does not believe in determinism, neither does he believe in free will in the sense that people always have the information or knowledge to make a genuinely free choice. More often, people are overshadowed by experiences from the past that make them either ignorant or only partially informed of their condition, making the idea of a free choice impossible. He then connects this reasoning to the war:

> Most of the soldiers are, if not completely, at least virtually, ignorant of the nature and conditions of the choices they make; besides this, they are pretty well determined in the passive sense—even if they should choose not to do a bad thing (and they usually do not have the information and training to make it possible for them to make a really reasonable decision about it), they will be forced to do it by the state.

Jarrell also comments that the government was responsible for giving out "misleading determining information" to the soldiers, further reducing their ability to make a free, informed choice. This purveying of false information is hinted at twice in "Losses," not only in the official declaration that casualties were low (the last line of stanza 2) but also in the statement that if the men were killed it was due not to an accident but a mistake (stanza 2, lines 6–7), which suggests that planes were lost and deaths occurred not because of any defects or safety problems with the planes but because of pilot error.

In the end, death is death and cannot be denied. The speakers in "Losses" may claim that it was not dying, but the wording of the poem itself gives the cruel game away. In a poem of thirty-two lines, the words *dead*, *died*, *die*, or *dying* occur sixteen times. Indeed, the four lines that constitute stanza 3 all end with one of these words. The language of the poem undermines the claims of the speakers. The youthful airmen do die, at random and without meaning, or at least without any meaning they are able to determine. Such are the individual tragedies of a war that comes upon its boy-victims before they have had a chance to become men.

Source: Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on "Losses," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2010.

Matthew B. Hill

In the following excerpt, Hill suggests that the dream in "Losses" presents a moment of epiphany in which the speaker is forced to recognize the reality of death and assume responsibility for his actions.

. . . Jarrell's "Losses," from his volume of the same name, is perhaps his most forthright examination of the relationship between war, language, and dreams. In this poem, we find Jarrell tracing the military's consistent deflection of "direct" linguistic signification when dealing with the inevitability of death in war. In Saussurian terms, the poem interrogates the constant change in the signifiers involved in the discourse of war, while highlighting the fact that there is little or no change in the actual, essential signifieds of that discourse. The result of this sliding system of signification is not only a deflection of meaning, but one of responsibility for the extinguishing of human life, both "friend" and "enemy." In this poem, the speaker, a member of a bomber crew, seeks to understand his own actions, but is mired in a language that actively resists a stable, reified labeling of events. This deflection is the

American B-17 "Flying Fortress" making a daylight raid over Berlin in February 1945 (Popperfoto / Getty Images)

central point of the text, informing even its title: "Losses" is a euphemistic military term denoting the amount of men and machinery destroyed in any given engagement. This pattern of deflection is perhaps most visible in the opening lines of the poem:

> It was not dying: everybody died.
> It was not dying: we had died before
> In the routine crashes (ll.1–3)

The speaker first defines the experience of "loss" by describing what it is not, simply "dying." "Dying" is something that other people or things, such as "aunts [perhaps a pun on "ants"] or pets or foreigners" (l.10) do. The inability of Jarrell's speaker to find an adequate analogical referent here is interesting, highlighting the pre-military innocence—and distance from "real" conflict and suffering—of the pilots and trainees. He shows them fresh out of high school, where "nothing else had died / For us to figure we had died like" (ll.11–12). The simple, deadpan assertion that "it was not dying" creates an ironic tension in the line, in one sense literally distancing the innocent, fresh-from-high school recruits from death, but in another, indoctrinating them into the language of military authorities. The difference between the "military" and "civilian" taxonomies in this passage clues us to Jarrell's acute awareness of the manipulation of language by his superiors: i.e., whatever the pilots in training did in Arizona was "not dying" in the eyes of the military. They were "sacrifices," "casualties," "costs," nameless victims of the "routine crashes," and part of the "rates" of quantifiable casualties that go up, "all because of [them]" (ll.3–4).

As the poem progresses, we see a more devious manipulation of language at work, an intentional corruption of language in service of a political agenda. It is worth reprinting at length—note the terms that I italicize here:

> In our *new* planes, with our *new* crews, we bombed
> The ranges by the desert or the shore,
> Fired at towed targets, waited for our scores—
> And turned into *replacements* and woke up

One morning, over England, *operational*.
It wasn't different: but if we died
It was not an *accident* but a *mistake*
(But an easy one for anyone to make.)
(ll.13–20)

Here, the "new" fliers, innocent children fresh out of high school and flight training, transform into "replacements," the military term for troops replenishing the depleted ranks of a combat force. This transformation is instantaneous, spanning only five lines and one grammatical thought. No essential change in the nature of the crews has taken place here; the "new" pilots are merely renamed "operational" "replacements" making them ready to experience combat. The fact that, to the speaker, "it wasn't different" (l. 18) shows the transparency of this discourse; the speaker (and possibly every other soldier) knows that nothing *is* different, despite the terminology the military uses to describe it.

The terms used to describe the fliers' deaths are also an extension of this awareness: "but if we died / It was not an *accident* but a *mistake*" (l.19). Again, the speaker notes the discrepancy in the terminology used to describe the same event, death. In war, deaths are not "accidents" as they are in training, but "mistakes," events that happen because of a glitch or flaw in planning or execution. The American mythology that underlies such thinking, the idea that one can do anything if given the freedom, has lethal real-world implications here: if one "does the right thing" or "follows orders," he gets to live. The "plan," in this sense, of modern warfare is sound; those who follow it will survive. This logic is redolent both of Willy Loman's tragic longing to be "free and clear" by being a good worker bee in Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and Thomas Sutpen's grand dynastic designs for Yoknapatawpha county in Faulkner's *Absalom! Absalom!*

While both of those characters suffer ignominious ends, neither man's personal mythology is forced to face anything like the overwhelming chaos of twentieth-century war. Plans, however well-thought out, in the face of industrialized warfare and modern military bureaucracy often disintegrate: the 1942 Canadian raid on Dieppe, the American airborne operations on D-Day, and the complex Market Garden in Holland in 1944 are perfect examples. D-Day was, remarkably, successful; Marker Garden and Dieppe were disasters. Even those soldiers who "followed orders" and did not make "mistakes" at times get killed. This is a simple fact of war.

The culminating image in "Losses" is that of a cataclysmic dream, where the speaker is obliterated both literally and figuratively. The last stanza of the poem reads:

It was not dying—no, not ever dying;
But the night I died I dreamed that I was dead,
And the cities said to me: "Why are you dying?
We are satisfied, if you are: but why did I die?" (ll.28–32)

The dream, in terms of the rhetorical structure of the poem, is where the deflection of meaning central to the earlier parts of the poem ceases. Dying, when discussed as part of the speaker's dream, is called *dying*, not becoming a "casualty" or a "loss" or anything else. The speaker has literally "died" and is dreaming that he is "dead." The near-obsessive repetition of the verb "die," both by the speaker and by the cities serves as an ontological hammer, its hard /d/ phoneme pronouncing itself with a thudding finality. The personification of the cities reinforces this idea, providing a human voice for the purposely anonymous victims of war, i.e., those killed by the falling bombs. The cities' questions to the flier, "Why are you dying?" and "Why did I die?" seem to serve a double function here, both to indict the speaker for his violent actions and to criticize him for his complicity in a system of signification that makes such atrocity possible. This meditation is an act of conscious self-examination that is oddly missing throughout the entire poem. For all the speaker's awareness of the ambiguity and instability of military language, he never bothers to wonder *why* he has done all that he has done, undergone as many supposed "transformations" as he has. The cities' response to the speaker's silence is "We are satisfied, if you are." This implies that the speaker has or had the power to object, or to accept the reasoning behind his actions. By extension, we can also reason that this question and its assignment of responsibility to the speaker serves as an indictment of a language that occludes "death" and "dying" from an actor's consciousness. Even while noticing the shifting terms at work in military discourse, the speaker still acts, still "burned the cities [he] learned about in school." Unfortunately, this epiphany comes too late to do him or the cities any good; he has "died," taking with him numerous innocents caught in the machinery and language of war. The dream, in its directness and lack of artifice, serves as a momentary antidote to the jargon stream, illuminating and summarizing the crucial problem of the poem, the speaker's

inability to rationalize morally what he has done or to find an adequate language for it. . . .

Source: Matthew B. Hill, "The Dream from Which No One Wakes: Jarrell, Dreams, and War," in *War, Literature & the Arts: An International Journal of the Humanities*, Vol. 19, No. 1/2, 2007, pp. 152–64.

Charlotte H. Beck

In the following essay, Beck investigates Jarrell's use of four personae—soldiers, children, women, and observers—and considers "Losses" in this context.

Randall Jarrell once wrote, "We never step twice in the same Auden." His own readers might ask, "Will the *real* Randall Jarrell please stand up?" Searching the poems, M. L. Rosenthal finds that Jarrell's typical speaker is "at once himself or herself *and* Randall Jarrell; not, of course, Jarrell the wit, translator of Rilke and edgily competitive poet, but the essential Jarrell" (["Between Two Worlds"] 31). The many Jarrells are as difficult to classify as to define. Jerome Mazzaro places him "between [the] two worlds" of modernism and postmodemism ([*Randall Jarrell*] 83), and Rosenthal praises *The Lost World* as Jarrell's vehicle of entry into a confessional period wherein he "finally treats intimate realities of his own actual life and memory" (41). These efforts to postmodernize Randall Jarrell, to prefer the confessional poet of *The Lost World*, is to devalue much if not all that precedes, as well as much that is in that climactic volume of poetry. It was the other Jarrell, the reluctant heir of modernism, who created monologues, dialogues, and scenes so central to his achievement. This was the poet who discovered and turned to his advantage one of modernism's chief strategies, "the sweet uses of personae."

I have adapted that phrase, "the sweet uses of personae," from Mary Jarrell's article "Ideas and Poems," wherein she describes how for Randall Jarrell, "the idea of altering the gender of his feelings" enabled him to avoid "the maudlin effects of a man's self-pitying confessions." She relates how first in "The Face" and afterwards in "The Woman at the Washington Zoo" and "The End of the Rainbow," he "established how sweet the uses of the persona could be for him" (218–19). Not only with female personae, but with a procession of soldiers, children, and an assortment of other male speakers, Jarrell found in the dramatic poem an effective distancing strategy. The use of personae in well over half of his poems places Randall Jarrell among the

FOR SUCH POETS, THE DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE AND RELATED FORMS BECOME THE WAY TO ALLOW EACH SELF ITS VERSION OF TRUTH; AND RELATIVISM BECOMES THE ONLY VIABLE PHILOSOPHY."

modernists, whose poetic he alternately admired and deplored but fully understood.

My intention is not to define such protean terms as "modern" and "postmodern" except insofar as they imply a judgmental contrast between Jarrell's dramatic and his so-called "confessional" poems. Rather, I would argue that for Jarrell, the use of many masks—of critic, novelist, children's storyteller, satirist, and translator, as well as all those that appear in his poetry—was necessary to his art and to his delineation of truth as he perceived it. For Mazzaro, this "insist[ence] on dramatic monologues" as "one alternate to shaping his views into a single voice" makes him a relativist, even a modern skeptic (87). The same charge can, of course, be leveled at Jarrell's predecessors in the genre—Browning, Tennyson, Frost, and Eliot, to name a few—who, like Jarrell, saw reality as composed of many differing perceptions coexisting in one multifaceted world. For such poets, the dramatic monologue and related forms become the way to allow each self its version of truth; and relativism becomes the only viable philosophy.

I

Does Jarrell's use of the dramatic monologue make him a modernist? To answer this question one need only recall how he consistently, throughout his career, defined modernism. In his 1942 essay, "The End of the Line," Jarrell anticipates modern critics' efforts to merge modernism with romanticism by labeling the former an "extension" and "end product" of the latter. For the first time, also, Jarrell calls the dramatic monologue a form which began as a "departure from the norm of ordinary poetry" but which "in modernist poetry . . . itself becomes the norm" (79). And although he proceeds to pronounce modernism's death, thereby separating himself and his generation from a spent tradition, Jarrell gives to modernist poetry thirteen

characteristics—including experimentalism; heightened emotional intensity to the point of violence; obscurity and inaccessibility; lack of restraint; emphasis on detail; preoccupation with the unconscious, with dreams; irony of every type; primitivism; isolationism; and condemnation of the present for an idealized past (79)—all of which, with the possible exception of primitivism, might be used to describe Jarrell's own poetry. For Randall Jarrell, both modern poetry and its most characteristic form, the dramatic monologue, had become a cliché which had yet to be replaced by any major kind of innovation. In a sense, then, to follow in the modern tradition was for Jarrell and his generation a compromise and a delaying strategy.

Jarrell's critics have often mirrored his ambivalence toward the dramatic mode by asking, with Frances Ferguson, "Why did he have so many 'characters' populating his poems" (["Randall Jarrell and the Flotations of Voice"] 163)? Others have objected, along with James Dickey, to the nameless, faceless quality of Jarrell's personae (["Randall Jarrell"] 44). To begin, it must be said that Jarrell's dramatic monologues and dialogues are not, like Browning's, said aloud to a listener; rather, they resemble Tennyson's monodramas and Eliot's interior monologues, Laforguian utterances of a mind looking inward. Jarrell's dramatic poems resemble Shakespearean soliloquies, wherein the speaker puts into words those unutterable truths he or she would tell no one; they are, for their lyrical qualities, like operatic arias that capture the speaker's emotions at an epiphanic moment. What makes Jarrell's dramatic poems come alive for the reader is their realization of a concrete situation in time and place. Although most of his speakers do represent types, as critics have complained, they are made unique by their particular relationships to the worlds around them. "What," Jarrell once asked (in a letter to Amy Breyer), "shall it profit a man if he gain his own soul and lose the whole world?" So much do Jarrell's speakers depend for their identity on their situation that the titles of the dramatic poems often name, not the speaker, but a place occupied by the speaker. One immediately recalls "In the Ward: The Sacred Wood,""A Camp in the Prussian Forest,""A Girl in a Library," and "The Woman at the Washington Zoo." Other titles fuse speaker with temporal and spatial situation so that separation is inconceivable; consider "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner,""Next Day,""A Street off Sunset," and "A Man Meets a Woman in the Street." Still others, like "Burning the Letters" and "The Player Piano," connect the persona in a Proustian manner with the object that precipitates the monologue. Surely Jarrell's "dramatic lyrism," as Parker Tyler early phrased it (["The Dramatic Lyrism of Randall Jarrell"] 140), has its earliest antecedent in the Wordsworthian and Keatsean dramatic lyric, wherein the speaker and landscape are interdependent. Add the Laforguian irony that gives the modern interior monologue its distinctive tone and one has the main ingredients of Jarrell's dramatic poems, themselves recapitulating the tradition and further extending it into the middle of the twentieth century, when, in Jarrell's own words, the "reign of the dramatic monologue" was finally at an end (*Stevens* ["The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens"] 66).

II

Because Jarrell's personae are typical rather than individual, his critics have from the beginning enjoyed classifying the poems according to similar personae. Tyler's 1952 groupings of soldiers, children, and fairy princes (141) have to give way to include the women who, after the publication of *A Woman at the Washington Zoo*, became his most frequently employed personae. To these classes I add the observers, Jarrell's most transparent masquers, who, though present throughout his career, come to prominence in *The Lost World*. Here I will illustrate briefly four groups of Jarrell's personae—soldiers, children, women, and observers—by focusing on one characteristic poem and, in typical Jarellian manner, naming a few equally characteristic poems that every Jarrell reader ought to know. To survey Jarrell's personae in this order is to recapitulate the approximate succession in which they became the central concern of his monologues. The soldiers (or airmen) dominate Jarrell's second and third volumes: *Little Friend, Little Friend* and *Losses*. The children have their domain in the fairytale world of *The Seven-League Crutches*, his first postwar collection. The women and observers, though represented in Jarrell's earlier volumes, come to prominence in his latter collections, *The Woman at the Washington Zoo* and *The Lost World*.

The war poems came out of Jarrell's indirect involvement with the nightmare world in which he participated, first as pilot trainee and then as flight instructor. A long letter to Allen Tate, dated 1944, provides an astonishingly complete gloss on these war poems. Jarrell reports having

had "a pretty good time when I was flying," but, since most of his fellow pilots were training for combat, he had to conclude that being "washed out" was "a very great piece of luck." Had he failed as pilot and then been assigned to Sheppard Field, he almost certainly would have been made a gunner. Such are the sweet uses of personae: two of Jarrell's best poems, "Gunner" and "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner," resulted from his relief at not occupying that most vulnerable position in a combat plane. The composite voice in "Losses" intones, "In bombers named for girls, we burned / The cities we had learned about in school." Jarrell writes in the same letter that "your main feeling about the army, at first, is just that you can't believe it; it couldn't exist, and even if it could, you would have learned what it was like from all the books, and not a one gives you even an idea." The speaker of "Eighth Air Force," who judges himself along with the other "murderers" who sit around him playing pitch or trying to sleep, is but one remove from the flight instructor who describes to Tate how he would "sit up at night in the day room . . . writing poems, surrounded by people playing pool or writing home, or reading comic-strip magazines." Jarrell's enthusiastic description of the celestial navigation tower where, "in a tower about forty feet high, a fuselage like the front of a bomber—the navigator . . . sits . . . and navigates by shooting with his sextant the stars that are in a star dome above his head" is answered, in "Losses," by the complaints of those who "died on the wrong page of the almanac" because star data was misinterpreted. Neither the confessional poems of a washed-out pilot nor the objective observations of a non-combatant could achieve the force of these dramatic poems spoken by the victims. It is not surprising that these two war volumes established for Jarrell a reputation for war poetry that he did not easily exchange for a more timely label.

Jarrell's child speakers have caused much controversy among his readers. Robert Lowell compared Jarrell with Wordsworth for making of the child's world a "governing and transcendent vision" (["Randall Jarrell"] 109). James Dickey's "B"—half of his divided opinion on Jarrell—accuses Jarrell of maudlin sentimentality of a James Fieldian variety (45). Certainly, Jarrell's children constitute for him a less successful distancing strategy than his soldiers or women. One is conscious of the painful memories that created such poems as "A Story" and "The Truth," although the situations in which Jarrell places his child-speaker are fictional. The most successful solution to this tonal problem is to be observed in two poems, "90 North" and "The Lost World." In these, Jarrell achieves distance through the use of a double persona, by which the adult and child together recreate two levels of consciousness: the powerless innocence of the past and painful experience of the present. Neither is superior to the other; both are simultaneously real. In a 1945 letter to Allen Tate, Jarrell reacts to the marriage of Tate's daughter Nancy by saying that to him she will always be "a fat little girl who surely can't have ceased to exist, but is waiting somewhere for you to discover that the other is an impostor." Thus did Jarrell's children exist on a causeway between past and present, easily traversed when an impulse from memory stimulated the mind to return.

Between "90 North" and "The Lost World" Jarrell wrote his more conventional dramatic monologues wherein the child speakers are placed in a fictional temporal and spatial setting. In addition to "The State,""A Story,""The Truth," and "Protocols," grounded in the terrible realities of the Second World War, there are the fantasy settings of "The Prince" and "The Black Swan." In the latter, as well as in the extended narrative with dialogue, "The Night before the Night before Christmas," the speaker has the dramatic advantage of being a girl rather than a thinly concealed version of young Randall. Even the most obviously biographical of these personae are given the objective detachment of fictional settings and time-frames necessary for the dramatic monologue. Among Jarrell's uncollected poems, until recently unpublished, is a case in point. "The New Ghost" is the dramatic monologue of a child newly separated by death from parents who, he believes, have always considered him an outsider. From his vantage point beyond life, he looks in on the world of the living. His "scratchy wool gown and shoes that squeak" represent his new condition, while comfortable in the lighted living room that has always excluded him, the ghost's parents appear happy to be rid of his unwanted presence:

> Father and mother are sitting there
> To mean that I'm not really theirs
> So that they don't say a word to me
> To pretend to me that I'm not there.
> In a dream there's no one there at all . . .
> But—but there it *is* a dream.

The child's confused speech mirrors the predicament of one who, like Rilke's dead children, is a stranger in the world inhabited and controlled by unfeeling adults. These children, crippled either physically or emotionally, are obvious objectifications of the fears and hostilities that marred Jarrell's childhood as well as our own. For several of these children, the only comforter is a beloved pet, the only escape the seven-league crutches of fantasy, dreams or death. Such monologues make Jarrell's readers uncomfortable, because they strike too close to aspects of reality we would like to forget and because the tone in such poems cannot be other than pathetic, even bathetic.

Jarrell's feminine personae represent his highest achievement in the dramatic monologue. As versions of the Jarrellian *anima*, these speakers are based on personal experience ironically masked; as products of Jarrell's reading of Rilke and Frost, they achieve classical status. Jarrell translated Rilke's "Faded" and "The Widow's Song" at about the time he was writing "The Woman at the Washington Zoo" and "The End of the Rainbow." Added to the Rilkean theme of isolation and rejection is the Frostian character of the mad or apparently mad speaker whom Jarrell so much admired in "A Servant to Servants" and "The Witch of Coös." Jarrell's feeling of ambiguity toward women, so brilliantly apparent in the non-dramatic poem "Woman" and in the essay "A Sad Heart at the Supermarket," provides the ironic seasoning that such poems as "Seele im Raum" and "Next Day" require. The first of these personae must have been the bereaved wife of "Burning the Letters," but they reach their height of dramatic realism in "Next Day" and "The Lost Children," which sit alongside the supposedly confessional poems included in and coming after *The Lost World*.

Perhaps none of Jarrell's dramatic monologues so successfully combines authenticity with self-displacement as "Gleaning," written in 1963 and one of his last poems. The catalyst is a childhood memory, one contiguous with those that account for the three semi-autobingraphical poems in "The Lost World." On the Sunday drives that the boy Randall Jarrell took with his California grandparents, he observed some aged persons patiently looking for beans left by the pickers. Later, when the recollection merged with the Biblical story of Ruth and Boaz, Jarrell was once again aware of the sweet uses of personae. The speaker, sensing the allegorical implications of her gleaning, becomes, in a compression of her entire existence, a "grown-up-giggling, grey-haired girl" who has begun to "glean seriously." Like Ruth, she has "lain / At midnight with the young men in the field"; at the evening of her life, she now awaits death, "A last man, black, gleaming / To come to me." Coming at the end of Jarrell's career, "Gleaning" establishes better than any other poem how personal experience may be universalized through the use of personae. The modern gleaner could have been the subject of a dramatic lyric poem with the observer as persona; instead, Jarrell has given her particularly archetypal significance. Jarrell had discussed with his publisher a volume entitled *Woman*, which would have displayed his best speakers in a more advantageous context than does their sporadic appearance in all his earlier volumes (M. Jarrell, interview). Without such an arrangement, Jarrell's readers still have evidence, both early and late, that the use of women as personae was always for Randall Jarrell a useful way to universalize his own experience.

Jarrell's observer-personae demonstrate his residual romanticism more than his modernism; but if one can believe the Jarrell of "The End of the Line," there is no reason why a poet cannot be both romantic and modern at the same time. In poems like "The Sick Naught," appearing with the early war poems, and in much later ones, "The Well-to-do Invalid" and "Three Bills," Jarrell becomes a dramatic lyricist—like Wordsworth, Keats, or Arnold—who places himself, as surrogate both for the reader and the poet, at the periphery of a dramatic situation centered around someone who has arrested his attention. The observer is a rather transparent version of the poet, but the fact that the action of the poem takes place in the present in a fully realized spatial framework does, in fact, make it a dramatic poem. A much-admired product from the middle of Jarrell's career, "A Girl in the Library," may serve as an illustration. Herein, the speaker, almost surely a professor of literature, is found at a safe distance leisurely observing "an object among dreams" sitting "with [her] shoes off" as her "face moves toward sleep." Not content with his status as an observer, the speaker conjures up an image of Tatyana (from *Eugen Onegin*) to serve as the girl's antithesis in sophistication. He, refusing to accept Tatyana's arrogant dismissal of the girl as a "poor fat thing" who is never to realize her potential, mentally changes her to his "Spring Queen," symbolizing all feminine potentiality. As her "Corn King," the observer successfully penetrates the closed world of her psyche without even disturbing her nap. A by-product of such poems is,

of course, an opportunity to observe the observer, to gain insight into the poetic consciousness caught in the act of transforming life into art. These observer poems stand as evidence that the poet may indeed play a role in his dramatic poem, if only as a supporting actor.

Robert Pinsky has commented that, although the use of a borrowed voice or alter-identity "... partly distinct from the poet, constitutes one of the most widely noted ... and fundamental aspects of modernism," certain recent poets have employed "a speaker or protagonist who is not only dramatic, but somewhat eccentric [to] present a statement about oneself" ([*The Situation of Poetry*] 14). In his use of personae, Randall Jarrell is able, as Pinsky implies, to be both dramatic and confessional and realize the full benefits of both poetic strategies. The Jarrell who saw no discontinuity between romanticism and modernism would no doubt summarily dismiss Procrustian barriers between modernism and post-modernism. By the end of his career, Jarrell had begun, on occasion, to write directly from experience; but he had not—as "Gleaning" and "The Player Piano" prove—abandoned the sweet uses of personae. The brilliance of Jarrell's monologues, dialogues, and scenes lies not in what they say, or do not say about the poet himself; rather, their value resides in that shock of recognition the reader experiences upon discovering, in one of Jarrell's speakers, not only a portrait but a mirror.

Source: Charlotte H. Beck, "Randall Jarrell's Modernism: The Sweet Uses of Personae," in *South Atlantic Review*, Vol. 50, No. 2, May 1985, pp. 67–75.

W. S. Graham

In the following negative review of Losses*, Graham asserts that* Losses *relies too heavily on "incidentals" and lacks an original voice.*

Mr. Randall Jarrell's name as a poet and critic is one which in England as in this country carries considerable prestige. One is at a loss therefore to account for the shocking betrayal of poetic responsibilities and, by implication, critical ones exemplified by his third collection of poems. One's perplexity grows when one finds the critics comparing it variously to the work of Browning, Auden and Tennyson, and included with the "great artificers" who "bring us into a world so painfully clarified that it seems there is nothing more to say." Rarely have I witnessed such a dividing gulf between reputation and achievement.

***LOSSES* COMPRISES A COLLECTION OF POEMS WHICH ARE MOSTLY SPUN FROM WHAT SHOULD BE THE INVOLUNTARY INCIDENTALS OF A POEM, RATHER THAN THE POEMS BEING MADE FIRST FOR THE POETIC ACTION."**

The situation raises fundamental questions concerning poetic and critical standards.

Losses comprises a collection of poems which are mostly spun from what should be the involuntary incidentals of a poem, rather than the poems being made first for the poetic action. Ideally, it is the intensity of the poetic action which sets off and elevates into significance these surrounding incidental values—news, observation, narrative or fiction, etc., or any "subject" separable from the words and alive in its own right. Mr. Jarrell's notes at the end of *Losses* indicate an almost naive reliance upon such incidentals. For example to explicate a slight, versified anecdote, "O My Name It Is Sam Hall," Mr. Jarrell obligingly informs, "These men are three American prisoners and one American M.P., at a B-29 training base in Southern Arizona—Davis-Monthan Field, in fact." Or in explanation of a line of imagery in "Pilots, Man Your Planes," "... *But on the tubes the raiders oscillate*: On the radar set, that is; the view plate looks like a cathode-ray oscillograph." The painstaking documentation of the poems in the notes suggests that Mr. Jarrell believes there is some helpful connection between the reporting of poetic experience and its verifiability in the "real" world.

Behind this dependence on objective documentation there would seem to be a fear of any formal, consciously "made" poetry. As an addition to his intended verisimilitude Mr. Jarrell sprinkles his poems full of little conversational phrases trailing off to dots which, as a device, have a loosening effect upon a poetic line which is, in the first place, conceived at too low-grade a tension. He also employs dashes liberally, although not consistently, sometimes to do the work of commas, other times of periods. The whole would seem to represent a revolt against the "poetic," an urge to deal with an honest, thorny reality. While the surface of Mr.

Jarrell's poetry is self-consciously modern, with all the up-to-date objects of the contemporary war-world—gun-turrets, flak, Jills, Stalags, radar, carriers, hutment, prisoners-of-war, etc.—seeking to create a contemporary fiction, in reality the timbre of the prosodic voice is old-fashioned and laboriously clichéd. Mr. Jarrell talks of "... the train's long mourning whistle. Wailed from the valley below," "the last cloud-girdled peak," the ward is "barred" with moonlight, "the squirrel gnaws mechanically." Always the texture of the poem is as loose and casual as possible, as though attempting to hide the fact that the words follow each other in an order chosen for any conscious poetic end. So we have a poem. "Money," starting with (surely a handicap) the extraordinary, certainly-not-nymph-and-shepherd lines:

> I sit here eating milk-toast in my lap-robe—
> They've got my night-shirt starchier than I
> told 'em ... Huh! ...
> I'll tell 'em ...

The poem, a monologue in dialect which does not succeed in creating its speaker, ends with the banal confession (a banality which is not relieved even if one is conscious of its contrivance for a dramatic purpose):

> When my Ma died I boarded with a farmer
> In the next county; I used to think of her,
> And I looked round me, as I could,
> And I saw what it added up to: money.
> Now I'm dying—I can't call this living—
> I haven't any cause to change my mind.
> They say that money isn't everything: it isn't;
> Money don't help you none when you are
> sighing
> For something else in this wide world to
> buy ...
> The first time I couldn't think of anything
> I didn't have, it shook me.
> But giving does
> as well.

In descriptive passages, as for example in the poem "A Country Life," he piles up the adjectives till the nouns are over-governed and the picture no longer substantially visual:

> Or why, for once, the lagging heron
> Flaps from the little creak's parched cresses
> Across the harsh-grassed, gullied meadow
> To the black, rowed evergreens below.

Because most of the poems in *Losses* deal with a war environment one expects them to contain the antithesis of life and death (that is, both as subjects objectified by the created poem, as well as common subject, by implication, in all poems), yet here they are embossed and studded with capitalized Lifes and Deaths throughout. The word "Life" and the word "Death" are no more help in articulating some vision of life and death than the word "orange." In fact, they usually serve as an evasion of any valid comment. In one poem, "Burning the Letters," which otherwise might have been successful, Mr. Jarrell hits the jackpot and litters his pages with the big verities. We have words and phrases like "his Life wells up from death, the death of Man," "The dying God, the eaten Life," "The Light flames," "the unsearchable / Death of the lives lies dark upon the life," "eternal life," "O death of all my life" (there are nine mentions of life in the poem) and "O grave." O what a defeaning organ-peal of the pseudo-profound. The voice which might have led us nearer the mysteries of life and death is lost in the noise. I had supposed the snare of the old abstract poetic gear would be more cunningly handled by a poet of Mr. Jarrell's training. Here he allows the poem to dissolve into "vague immensities."

Where Mr. Jarrell is influenced by Robert Frost, a poet to whom he has paid critical tribute, his work reveals a simple, old-fashioned nostalgia and these poems work successfully at a humble magnitude. "The Breath Of Night" falls into this category. It begins

> The moon rises. The red cubs rolling
> In the ferns by the rotten oak
> Stare over a marsh and a meadow
> To the farm's white wisp of smoke.

But, it should be noticed, the final stanza effects an overtly moral dimension similar to that in Hardy's *Satires of Circumstances*. For, as a matter of fact, Mr. Jarrell is more obligated to Hardy's small dramatic framework of incident than he is to Browning's interest in character or Frost's effectively restrained sermonizing. Still, when he remembers the deceptively homely but polished verse of Frost, he can achieve a pleasant simplicity, as in "A Country Life":

> A bird that I don't know,
> Hunched on his light-pole like a scarecrow,
> Looks sideways out into the wheat
> The wind waves under the waves of heat.
> The field is yellow as egg-bread dough
> Except where ...

There is a less hysterical "realism" in the careful observation of these details than in the more violent war poems. Unfortunately, however, such observation gives way towards the poem's end to Mr. Jarrell's reliance upon the worn-out poetic diction of lines like:

> The shadows lengthen, and a dreaming hope
> Breathes, from the vague mound, *Life*;
> From the grove under the spire
> Stars shine, and a wandering light
> Is kindled for the mourner, man.
> The angel kneeling with the wreath
> Sees, in the moonlight, graves.

Perhaps the most successful poem in *Losses* is "A Camp in the Prussian Forest." It is a quiet, slow-paced description of a death camp. The action or the scene behind the poem, the incidental news which is contained in the poem, is moving as a good newspaper report of horror is moving. But few words in the poem are positioned to create that flash of vision which in its quality incorporates the "news" of the poem, but which is so much more than just that. When this does happen, as in stanza six, the effect is liberating:

> I paint the star I sawed from yellow pine
> And plant the sign
> In soil that does not yet refuse
> Its usual Jews

Here it is the word "usual" which, in its proximity to "Jews" (the musical half-chime should be mentioned) adds a philosophical dimension to what, up to that point, has been a statement made at a level of personal compassion.

Losses represents a retreat from the small eminence achieved by Mr. Jarrell's second collection, *Little Friend, Little Friend.* If his "modernity" has led him into an over-strategic attempt to resuscitate certain discarded poetic modes and intentions in the ordering of contemporary experience, I can only point out that the job has been much better done by poets of World War I like Owen, Read, Grenfell and Rosenberg. If *Losses* were a book by an unknown young poet, one would not consider it worth reviewing. Keeping in mind the reputation of Randall Jarrell, I find it a disappointing and baffling experience.

Source: W. S. Graham, "Review of *Losses*," in *Poetry*, Vol. 72, No. 6, September 1948, pp. 302–307.

Hayden Carruth

In the following review, Carruth counters W. S. Graham's critique of Losses, *arguing that Jarrell's subjects are "hardly incidental" and that his war poems are "quite as good as any written in this century."*

Here is another reviewer who tells us what is the stuff of poetry. It was tried before, I think, by Bruin of Colchester and, somewhat later, by Mgr. Polidore Flaquet.

Now it is time to question this kind of talk by Mr. Graham. It is time to challenge what Mr. Stephen Spender, a better-tempered Englishman who is also living at present in our monstrous country, recently deplored as "the denigration of American poetry as external by English writers."

For the subjects of poetry cannot be limited. The lesson taught to us by Mr. Ezra Pound, Dr. William Carlos Williams, and Mr. T. S. Eliot cannot be soon forgotten. Poetry will be what it must be, and it is not the critic's job to administer it or patronize it, but rather to investigate its methods and explore its meanings.

It is apparent from Mr. Graham's review of *Losses* that poetry is, in his opinion, only that thing which puffs itself up, like a certain tropical fish, whenever you touch it. It must be a living thing, swimming back and forth between the lines of print, ready to explode in your face at the slightest anxiety. It is not the words, it is not what they say; it is a small organism which slips skittishly among the periods and commas, eyeing the barnacle-encrusted words with dark distrust. What a pity Mr. Graham has never caught one of these creatures to show to the rest of us!

The fact of the matter is that what Mr. Graham calls "incidental values" can be turned into very good poetry indeed. Furthermore, whether we would or no, these values are hardly incidental. The world is full of motor cars, of machine guns, of money. These things have a considerable influence, sometimes good and sometimes bad, on our modern life. They can be treated as instruments by all of us, as statistics by sociologists, as subjects by artists. Many poets use them as symbols; many more (and I believe Mr. Randall Jarrell is, on the whole, one of these) choose to employ them in their own right as things to be noticed and questioned. They cannot be eliminated from poetry, nor can they be made incidental to it.

Two capacities are required for the composition of poetry: a talent for writing in our English language, and a sure intelligence. If any person possesses these qualities to a sufficient degree, he

can create poetry. I would be the last to deny that learning, sensitivity, good taste, and understanding of the tradition may assist poetic endeavor, but these attainments, however they may lend assistance, are surely not the first qualities that a poet must possess. Emotional sensitivity, above the rest, is the quality most overrated since the time of the Romantics in England. Poetry results, not from the conjuncture of an object and a sensitive perception (which children enjoy to a greater degree than adults), but from the observation of an event, "internal" or "external," by a penetrating intelligence. And if that event involves the operation of objective phenomena, as it very often must, then those objective phenomena will assume central value for the observing intelligence.

I suspect that Mr. Graham will set this down as another argument for "realism," which is the malapropism he has so blindly pinned to Mr. Jarrell's poetry. Of course, realism in its broadest meaning must be adjunctive to all art: art depends on life. But realism as a literary dogma has long since been cast aside by serious artists. Mr. Jarrell, to select only one example, has hardly been concerned with the presentation of an accurate report of the war. The world of war which he has created in his poetry is one of which, I dare say, he, as a participating soldier, was unaware. But working as a poet, he has constructed a world, and it is a true one because it is a logical metaphor spanning the desert of imagination between reality and ideality.

Mr. Graham pays considerable attention in his review to the notes which Mr. Jarrell appended to the poems in *Losses*, and he seems to deprecate author's notes generally. Yet I think he would not disagree with the modern editors of the *Divine Comedy* who feel obliged to include in their notes explanations of the medieval concept of celestial and infernal geography. Such information is helpful and often entirely necessary for the understanding of poetry written about things of which readers may be more or less ignorant. Mr. Graham seems to say that it is improper for poets to write on subjects which readers do not know. But many people enjoy reading the *Divine Comedy* and the topical satires of Pope, Chaucer, or even Juvenal, about which they know next to nothing from personal experience. In our departmentalized world, where the experiences of life have become less and less common to society, objective understanding necessarily precedes imaginative understanding. How can a poet today write of war for a civilian audience unless he is willing to describe the apparatus of warfare? Is a poet to be denied the expression of a genuine experience merely because it occurs when he is seated before the view plate of a radar set?

It would appear, then, that at least one of the criteria adopted by Mr. Graham is bound to invalidate his criticism, and certainly this is so in his review of *Losses*. The book contains war poems quite as good as any written in this century. "A Camp in the Prussian Forest,""Eighth Air Force," "Burning the Letters"—these and others are without question successful poems. Yet all of them deal with the "incidental values" dispraised by Mr. Graham. Part of their power accrues, in fact, from their immanent recognition of the dehumanization of conflict and of the giant metal wills which crash together in our robot warfare. However much ultimate motives derive from men, it is the fictions and objects, not the human beings, which get out of hand and cause the immediate, disastrous damage; and since these forces lumber through society with elephantine strength and come together here and there in tropical bursts of tumult, they can be treated validly by Mr. Jarrell as real mythic movements against which our smaller events may be cast. These same external forces act behind the poems which are not about war: "Loss,""Lady Bates,""A Country Life."

I come around again to my starting point: the subjects of poetry cannot be limited. Poetry is good or bad in its methods, not in its materials. The poetry written within the *milieu* recommended by Mr. Graham is often exciting, and it is unseemly of him to denounce other media with partisan animosity. It seems to me that the varieties of poetry in western literature which can be read with plenary enjoyment by contemporary readers ought to convince Mr. Graham that he is puffing quite preposterously on a dead cigar. It is time for him and his dogmatic, parochial colleagues to give over their idle wrath and ask themselves why a poem is worth reading, instead of why the poet sees different things than they want him to see.

Source: Hayden Carruth, "Review of *Losses*" in *Poetry*, Vol. 72, No. 6, September 1948, pp. 307–11.

Yvor Winters

In the following excerpt from a negative review of "Losses," Winters asserts that Jarrell is "wholly without the gift of language."

The two marks by which we most readily recognize a poet, I presume, are first an ability to grasp and objectify a particular subject so that it is rendered comprehensible both as an individual thing and as a symbol of general experience, and second a command of the potentialities of language, phrase by phrase, including the rhythmic potentialities. Neither of these abilities will ever develop very far by itself: the subject cannot be defined satisfactorily in general unless it is defined well in detail, and the language, phrase by phrase, cannot be made to say much unless the poet knows what he is trying to say. Nevertheless, the gift of language can sometimes carry a poet a fair distance without much support from thought: the poetry so achieved will always be in a large measure unsatisfactory, but it may be memorable at least in part. Swinburne is an example, and so in somewhat different ways are Collins and Mallarmé. When Valéry writes "Masse de calme et visible réserve," when Stevens writes "Than mute bare splendors of the sun and moon," when Tate writes "So blind, in so severe a place," we know that we are in the presence of living language and that if we master the whole statement we may conceivably find ourselves in the presence of great poetry. But without the gift of language, the best subject in the world will fall absolutely dead from the hand.

What I wish to point out, and I do it regretfully, is this: that Randall Jarrell is wholly without the gift of language. With the best of intentions and some reasonably good topics, he displays, line by line, from beginning to end of his book, an utter incapacity to state anything memorably; and he frequently displays a distressing capacity to make serious topics appear ludicrous. There is not much one can do in a case like this except to illustrate the defect. This is from "Pilots, Man Your Planes":

The carrier meshed in its white whirling wake,
The gray ship sparkling from the blue-black sea,
The little carrier—erupts in flak,
One hammering, hysterical, tremendous fire.
Flickering through flashes, the stained rolling clouds,
The air jarred like water tilted in a bowl,
The red wriggling tracers—colonies
Whose instant life annexes the whole sky—
Hunt out the one end they have being for,
Are metamorphosed into one pure smear
Of flame, and die
In the maniacal convulsive spin
Of the raider with a wing snapped off, the plane
Trailing its flaming kite's-tail to the wave.

If I had received this description, written out as prose, from a student in freshman composition at Stanford, there is scarcely a phrase in it which I should not have underlined as either trite or clumsily obvious; furthermore, I think that there is scarcely a teacher of freshman composition at Stanford (I should hesitate to speak for the teachers in the great universities of the east) who would not mark it similarly. The passage is dead; furthermore, one will find nothing appreciably better in Jarrell. Occasionally, however, as he approaches the ludicrous, one may find something worse. This is the last stanza of "The Breath of Night":

Here too, though death is hushed, though joy
Obscures, like night, their wars,
The beings of this world are swept
By the Strife that moves the stars.

This is the first stanza of another poem:

When I was home last Christmas
I called on your family,
Your aunts and your mother, your sister;
They were kind as ever to me.

These two stanzas (and there are many more like them) are the sort of thing that one would expect to see published by a female genius in a country newspaper.

I realize, and in fairness should confess, that the world is against me in this judgment. Among the eminent critics who praise Jarrell in very high terms on the jacket are Joseph Warren Beach, Arthur Mizener, Dudley Fitts, Delmore Schwartz, Alan Swallow, John Crowe Ransom, and Theodore Spencer. The praises are similar in tenor; so I shall quote only one, and the shortest, which is Ransom's: "He has an angel's velocity and range with language."

If one were inclined to use the critical technique which Jarrell himself habitually employs, the technique of explosive epigram and Menckenesque ridicule, I believe that one could, between the poems and the comments on the jacket, write a fairly entertaining essay. But it seems to me more profitable to drop the subject. . . .

Source: Yvor Winters, "Three Poets," in *Hudson Review*, Vol. 1, No. 3, Autumn 1948, pp. 402–406.

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> This book is an introduction to the entire range of Jarrell's work. It includes a biographical chapter.

A Noiseless Patient Spider

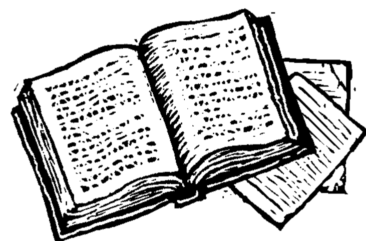
WALT WHITMAN

1881

"A Noiseless Patient Spider," by the nineteenth-century American poet Walt Whitman, was first published in 1868 in the *Broadway: A London Magazine*. Whitman then included the poem in slightly altered form in the fifth edition of his *Leaves of Grass* in 1871. The poem reached its final form in that volume's seventh edition, published in 1881. "A Noiseless Patient Spider" is a short, free-verse poem in two stanzas that uses Whitman's observation of the activity of a spider as an opportunity to examine the activity of the poet's soul. Like a spider spinning its web from within itself, the isolated soul tries to project from within itself something that will enable it to connect with the rest of the universe. The poem may also be interpreted as being about loneliness, about death and the hope for eternal life, or about artistic creativity. Whitman is one of the great American poets, and this poem is an accessible introduction to his style—free verse and long poetic lines—and many of his typical thematic concerns.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

One of the greatest American poets, Walt Whitman was born on May 31, 1819, in West Hills, a village near Huntington, on Long Island, New York. His father, Walter Whitman, was a farmer and carpenter with little education. When



Walt Whitman *(National Archives and Records Administration.)*

Whitman was three, the family moved to Brooklyn, where his father speculated unsuccessfully in real estate. Whitman attended school in Brooklyn for six years and then at the age of eleven worked as an office boy in a legal firm. He continued to educate himself by reading in the library, including authors such as Sir Walter Scott and James Fenimore Cooper, as well as by attending Shakespeare plays, visiting museums, and attending lectures. In 1831 he became an apprentice printer for the *Long Island Patriot*, a newspaper in Brooklyn, and he soon began to contribute his own articles. In 1833, he worked for the *Long Island Star*. By the mid-1830s Whitman was a journeyman printer and compositor for printing shops in New York City, but in 1836 he moved back to Long Island, and for five years he taught school in various towns. During this time he tried to start his own newspaper, the *Long Islander*, but the venture failed within a year.

Whitman decided he was unsuited to teaching, and in the 1840s he returned to journalism. During the 1840s in Brooklyn, Whitman moved in and out of editorial positions for an array of newspapers, including the *Evening Star*. He also began writing fiction, and about twenty newspapers and magazines published his stories between 1840 and 1845. He published *Franklin Evans; or, The Inebriate: A Tale of the Times*, a temperance novel, in 1842. In 1848 he traveled outside the New York area for the first time, making a three-month trip to New Orleans, Louisiana.

In 1855, Whitman published the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, containing twelve poems, as financed by himself. Not many copies were sold, and the book was ignored by reviewers. However, Whitman wrote and published some reviews himself and sent copies of the book to established literary figures, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, who replied with an enthusiastic endorsement of the poet's work. Whitman published a second edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1856, adding many new poems. He was to go on expanding his masterwork all his life, publishing the ninth edition in 1891, the year before his death. "A Noiseless Patient Spider" first appeared in the fifth edition, published in 1871.

In 1862, Whitman visited hospitals in Washington, D.C., comforting and caring for soldiers wounded in the Civil War. Out of this experience he wrote many poems, publishing them in 1865 in *Drum-Taps* (later incorporated into *Leaves of Grass*). One of Whitman's greatest poems, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" (1865–1866), was written as a tribute to President Abraham Lincoln, who was assassinated in 1865.

In 1873, at the age of fifty-four, Whitman suffered a stroke that left him partially paralyzed. He moved from Washington to Camden, New Jersey, where he lived the remainder of his life and managed to recover some of his physical strength. Whitman published a prose work, *Specimen Days*, in 1882. This book consists of various jottings that he had written as far back as the 1860s, including from his experiences at hospitals during the Civil War and from the times he spent around Timber Creek in Camden, convalescing after his stroke. Suffering from many accumulated illnesses, Whitman died a world-renowned poet on March 26, 1892, at his home in New Jersey.

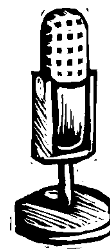
POEM TEXT

A noiseless patient spider,
I mark'd where on a little promontory it stood
isolated,
Mark'd how to explore the vacant vast
surrounding,

It launch'd forth filament, filament, filament,
out of itself,
Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them. 5

And you O my soul where you stand,
Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans
of space,
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seek-
ing the spheres to connect them,
Till the bridge you will need be form'd, till the
ductile anchor hold,
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere,
O my soul. 10

MEDIA ADAPTATIONS



- In *The Essential Walt Whitman*, a CD issued by HarperCollins Audio in 2008, Ed Begley recites selections from Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*.

POEM SUMMARY

Stanza 1

"A Noiseless Patient Spider" consists of two unrhymed stanzas of five lines each. The first stanza describes how the poet is observing a spider. In the first line, the poet notes how silent the spider is, and how it shows no hurry as it stands on the edge of a promontory—a small hill or cliff that overlooks lower-lying land or water. The spider is on its own; no other life is apparent around it. The poet then observes (line 3) how the spider begins to explore its environment by putting out its fine silk threads, manufactured within its own body, to form a web. In the last line of the first stanza, the poet continues to observe this process, which goes on seemingly without end as the spider goes about its self-appointed task.

Stanza 2

From the description of the activity of the spider in the first stanza, the poet now turns his attention to himself and directly addresses his own soul. When a poet addresses an abstract entity in this manner it is known as an *apostrophe*. Through this apostrophe, the poet compares his soul to the spider. Just as the spider stood in isolation, so does the poet's soul. It is surrounded by the huge, infinite universe but is also separate from it. Line 8 focuses on the activity of the poet's soul, which is continually, like the spider, engaged in some activity that will connect it to its vast environment, that will end its solitude and detachment. Like the spider also, it is patient, endlessly trying to make these connections until it meets with success. Success is presented as like building a bridge, or putting down an anchor, so that one thing is connected to another. The last line repeats the same idea with a spiderweb image, and the poem ends with the poet's second direct invocation of his own soul, as if he is wanting the soul to listen, to take note of what he is saying.

THEMES

Separateness and the Desire for Connection

The speaker in Whitman's poem is very conscious of his own isolation, perhaps his own loneliness. He therefore sees the tiny spider, alone on a promontory, as a suitable analogue for his own condition. The spider and the speaker are both small beings in a vast universe that stretches all around them. The poet feels this sense of separation from the whole very keenly, which is why he observes the activity of his own soul (which surely encompasses his mind and heart) as it endlessly and patiently, just like the spider, seeks some kind of connection with the wider whole. This connection could be as simple as the forming of a friendship with another human being, or it could be understood in a more abstract sense as a man desperately wanting to feel some kinship with the life of the earth and the universe as a whole. As line 8 indicates, he is prepared to try many different approaches to make this connection until he finally succeeds. Then he will no longer be alone in the vast, impersonal cosmos. The last line of the poem seems to suggest a fairly random, undirected process, whereby the soul is willing to try anything and everything in its attempt to connect, hoping that eventually, perhaps just by chance, like a

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY

- Read “The Chambered Nautilus,” a poem by Oliver Wendell Holmes. In an essay, compare and contrast this poem with “A Noiseless Patient Spider.” In what ways are these two poems similar, and how do they differ?
- Write a poem in which you describe some aspect of nature—a creature, a landscape, a specific object—in the first half, and then, in the second half of the poem, reflect on some aspect of human life that occurs to you in observing that natural phenomenon.
- Visit the Walt Whitman Archive online at http://www.whitmanarchive.org/multimedia/gallery.html and peruse the gallery of 128 pictures of Whitman. Select three or four from different stages of his life, including one of the 1854 photographs by an unknown photographer. In a paragraph or two, describe Whitman’s appearance for someone who has not seen these photos. What did Whitman look like? What sorts of expressions are on his face? What sorts of clothes did he wear? Then make a caption for each photograph by using a line taken from Whitman’s poetry that seems to suit the image.
- At the Walt Whitman Archive online (http://www.whitmanarchive.org/multimedia/index .html), listen to the thirty-six-second recording that is believed to be of Whitman reading the first four lines of his poem “America.” What is your impression of his voice and how he reads his own poem? Does he sound the way you would expect him to sound? Read “A Noiseless Patient Spider” aloud, experimenting with pace and emphasis. Perfect your reading and deliver it to the class. Then lead a class discussion on how hearing the poem alters its overall effect.

fisherman finally making a catch (although the poet does not use this image), his effort will be rewarded. However, there is no guarantee that he will succeed in his quest. The only certainty is that he will go on trying.

Desire for Eternal Life

In the edition of *Leaves of Grass* in which “A Noiseless Patient Spider” appears, it is placed in the section titled “Whispers of Heavenly Death.” Many of the poems in this section are about death, which suggests another level of interpretation for the poem under consideration: it may be read as a plea for eternal life. The soul longs to avoid extinction at death; it desires not to expire but to expand, to exist in a far fuller dimension of life than it currently occupies, as tied to a mortal human body. The poet anticipates that his soul, at the moment of death, will make a leap into the soul of the universe; it will be released, and its isolation will end.

Artistic Creativity

The poem might also be seen as a symbolic representation of the nature of artistic creativity. Like an artist or poet, the spider spins its web out of itself. The poet creates out of his own mind a poem that he or she hopes will touch another person in some way, communicating an idea, a vision, or a moral. “A Noiseless Patient Spider” spent many years germinating within Whitman’s mind until it eventually emerged and was embodied externally in printed form. The poem itself is an illustration of its own theme, the attempt to reach out, speak to, and connect with others. The poem seeks to make a bridge between the particular mind of one man and the larger mind made up of many people in society. Whitman has expressed this directly himself, in a comment (quoted in Gay Wilson Allen’s *A Reader’s Guide to Walt Whitman*) that might serve as a gloss on “A Noiseless Patient Spider”: “I…sent out *Leaves of Grass* to arouse and set flowing in men’s and women’s hearts, young and old, (my present and future readers,) endless streams of living, pulsating love and friendship, directly from them to myself, now and ever.”

STYLE

Repetition

Artful repetition of key words and phrases occurs throughout “A Noiseless Patient Spider.” This is a strategy Whitman employs in many poems (see for example “The Last Invocation,”

Spider in a web *(Image copyright Anyka, 2009. Used under license from Shutterstock.com)*

also found in the section "Whispers of Heavenly Death"), but it is particularly appropriate here, because the repetition echoes the repetitive nature of the spider's actions and the longings of the soul. The repetition is particularly prominent in line 4, in which the word used to describe the silk thread generated by the spider is repeated three times, the commas and the length of the word all helping to convey the patient, repetitive activity. Then in line 5, the repetition of the word *ever* at the beginning of each phrase conveys the seemingly eternal nature of this repeated activity.

There are also repetitions in the second stanza, particularly in the direct addresses to the poet's soul, with which the stanza begins and ends. The last two lines feature a phrase repeated three times, twice in line 9 and again at the beginning of line 10, to introduce three different metaphors that describe the way the soul, through its persistent and tireless activity, seeks to make connections with the larger universe. The repetition provides emphasis and builds the sense of an activity going on in much the same way endlessly.

Allegory and Allegorical Imagery

An allegory is a narrative in which there is a second level of meaning beyond the literal level. In what is known as an allegory of ideas, each of the characters in the narrative may represent some abstract idea. In this poem, Whitman is telling a little story about a spider on a promontory, but the real point, the deeper level of meaning presented, is that the spider represents the human soul as it sends out from itself, like the spider spinning its web, impulses or vibrations or other signals designed to connect with something larger than itself. Since the poem is short and is therefore not an extended allegory of ideas, it might be thought of more modestly as embodying allegorical imagery; the image of the spider is used not just for its own sake but because it represents something else, the human soul.

Free Verse

This poem is written in free verse, which, unlike traditional poetry, does not rely on rhyme and meter. Free verse is the most common form of poetry today, but in the mid-nineteenth century it was uncommon, and Whitman was one of its

earliest practitioners. As M. H. Abrams notes in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, Whitman "startled the literary world . . . by using lines of variable length which depended for their rhythmic effect on cadenced units and on the repetition, balance, and variation of words, phrases, clauses, and lines, instead of on recurrent metric feet." In "A Noiseless Patient Spider," Whitman makes no use of rhyme, apart from the near internal rhyme that occurs in line 5, ending the first stanza, and the near rhyme that links the last two lines of the poem. He makes occasional use of assonance (the repetition of the same vowel sounds), as in the near rhyme at the end of the last two lines of the poem and in the repetition of the long *i* sound at the end of line 1 and in the first word of line 2 (which creates a link at the level of sound between the spider and the poet). The main organizing principle of the poem, however, is the line. These are long poetic lines, and aside from the final periods at the end of each stanza, each line ends in a comma. The last three lines in the second stanza are longer than the others, which suggests at once the tireless repetition of the activity of the soul and its attempts to expand itself, to stretch itself out so that it can make the connections it desires.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Renaissance in American Literature

In the 1840s, the established poets in the United States were William Cullen Bryant, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Oliver Wendell Holmes, John Greenleaf Whittier, and James Russell Lowell. They were all from New England and were known as the Fireside Poets. Their poetry was popular and conventional, making use of traditional rhyme and meter and often being easy to memorize. However, the nation's literature was about to experience a renaissance. In *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: A History of American Literature*, Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury trace the beginning of this new period to the publication of Ralph Waldo Emerson's book *Nature* in 1836, which rejected the past and gave expression to a fresh, forward-looking vision for America. A year later, Emerson was invited by the Harvard College chapter of the educational organization Phi Delta Kappa to give the annual address at the Harvard commencement ceremonies. The result was the famous address "The American Scholar," in which Emerson stated, "Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close. The millions that around us are rushing into life, cannot always be fed on the sere remains of foreign harvests." Emerson expected that "poetry will revive and lead in a new age." It was an optimistic vision of literary independence for a nation that was still only several generations old.

Emerson was to become the leading voice in the American transcendentalist movement, and he has been described (by Mark Van Doren) as "the prophet of his generation." Ruland and Bradbury comment on Emerson's influence: "Throughout the 1840s, an increasingly confident temper was to grow, partly through Emerson's stimulation, in American writing." They point out that between 1850 and 1855 a number of remarkable new works were published in the genres of novel, essay, and poetry, including Emerson's *Representative Men* (1850), Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851), Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), and finally the first edition of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855). Whitman's great if yet-small collection of poems, which was quite unlike anything seen in American literature up to that point, was published in the same year as Longfellow's immensely popular epic poem *The Song of Hiawatha*, based on Native American legends.

Whitman, the new voice, continued to write alongside established poets, such as Longfellow, who retained their popularity while he at first struggled to find an audience. Indeed, Longfellow was the most celebrated of nineteenth-century American poets, a much-beloved household name. On Longfellow's death in 1882, however, Whitman, now an established poet himself, praised the deceased but identified him with America's derivative past rather than with the vital, truly American poetry that he believed he was himself writing. Longfellow "is not revolutionary, brings nothing offensive or new, does not deal hard blows," Whitman wrote in *Specimen Days*. He wrote in his final preface to *Leaves of Grass* in 1888 ("A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads") that he knew *Leaves of Grass* had a particular relationship with the times, as it "could not possibly have emerged or been fashion'd or completed, from any other era than the latter half of the Nineteenth Century, nor any

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **1860s:** The American Civil War takes place from 1861 to 1865 and results in the end of slavery. George Whitman, Walt Whitman's brother, is wounded at the battle of Fredericksburg in 1862. From 1862 to 1864, Whitman visits wounded soldiers in hospitals in Washington, D.C., jotting down in his Civil War notebook the first draft of "A Noiseless Patient Spider."

  Today: Different regions in the United States still have very different political philosophies and party allegiances, but ideological battles are fought at the ballot box rather than with guns. Political commentators sometimes divide the country into so-called red states (Republican) and blue states (Democratic), but these are in many cases fluid distinctions that may change from one election cycle to the next.

- **1860s:** In the years immediately following the Civil War there is a widespread sense that the country has entered a period of corruption. There are a number of financial scandals, and in 1868 President Andrew Johnson is impeached but acquitted before the Senate. Whitman begins writing the essays that will make up *Democratic Vistas* (1871), in which he expresses his disillusionment with the condition of the country.

  Today: Beginning in 2008, following years of financial deregulation, soaring military budgets, and corruption in the rebuilding of Iraq, the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s envelops the United States and much of the rest of the world. Long-established companies fail, savings and investments are lost, and unemployment rises.

- **1860s:** In an article about spiders that appears in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, the writer mentions how scientists have tried to make use of spider silk. A French scientist named Bon has managed to make a few gloves and stockings out of the silk, but they cost more than their weight in gold. Another contemporary scientist estimates that to create a pound of spider silk would take the work of 27,648 spiders. No human use has yet been found for spiders other than the fact that in some cultures, spiders are eaten and considered a delicacy.

  Today: Research is being conducted into the possibility of using venom from the Australian Blue Mountains funnel-web spider as an insecticide. Because the venom kills insects but does not affect vertebrates, it may be usable as an environmentally friendly pesticide. Research is also ongoing into the use of spider venom to correct cardiac arrhythmia. Researchers report that a peptide isolated from the venom of the spider *Grammostola spatulata* inhibits atrial fibrillation, a condition that occurs in people suffering from valve disease, hypertension, and chronic lung disease.

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other land than democratic America" after the triumph of the Union forces in the Civil War.

Traditional Nature Poetry

Whitman's "A Noiseless Patient Spider" belongs in part to a long tradition of nature poetry and prose, in which nature is seen as providing moral and spiritual lessons for humans. In English poetry, the tradition can be found in the work of the seventeenth-century metaphysical poets, especially Henry Vaughan, in poems such as "Cock-Crowing," "Waterfall," and the untitled poem that begins "I walkt the other day (to spend my hour)." In the first poem, for example, just as the cock watches and waits for the dawn, so should men watch for the hour when God will come.

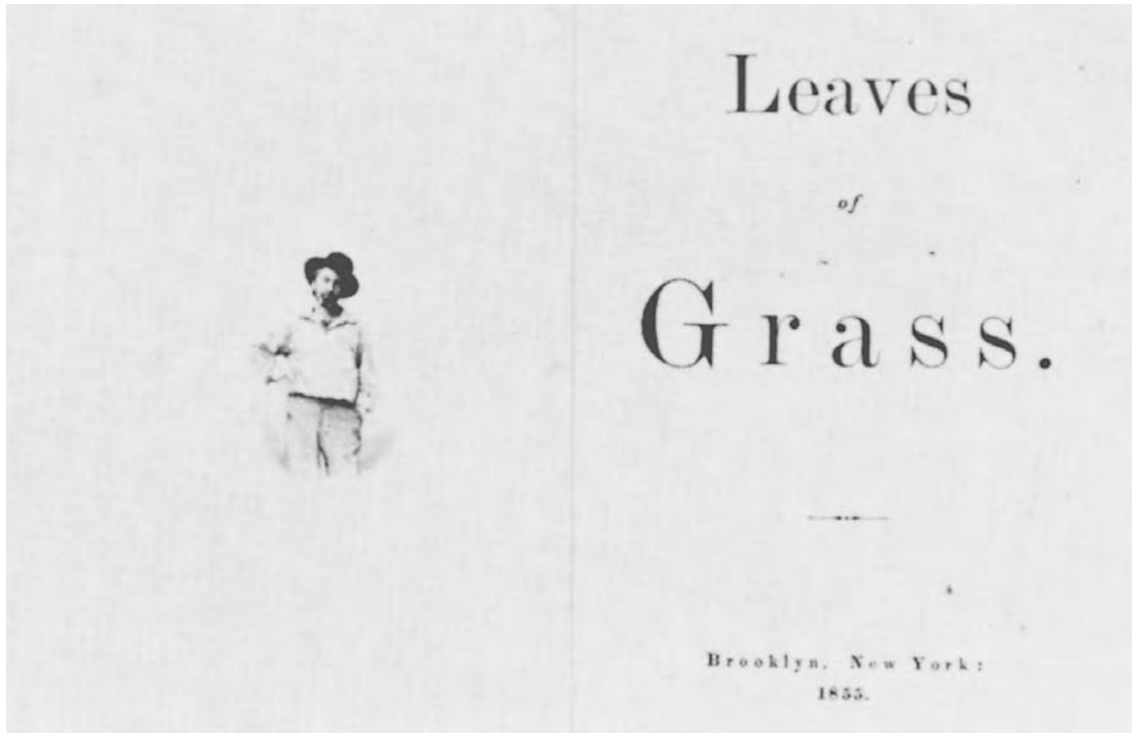
In the United States, the tradition goes back at least far as the New England minister Edward Taylor (1642–1729), whose poem "Upon a Wasp Chilled with Cold" is, as its title suggests, a meditation on the fortunes of a wasp in winter. Taylor observes and describes the wasp just as carefully as Whitman does his spider. The cold wasp attempts to warm herself in the winter sun, as if she has made a deliberate and rational decision that this would be a wise thing to do. The wasp is thankful for the opportunity and then flies back to her nest. In the second, concluding stanza, Taylor addresses God, asking that he, the poet, might emulate the wasp, from which he has learned the lesson to act out his own part in life in a similarly rational and thankful manner, that he might ascend to God, like the wasp to her nest. A similar attitude to objects of nature is found in the sermons of the revivalist preacher Jonathan Edwards of the eighteenth century. In his notebook entry under the title of "Images or Shadows of Divine Things," Edwards takes various natural phenomena—roses, hills, mountains, rivers, trees—and shows how each provides lessons about the spiritual life. Trees, for example, are an emblem of Christ (the trunk) and his church (the branches). The natural tradition appears again in the poetry of Whitman's contemporaries, notably Holmes, in "The Chambered Nautilus" (1858), and Bryant, in "To a Waterfowl" (1821).

Underlying nearly all such poetry and prose is the belief not only that nature offers opportunities to humans to reflect on spiritual truths but furthermore that all things in nature are designed and created by an intelligent, benevolent God and are therefore perfectly adapted for all tasks performed. This worldview formed one of the traditional arguments for the existence of God. In *Natural Theology* (1802), for example, the English clergyman William Paley tried to prove that the intricate design of nature demonstrated the existence of a cosmic designer. Paley included spiders in his demonstration of how the wisdom of God is manifested in his creation: The spider feeds on insects that can fly, but the spider cannot fly, which would appear to put it at a disadvantage. However, God in his wisdom has given the spider the ability to spin an adhesive web that will catch the fly. (Paley does not comment on why God has not also endowed the fly with the ability to avoid or escape from the spider's web.) Paley also notes that the spider has been given eight eyes, which enable it to see every view possible (which rather puts in mind Whitman's "soul" in "A Noiseless Patient Spider," which, as analogous to the spider, is able to cast around in all directions in the universe in order to make some connection).

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

"A Noiseless Patient Spider" has attracted a fair amount of attention from literary critics. Mark Van Doren, in his *Introduction to Poetry*, emphasizes the lonely stance of the poet: "Here is solitude with a vengeance, in vacancy so vast that any soul seen at its center, trying to comprehend and inhabit it, looks terribly minute." But Van Doren argues that the "rolling energy of the verse by its own might" seems to promise that the soul will make the connection it so much desires. E. Fred Carlisle, however, reaches the opposite conclusion in *The Uncertain Self: Whitman's Drama of Identity*: "The poem offers no assurance that spiders or souls, after enduring a period of isolation and loneliness, will inevitably succeed in bridging the vast spaces separating each from some other."

In his book *Walt Whitman*, James E. Miller, Jr., notes that the poem is included in the section "Whispers of Heavenly Death," "suggesting that it deals not only with human relationships, but also with the relationship to divinity in both life and death—the recurring theme of the cluster." Luke Mancuso, in his entry on the 1871–1872 edition of *Leaves of Grass* in *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia*, interprets the "soul" in Whitman's poem to refer to the soul of the American nation, suggesting that the spider "represents a compelling emblem for the Reconstruction poet, though apparently isolated and casting filaments into an unpromising future, who will continue to desire to connect the present social turmoil to the unwritten national future." M. Jimmie Killingsworth takes a different approach in *Walt Whitman and the Earth: A Study in Ecopoetics*, considering the poem in light of the figure of Spider Woman in the mythology of the Pueblo Indians, who is depicted "not only as the creator of the world but as the original storyteller who weaves and spins and makes living connections among the organic and inorganic elements of the world, animating the inanimate, enchanting the earth." Killingsworth sees the speaker in the



The first edition of Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass. *A slightly altered version of "A Noiseless Patient Spider" appeared in the fifth edition of this collection* (Public domain)

poem as like a solitary writer trying to connect with his audience. Like Spider Woman,

> the poet sends filaments from the root of his own being, seeking to bridge the empty spaces, creating thereby the path between reality and the soul. Unlike speaking, writing is noiseless and ideally patient, the writer isolated from rather than face to face with the ones addressed. The writer sends the filaments forth, seeking to capture the attention of readers and turn their gaze upward and outward.

CRITICISM

Bryan Aubrey

Aubrey holds a Ph.D. in English. In the following essay, he explains how Whitman developed "A Noiseless Patient Spider" from early draft to final version and also offers an interpretation of the poem based on Ralph Waldo Emerson's concept of the Over-Soul.

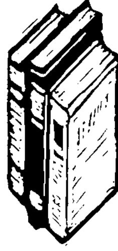
"A Noiseless Patient Spider" is a short poem with a long history. The idea for such a poem germinated in Whitman's mind for a number of years. The earliest trace of it appears in a notebook entry Whitman made sometime between 1855, when the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* appeared, and 1863. As quoted by Paul Diehl in *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review*, Whitman is reflecting in this note on how little is known in comparison to the vast amount that is unknown, particularly concerning spiritual matters:

> By curious indirections only can there be any statement of the spiritual world—and they will all be foolish—Have you noticed the [worm] on a twig reaching out in the immense vacancy time and again, trying point after point? Not more helplessly does the tongue or the pen of man, essay out in the spiritual spheres, to state them.

The image of the worm on a twig reaching out into the vastness of the environment is clearly related to the later image of the spider on the promontory. In this notebook entry the image is used to convey the difficulty of perceiving and writing about the spiritual laws of life. Knowledge is dwarfed by ignorance.

The image of the tiny creature in the vastness of space stayed with Whitman. He did not

WHAT DO I READ NEXT?



- Whitman's poem "Passage to India" was first published in 1871, around the time that Whitman completed his final version of "A Noiseless Patient Spider." It is notable for Whitman's confident tone as he contemplates the increasing connectedness of everything on earth and the ever-expanding reach of the soul. It therefore stands in contrast to the more tentative tone of "A Noiseless Patient Spider."
- A spider is also the subject of Emily Dickinson's poems "A Spider Sewed at Night" and "The Spider as an Artist," found in *Selected Poems and Letters of Emily Dickinson* (1959) and other collections of Dickinson's poems. The second poem is particularly notable because it presents the spider in an elevated light, as the creator, through its web, of a work of art.
- Like Whitman, the twentieth-century poet Rainer Maria Rilke, who wrote in German, often expresses the loneliness of the self and the desire to reach out and connect to something vaster than himself that is also, paradoxically, the essence of his own self. *Selected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke* (1981), translated and with a commentary by Robert Bly, is a good place to start reading this sometimes difficult but immensely rewarding poet.
- In *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, Henry David Thoreau, the great contemporary of Emerson and Whitman, meditates on the two years he spent living in a wooden hut at Walden Pond, near Concord, Massachusetts. He describes feeling the kind of deep communion with nature that Whitman also expresses feeling in many of his poems. *Walden* was first published in 1854 and is available in several modern editions.

return to the worm image (the brackets he placed around the word in his notebook suggest that he was not entirely happy with it), replacing it with

WHITMAN WAS A MAN WHO LONGED FOR CONNECTION WITH ABSOLUTELY EVERYTHING HE COULD CONCEIVE OF—BIG AND SMALL, ANIMATE AND APPARENTLY INANIMATE; HE SENSED THE VASTNESS OF THE HUMAN SELF…AND ITS CAPACITY TO FEEL A KINSHIP WITH EVERY ATOM IN THE ENTIRE COSMOS."

the image of the spider. The spider, and with it the first version of "A Noiseless Patient Spider," first appears in a notebook Whitman kept during the Civil War. Like the final version, the early version is in two stanzas. In the first, Whitman presents the soul as reaching out for love, like the spider spinning its web out of itself. The poem then becomes an expression of the poet's yearning for love, with the memory of a moment when he felt connected to a passing stranger. In the second stanza he makes a series of exclamations about the existence of a vast, even infinite love that is unable to find its fulfilment. The sense conveyed is that of the isolation of the poet, who offers love but does not find that it is reciprocated. Curiously, in 1856 in St. Petersburg, only a few years before Whitman wrote this early draft about the soul reaching out in love like a spider spinning its web, the great Leo Tolstoy, then a young man of twenty-six, wrote in his diary (as later quoted in *Leo Tolstoy, His Life and Work: Autobiographical Memoirs, Letters, and Biographical Material*, edited by Paul Birukoff) the following entry: "A powerful means to secure happiness in life is—without any rules—to spin in all directions, like a spider, a whole web of love and catch in it all that one can—old women, children, women, and constables." Tolstoy writes with the facetious confidence of the young, a tone which is absent from the earnestness of Whitman's poem, but the image he chooses is remarkably similar.

Whitman continued to work on this poem, tightening it and altering its focus. Whereas the notebook draft uses the word *love* six times, the next version, which is almost the final version of the poem, eliminates the word entirely. Instead,

the soul now seeks an unspecified connection with the vastness of its environment. This version of the poem was the first one published—in the *Broadway: A London Magazine* in October 1868. It is almost the same as the final version but contains far more caesuras, or breaks. The second line of the first stanza has four commas in it, in addition to the final semicolon; in the final version Whitman would remove all of these, to give the line an unbroken flow. He did the same with most of the other commas, especially in the first stanza, and the effect he achieves is well to his purpose, since it suggests the tirelessness of the spider's work and the corresponding tirelessness of the soul's constant exploration. There is no time to pause.

The theme of all versions of the poem, including the unpublished notebook version, is of the isolated individual reaching out for meaningful connection with something outside himself. Perhaps at its simplest, the poem is an expression of the poet's loneliness, as if the pain of being locked into a separate self is too much, and he must spontaneously reach out to overcome that separation through a vital connection with another person. The poem may well also be about approaching death, and about the poet's desire to be assured of the soul's continued existence, a plea for consciousness not to be extinguished when the physical body dies. In fact, when Whitman published the poem in the *Broadway*, it appeared not as a separate poem but as the third section in a single poem titled "Whispers of Heavenly Death." This strengthens the notion that the poem is indeed about death and the survival of the soul. Death was a frequent and favorite topic for Whitman; in an article collected in his *Selected Essays*, the English poet D. H. Lawrence, a fellow romantic who certainly understood Whitman, put it well when he wrote,

> Whitman is a very great poet, of the end of life. A very great post mortem poet, of the transitions of the soul as it loses its integrity. The poet of the soul's last shout and shriek, on the confines of death.

Lawrence may well be right, but there is more to this particular poem than the shriek of a soul at the approach of death. Whitman was a man who longed for connection with absolutely everything he could conceive of—big and small, animate and apparently inanimate; he sensed the vastness of the human self—he often used the terms *self*, *soul*, and *spirit* to mean much the same thing—and its capacity to feel a kinship with every atom in the entire cosmos. He said this explicitly, again and again, in his poetry, as even a cursory reading of "Song of Myself" will demonstrate. He also expressed similar ideas in prose, as in the following passage from a notebook entry, included in a volume of Whitman's unpublished prose edited by Edward F. Grier:

> The soul or spirit transmutes itself into all matter—into rocks, and can [illegible] live the life of a rock—into the sea, and can feel itself the sea—into the oak, or other tree—into an animal, and feel itself a horse, a fish, or a bird—into the earth—into the motions of the suns and stars—
>
> A man only is interested in any thing when he identifies himself with it. . . .

The evidence supplied by so much of Whitman's poetry suggests that the identification between self and other that he describes is accomplished not through some huge imaginative effort but simply by a recognition, as a fact of experience, that the essence of the individual self is the same as the consciousness that runs through everything that exists. Whitman's own awakening to this knowledge was what gave rise to *Leaves of Grass* in the first place and was no doubt stimulated by his reading of Ralph Waldo Emerson, that sturdy transcendentalist, whose work Whitman greatly admired. In Emerson's essay "The Over-Soul," published in 1841, Emerson wrote of

> that Unity, that Over-Soul, within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other. . . . Within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE.

Whitman likely read these words before he wrote *Leaves of Grass*, and they stayed with him, although he found his own distinctive way of expressing the central truth he recognized in Emerson's essay. But he also acknowledged that the individual does not always feel this sense of unity with all things; he does not always consciously live within the Over-Soul. The expanded self is quite capable of collapsing into smallness and separation; it can cut itself off from the whole and make itself wretched. If "Song of Myself," the poem with which Whitman announced his poetic presence to the world, is a celebration of the transcendental self—Emerson's Over-Soul, which knows no restrictions of time or space and flows into and out of everything that lives—then

"A Noiseless Patient Spider" is an expression of the pain that results when that connection is obscured, lost, or doubted, and of the ceaseless effort the soul puts forth in order to recover it. It is this that gives the poem its poignancy, its power, its fragile hope.

Source: Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on "A Noiseless Patient Spider," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2010.

FOR WHITMAN, THE VERY PROCESS OF QUESTIONING, SEARCHING, AND EXISTING IN UNCERTAINTY IS THE VITAL ELEMENT OF SPIRITUAL HEALTH, AS OPPOSED TO CERTAINTY OF THE SOUL'S DESTINATION."

Ernest Smith

In the following excerpt, Smith examines the spiritual elements in the cluster of poems titled "Whispers of Heavenly Death" and identifies "A Noiseless Patient Spider" as "one of Whitman's greatest achievements in the short form."

The spiritual dimension of American poet Walt Whitman's work has received no shortage of critical commentary. Whitman himself clearly saw his work as spiritual, going so far as to claim in his 1855 preface to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* that the work of the poet would soon come to supplant that of churches and priests. At the same time, he envisioned an expanded *Leaves* as a sort of "New Bible," and by 1872, in another preface to his lifelong project, concluded that his by now massive book of poems had "one deep purpose" above all others, "the religious purpose" (*Collect* 461). Pondering possible titles early on for what would become *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman once wrote, "What name? *Religious Canticles*" (Asselineau 221). Many contemporary readers seemed to agree with Whitman, hailing him as a prophet inaugurating a new religion. Whitman scholars David Kuebrich and David Reynolds both describe how some early readers of Whitman went so far as to found religious groups and, in at least one case in England, a church devoted to following his writings.

But the spiritual aspect of Whitman's project is complex, and it changes over time and in the nine editions of *Leaves of Grass*. The goal of this essay is not to define spirituality in Whitman specifically or to unravel components of his spiritual vision, but to argue instead that any acknowledgment of the power of Whitman's spiritual message needs to account for the way in which that message evolves through the expanded editions of *Leaves*, and how the poetry ultimately emphasizes the soul's embrace of the unknown over the known. For Whitman, the very process of questioning, searching, and existing in uncertainty is the vital element of spiritual health, as opposed to certainty of the soul's destination. In gauging his spiritual message, a reader should resist examining any period of Whitman's work, or any edition of *Leaves*, in isolation from other periods or poems. Tracing the progression of his voice and subjects, so useful to stylistic and historically oriented studies of Whitman, is less effective when considering a central theme such as spirituality, a theme that develops organically and deepens as the book grows in size and scope. Hence, the approach here would claim that the confident, sexually vibrant, ecstatic poet of body and soul in 1855 be read alongside the doubtful *Drum-Taps* poet who struggles to comprehend and console in 1865, and in turn beside the meditative, at times faltering mode of the death poems spanning 1871–1882. Central to this rationale is the fact that Whitman's treatment of spirituality rejects the temporal and that reading his treatment of the theme as one of [the] phases in a poet's development diminishes the complexity, fluidity, and evolving nature of the theme. The levels of exuberance, reflection, anguish, doubt, and certitude in individual poems modulate as *Leaves* grows, with new poems speaking to preexisting ones, often demanding that readers reexamine their response to an earlier poem or the poet's overall treatment of the theme. Such a methodology agrees with Kuebrich's assertion that "Whitman did arrive at a unified religious vision during the process of writing the first edition of the *Leaves*, and he continued to elaborate that vision throughout the rest of his life. The individual poems and sections of the *Leaves* are informed by this new religion and they cannot be considered in isolation."

A further complexity exists in the fact that the appeal of Whitman's personal spirituality cannot easily be separated from the spiritual

component of his political vision. At numerous crucial periods of his writing career, his poems strive to cultivate the individual for the sake of growing and strengthening the democracy, and oftentimes his visionary call is at the service of his political aims. Whitman scholars such as Allen Grossman and Betsy Erkkila have noted how "The 'inner light' of religious spiritualism and the 'outer light' of the revolutionary enlightenment—the doctrines of the soul and the doctrines of the republic—became the early and potentially self-contradictory poles of Whitman's thought" (Erkkila and Grossman 16). Others such as William Pannapacker see the promise of "spiritual democracy" as a result of Whitman's engagement with Emersonian transcendentalism, and account for the seeming inclusiveness of *Leaves* as the poet's success at "camouflag[ing] a political text in the trappings of a sacred scripture" (31). These contradictory poles of private and public, religious and political, result in the unstable, often uncertain nature of Whitman's spiritualism, and it is precisely this fluid instability of vision that lends the theme such resonance and hold in every edition of Leaves. In an uncollected manuscript fragment, Whitman terms spirituality "the unknown" (*Leaves*), and despite various pronouncements of certitude, especially in the 1855 and 1856 editions, as the poet more deeply engages his personal contradictions and his envisioned democracy's various failures and compromises, his poetry comes to challenge its readers to conceive of spirituality more broadly, but less conclusively.

The personal pull of Whitman's early poetry is undeniably powerful, a proclamation of the agency of the individual that at the same time invites us to "follow" the poet toward enlightenment, claiming deep insight into the nature of the soul. The largeness of Whitman's voice and personality within the poems has always evoked a disproportionate attention to his supposed confidence at the expense of a sense of self and purpose that becomes more questioning, more ambiguous, and more engaging as his project grows. While the major works of Whitman's final productive decade demonstrate what Erkkila terms "a more traditional religious faith," by the final arrangement of poems for the 1881 edition, the reader of *Leaves* will move through poems supremely confident of immortality and a mystical oneness of humanity, other poems where the spiritual core of the text seems more based in phenomenology, Civil War poems that recognize the ability of death's sheer physical carnage to at least momentarily eclipse spiritual hope, and the later meditative mode of poems such as those in the "Whispers of Heavenly Death" cluster. Ultimately, Whitman's collective claims across these editions are less for himself as spiritual guide and more for the power of poetry, language, intellectual search, and imaginative empathy as fluid, dynamic, mysterious, and ultimately unknowable components that anchor the spiritual life.

Among the most compelling spiritual efforts in Whitman's poetry are his paradoxical attempts to obliterate temporal, spatial, and personal confines by focusing intently on the present moment and to forge a communal oneness among all people across time by addressing the reader as a specific "you," a private auditor. Both of these endeavors are at the heart of the major new poem of the 1856 edition of *Leaves*, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" (originally titled "Sun-Down Poem"). Whitman begins the poem with one of his evocations of the eternally possible present, an apostrophe to the immediate: "Flood-tide below me! I see you face to face! / Clouds of the west—sun there half an hour high—I see you also face to face." This exclamatory opening instantly creates a sense of intimacy between speaker and surroundings while also, in its gaze toward the west and awareness of the sun's movement, hinting at the flux of time that will play such a key role later in the poem. In his recent ecocritical study of Whitman, M. Jimmie Killingsworth discusses the poem in the context of four "shorelines" associated with either mourning or renewal, and makes the useful observation of how often in Whitman "tides become associated with the availability of certain spiritual forces and states of mind. The change of the tides provides a needed analog to the ebb and flow of the human soul and its susceptibility to different influences" (130). It is just this "susceptibility" and vulnerability of the soul that is so unique to Whitman's spiritualism and the ease with which uncertainty is accepted. In some poems, like 1860's "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life," the tide might suggest the beleaguered, empty soul, but in the opening of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" it carries a sense of abundance, a rush of fullness. The ecstatic celebration of the quotidian then turns to include the "hundreds and hundreds" of fellow commuters, the poet's keen interest in them described as "curious," an important word

that will return later in the poem. Here directed toward the immediate present, the word establishes preference for the process of knowing over possessing the known that is so crucial to the poet's spiritual concept. This curiosity, intense in the moment, is also the catalyst for connecting with the future, leading to the poem's first move to link humanity across generational and temporal boundaries. Whitman boldly declares that those who will also ride the ferry in "years hence" are equally in his meditations, using the familiar "you" to address both his fellow commuters and those who will cross the river far in the future. . . .

The poems comprising the eighteen-poem cluster Whitman grouped under the title "Whispers of Heavenly Death" were composed primarily in the late 1860s following the Civil War. In many of the poems one gets the sense of the poet regaining his balance after the experience of the war, expressing an attitude toward death more speculative and hopeful, more philosophical but less "ecstatic" than the boy dancing on the shore in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking." The sequence begins with "Darest Thou Now O Soul," where Whitman asks his soul to accompany him to a "blank" and "unknown region," an "inaccessible land." Part of what seems an initial hesitancy in the poem stems from the poet's assertion that this unknown realm is sure to be devoid of human "voice," "touch," and "flesh." When a reader pauses to consider the significance of these human elements on both Whitman the man and his poetic endeavor, as both are represented in *Leaves of Grass*, any surprise at a slightly tentative tone diminishes, for delight in fleshly contact and what "Song of Myself" terms the "hum" of the "valved voice" is one of the major strands binding this poet's project. Even in his late work, for Whitman to move toward any dimension lacking the press of fellow humanity, to ask his soul to leave its steadfast companion, the body, is to explore truly foreign terrain. But as with his earlier epics of psychological struggle and breakthrough, "The Sleepers" and "Cradle," Whitman offers a sudden, almost spontaneous breakthrough into a dimension of freedom and possibility, not a specific locality or even destination, only a state without "ties" or "bounds" where "we burst forth, we float." Again, as in the earlier "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," the liquid element represents both freedom and acceptance of the unknown, an ability to feel part of the vastness of time and space without fear of being absorbed or obliterated. Here, and in the poem that follows, the title poem of the cluster, Whitman begins to lay the groundwork for movement into the realm of death by celebrating the possibilities of the unknown.

In the third poem, "Chanting the Stature Deific," Whitman addresses what William James termed "the varieties of religious experience" through an acknowledgment of the vastness of concepts of God. Whitman had made several earlier attempts at this poem, suggesting both the difficulty of the subject and the poet's determination to fully engage it. It first appeared in *Sequel to Drum-Taps* (1865–66), and Gregory Eiselein has suggested that in initially placing the poem in this collection Whitman sought "a post-war message of reconciliation and religious consolation." The poem begins by asserting that concepts of the divine are both iconic and multiple, old and new, evolving: "Chanting the square deific, out of the One advancing, out of the sides, / Out of the old and new, out of the square entirely divine, / Solid, four-sided, (all the sides needed,)." In four relatively concise sections, Whitman evokes versions of four types of divinity: the traditional, all-judging God; the compassionate, healing God; the defiant, exiled angel; and the universal, timeless spirit of God. Each God pronounces his identity and names himself in his own voice, insisting on the various manifestations of his type through the history of religious beliefs. Hence, the God who speaks in section 1 identifies himself as "Jehovah," "Old Brahm," "Saturnius," "the Father," and "brown old Kronos," old and modern at the same time, "executing righteous judgments." This elder, judging God is both beyond time and of time itself, unforgiving. In section 2 Whitman turns to "the cheer-bringing God," "Lord Christ," "Hermes," and, in his evocation of the healing and compassionate God of love, suggests images of himself running throughout *Leaves of Grass*, most notably in the "Drum-Taps" sequence. While there are certainly aspects of Whitman the nonconformist in the revolter-Satan of section 3, readers will most likely feel that the God of section 2 is the deity most identified with by the "Walt Whitman" presented by the poet in *Leaves of Grass*. The most rhythmic of the four sections, the lines of section 2 are consistently long, swelling in movement, a catalogue of generosity following the actions of a God who, like

the persona "Walt Whitman," absorbs and celebrates the world.

But in section 3 Whitman strikes his most original concept of faith by including Satan as a necessary fourth "side" in his refashioning of a conventional trinity. Whitman's language in this part of the poem presents an aspect of the spiritual life that is proud and resolute, refusing to be "rule[d]," a "comrade of criminals, brother of slaves," a role again recalling the empathetic position of the poet in so many earlier poems in *Leaves of Grass*. Within the context of Whitman's evolving spiritual vision, the notion of an "aloof," "defiant" deity is less revolutionary than it seems. This is the nonconforming, ever-questing spirit that has always been a necessary part of the poet's conception of faith, American democracy, and American character. Whitman's Satan is the vital, energetic, crafty, and creative God inherent in the most complete human soul, as well as the prideful and nonconforming spirit that he envisions as the new American spirit, the dynamic world citizens he posits in "Democratic Vistas" and in poems that celebrate the independent, free-thinking America.

Whitman brings the different sides of human concepts of the divine together in section 4 with "Santa Spirita" or the Holy Spirit, merging the previous Gods into a harmonious entity "beyond" both heaven and hell, "lighter than light." Whitman deviates from the traditional masculine phrasing of the Italian (Spirito Santo) and Latin (Spiritus Sanctus) in his naming of the unifying spirit, thereby emphasizing the universality of his vision of deity. In closing the poem, Whitman again returns the focus to the connection between the divine and his own poetic endeavor, having Santa Spirita declare that it is her breath that gives life to "these songs." All along, language and poetry have been closely tied to the spiritual quest, and even in an attempt at an all-encompassing summation of spiritual conceptions, the poet is unable to disassociate divinity from his own enterprise.

The "Whispers" cluster reaches its culmination in one of Whitman's greatest achievements in the short form, "A Noiseless Patient Spider." Ten lines in length, the poem compares the quest of the soul to that of an "isolated" spider seeking to "explore the vacant vast surroundings." In the first five lines Whitman offers an observation of the spider's efforts as it launches "filament" after filament into the void, and then in the second half of the poem he turns to directly address his soul, similarly "detached" yet seeking connection. Again, as with most of the poems in the "Whispers" sequence, it is striking that the poet who found so many connections—with other human beings, physical phenomena, and himself—in the poems of tire 1850s and early 1860s should at this late stage present himself as solitary and still optimistically seeking connections amidst an unknown and mysterious universe. But the willingness to exist "in measureless oceans of space, / Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing" remains as much a part of Whitman's essential being as in the early poems of more intense, ecstatic psychological exploration. What has changed is the poet's stance, his attitude toward his endeavor. More patient, more musing, he is in his late phase less urgent and more persistent in his questing and questioning than in his longer poems of the 1850s such as "The Sleepers" and "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking." . . .

Source: Ernest Smith, "'Restless Explorations': Whitman's Evolving Spiritual Vision in *Leaves of Grass*," in *Papers on Language and Literature*, Vol. 43, No. 3, Summer 2007, pp. 227–63.

Mary Oliver

In the following excerpt, poet Oliver discusses the impact of Whitman and the subjects of his poetry, including the spider, on her life.

MY FRIEND WALT WHITMAN

In Ohio, in the 1950's, I had a few friends who kept me sane, alert, and loyal to my own best and wildest inclinations. My town was no more or less congenial to the fact of poetry than any other small town in America—I make no special case of a solitary childhood. Estrangement from the mainstream of that time and place was an unavoidable precondition, no doubt, to the life I was choosing from among all the lives possible to me.

I never met any of my friends, of course, in a usual way—they were strangers, and lived only in their writings. But if they were only shadow-companions, still they were constant, and powerful, and amazing. That is, they said amazing things, and for me it changed the world.

This hour I tell things in confidence,
I might not tell everybody but I will tell you.

Whitman was the brother I did not have. I did have an uncle, whom I loved, but he killed himself one rainy fall day; Whitman remained,

perhaps more avuncular for the loss of the other. He was the gypsy boy my sister and I went once to the woods with, with our pony, to gather strawberries all one long hot summer afternoon. The boy from Romania moved away; Whitman shone on in the twilight of my room, which was growing busy with books, and notebooks, and muddy boots, and my grandfather's old Underwood typewriter.

My voice goes after what my eyes cannot reach,
With the twirl of my tongue I encompass worlds and
volumes of worlds.

When the high school I went to experienced a crisis of delinquent student behavior, my response was to start out for school but to turn instead into the woods, with a knapsack of books. Always Whitman's was among them. My truancy was extreme, and my parents were warned that I might not graduate. For whatever reason, they let me continue to go my own way.

It was an odd blessing, but a blessing all the same. Down by the creek, or in the wide pastures I could still find on the other side of the deep woods, I spent my time with my friend: my brother, my uncle, my best teacher.

The moth and the fisheggs are in their place,
The suns I see and the suns I cannot see are in their place,
The palpable is in its place and the impalpable is in its place.

Thus Whitman's poems stood before me like a model of delivery when I began to write poems myself—I mean the oceanic power and rumble that travels through a Whitman poem—the incantatory syntax, the boundless affirmation. In those years, truth was elusive—or my own faith that I could recognize it. Whitman kept me from the swamps of a worse uncertainty, for I lived many hours within the lit circle of his certainty, and his bravado. Unscrew the locks from the doors! Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs! And there was the passion which he invested in the poems. The metaphysical curiosity! The oracular tenderness with which he viewed the world—its roughness, its differences, the stars, the spider—nothing was outside the range of his interest. I reveled in the specificity of his words. And his faith—that kept my spirit buoyant surely, though his faith was without a name that I ever heard of. Do you guess I have some intricate purpose? Well I have . . . for the April rain has, and the mica on the side of a rock has.

But first and foremost, I learned from Whitman that the poem is a temple—or a green field—a place to enter, and feel. Only in a secondary way is it an intellectual thing—an artifact, a moment of seemly and robust wordiness, wonderful as that part of it is. I learned that the poem was made not just to exist, but to speak—to be company. It was everything that was needed, when everything was needed. I remember the delicate, rumpled way into the woods, and the weight of the books in my pack. I remember the rambling, and the loafing—the wonderful days when, with Whitman, I tucked my trowser-ends in my boots and went and had a good time. . . .

Source: Mary Oliver, "A Celebration of Whitman," in *Massachusetts Review*, Vol. 33, No. 1, Spring 1992, p. 65.

THOUGH THE FORMAL CONNECTIONS WITH QUAKERISM WERE FEW, WHITMAN PICKED OUT THE QUAKER INFLUENCE, SLENDER AS IT MAY HAVE BEEN, TO EXPLAIN THE HUMANITARIAN AND INTUITIVE CHARACTERISTICS IN HIS OWN NATURE."

Lawrence Templin

In the following excerpt, Templin discusses the influence of Quaker leader Elias Hicks on Whitman and points to the source of the central image in "A Noiseless Patient Spider."

On November 20, 1855, *Leaves of Grass* was the main topic of conversation at a meeting of Quaker abolitionists in Philadelphia. One of the members of the group had purchased a copy for his seventeen-year-old daughter and was himself delighted by it and its Emersonian style. It was not by accident that there were at least a few Quakers able to appreciate Whitman's poetic message, for Whitman was at his core a religious man, and the core of his religion was his belief in what the Quakers call the Inner Light.

In order to place Whitman into relationship with Quakerism it is perhaps valuable to begin with the simple fact that early Quakerism was simultaneously an extension of fundamental

Puritan ideas and a revolt against the Puritan tendency to solidify ideas into authoritarian theology. Thus, "whereas the Puritans had 'purified' the church of prayer-books, vestments and music, the Quakers wished to go one step further and purify the church of clergy." They wished to maintain an openness to the source of religious illumination. They firmly believed that God did speak directly *to individuals* and that a community of believers was possible without the intervention of ecclesiastic authority. Just as the Quakers went beyond Puritanism, however, Whitman went beyond Quakerism, recognizing both his differences and his likenesses to the followers of the Inner Light.

The purpose of this article is to summarize the facts of Whitman's relationship to Quakerism and to define at least three basic kinds of indebtedness: for what Whitman calls his Quaker intuition; for the inspirational effect on Whitman of the Quaker leader, Elias Hicks; and for the implications of Quakerism to Whitman. The relationship has not, I think, been fully summarized and explored for the light it sheds on Whitman's work as a creative artist. . . .

There are relatively few biographical facts concerning Whitman's Quaker background and its possible influence on him. This is revealed in the fact that some critical biographers, John Burroughs and Gay Wilson Allen, for example, have almost nothing to say about the Quaker influence. Others—notably Henry Seidel Canby, Emory Holloway, Clifton Furness, and F. O. Matthiessen—do rather generally credit Whitman's mysticism, religious outlook, and humanitarian principles to Quakerism.

It was from his mother that Whitman was supposed to have acquired his Quaker tendencies. Louisa Van Velsor was part Quaker in the sense that her mother, Naomi Williams, came from Quaker stock and maintained Quaker ways and sympathies. It is probable that Whitman's maternal grandmother, or her parents, were barred from Quaker membership for marrying outside the society. Thus, as far as formal membership is concerned, Whitman was two or three generations removed from Quaker circles, and certainly the Whitmans were not Quaker in any formal or active sense. Yet in later life Whitman seems to have been increasingly absorbed with the desire to pick up threads of influence, and Quakerism was important to him as one of these threads.

Another connection with Quakerism mentioned by Whitman was the association of his grandfather with the Quaker leader, Elias Hicks. Hicks was well known on Long Island. In his youth he had been a sociable fellow who liked to dance, go hunting and fishing, and join in the general merrymaking of young people his age. He happened at this time to be in a group with which Whitman's grandfather was also associated. Later, when Hicks became well known on Long Island as a relatively prosperous farmer, a Quaker leader, and a preacher attracting large crowds, Whitman's parents attended some of his public meetings. Whitman made much in later years of the influence of Hicks on his family and himself. He said once, "It was through my mother that I learned of Hicks: when she found I liked to hear of him she seemed to like to speak."

Though the formal connections with Quakerism were few, Whitman picked out the Quaker influence, slender as it may have been, to explain the humanitarian and intuitive characteristics in his own nature. His "Quaker" mother is thus made a source of style and inspiration: "*Leaves of Grass* is the flower of her temperament active in me." His father's antislavery attitude is explained as a result of his being a follower of Hicks; and all Quakers, Whitman said, were opposed to slavery. It is interesting to note, however, that even as an old man, mellowed by this reminiscing, Whitman was forced to admit the discontinuity and the vagueness of the Quaker influence in his own general makeup. He knew he was not, could not be, in fact, a real Quaker, as he told Horace Traubel.

> [Whitman:] "When I was a young fellow up on the Long Island shore I seriously debated whether I was not by spiritual bent a Quaker?—whether if not one I should not become one? But the question went its way again: I put it aside as impossible: I was never made to live inside a fence." [Traubel:] "If you had turned a Quaker would *Leaves of Grass* ever have been written?" [Whitman:] "It is more than likely not—quite probably not—almost certainly not."

If Whitman had become a Quaker at the age of twenty, by Quaker discipline he would have had to give up going to stage plays and concerts, to avoid reading "pernicious" books, to give up any inclination toward accepting a governmental office, and generally to live simply and not in "conformity to the vain and changeable fashions of the world." Instead of adopting any such

quietistic creed, Whitman went to work as a printer, joined debating societies, became an editor, and enjoyed plays, concerts, and operas, preparing himself for the affirmations of the activities of the world in the early *Leaves of Grass*. In an editorial for the *Daily Crescent* in 1848 the young Whitman explicitly rejected the Quaker refusal to bear arms in these words: "Quakerism can never become the creed of the race; and you might as well expect all men to adopt the straight-cut coat and plain phraseology of the followers of Fox, as to hope that the principles of peace will ever become the law of men's opinions and actions."

Even in later life, when Whitman could speak fondly of his "Quaker" mother, and of his own Quaker intuition, he was well aware of the narrowness of the sect in custom and discipline and could speak with some feeling of their "damnable unreason" for being "fiercely opposed to pictures, music in their houses." He wanted to flaunt the picture of Elias Hicks in the faces of the Quakers who would buy *November Boughs*. In the same year, 1888, Whitman received a short friendly note from the Quaker poet Whittier. Traubel asked Whitman whether Whittier had finally committed himself to *Leaves of Grass*. "Good heavens no!" said Whitman. "He has too much respect himself, for his puritan conscience, to take such a leap."

Walt Whitman was well aware of the real gap that separated him from the Puritan conscience of the Quaker. There was too much of the love of the world in Whitman to set up the typical Quaker hedge against outside influences. Yet Whitman could feel the effect of the root similarities between his own mystical experiences and the experiences of the Quaker in silent meeting "centering down" and waiting for illumination. He correctly labeled this root similarity his "Quaker intuition." Through it he shared the Quaker concern for unity and humanitarian equality that lies beneath the surface of apparent religious formlessness and unworldliness in Quakerism. One could perhaps better phrase this as the paradox of the individual and the *en masse*, or of the community achieved through individual intuition of the Inner Light, that works itself out in many ways in both Whitman and Quakerism. It was largely through Elias Hicks that Whitman seems to have got the sense of this paradoxical conception. . . .

Various parallels have been noted by scholars between Elias Hicks and Walt Whitman: their early life on Long Island, love of nature, tendency toward mystical experiences, belief in the validity of individualistic religion, identification with the democratic spirit of America, and even a certain kind of cadence in their use of language. It is important also to notice the differences. Hicks was a recorded minister who lived strictly under Quaker discipline. He led a quiet and industrious family life as a farmer on Long Island, yet he attracted large audiences during the period of his public ministry toward the end of his life. It is significant that Elias Hicks's message grew out of a long life of discipline and experience. He spoke only when he felt an "impressive concern," and he spoke from depth of experience. In contrast, it is perhaps the weakness of Whitman as a man—accountable for his failure as an orator, a political leader, a religious leader, or even as an editor—that he lacked and had rejected precisely the kind of disciplined life that gave Hicks his great strength and power with words. Yet somehow Whitman managed to translate this feeling for the power of inspired words into poetry, secularized and interfused with all that the world had to offer and that Whitman had voraciously absorbed. Whitman was, in a sense, the exact opposite of Hicks. Hicks shut out worldly experience and disciplined himself to sensitivity to the Inner Life; Whitman absorbed experience like a sponge and found his discipline in bardic utterance.

The important influence of Hicks on Whitman was through his power of words, through oratory. Whitman frequently ranked Hicks along with great opera singers, actors, and orators like the famous Methodist preacher Father Taylor of Boston, who was the model for Father Mapple in *Moby-Dick*. These men had vocal power, something that "touches the soul, the abysm." Whitman described Father Taylor and Hicks as essentially perfect orators. "Both had the same inner, apparently inexhaustible, fund of latent volcanic passion—the same tenderness, blended with a curious remorseless firmness, as of some surgeon operating on a belov'd patient." The secret of this oratorical power, if Whitman could not command it himself, was at least translatable into an organic theory of poetry. Thus, "from the opening of the Oration [or the Poem] & on through, the great thing is to be inspired as one divinely possessed, blind to all subordinate affairs and given up entirely to the surgings and utterances of the mighty tempestuous demon." It is important to realize, however, that for Hicks the words and even the inspiration were only a

means to an end. In the sermon that Whitman had remembered for such a long time, Hicks had said that the end of man is "to glorify God, and seek and enjoy him forever." For Whitman the words and the inspiration in themselves became the end and justification of his life. He became, in short, a poet.

Whitman had wanted to write something about Hicks for a long while—thirty to fifty years, he said in 1888. This puts the original idea squarely into the period of Whitman's beginning as a serious poet. During this same period Whitman was absorbed with the idea of being an orator, and he jotted down ideas for lectures or "lessons." One of the first notes under the heading of "Notes for Lectures on Religion" in *Walt Whitman's Workshop* reads, "Change the name from Elias Hicks / make no allusion to him at all." It is implied in this that the original conception had been a lecture on Elias Hicks. Whatever may have entered into Whitman's mind to change it, his ideas on religion were originally, and no doubt fundamentally, associated with his memory of Elias Hicks. The notes show the fundamental relationship between the two men and the way in which Whitman secularized and went beyond the insight of the Inner Light.

The "spinal cord" of the lecture was to be the idea that investigation of religion should be released from all authority, it should be scientific, and each age should study religion for itself. Underneath all religious form (churches, scriptures, ritual, authority) is the "deep, silent, mysterious"—this is the real essence of religion. Whitman then introduces, probably for the first time, the image that later developed into "a noiseless Patient Spider": the little worm on an isolated promontory sending its filaments out into space, like the soul trying to make connections in the immensity of the spiritual and unknown. There is much of the negative corollary of the Inner Light in the notes. Beware of priests, churches, ritual, prayer, says Whitman—all this stands in the way of real religion. "There is nothing in the universe more divine than man." Whitman makes no claim to settle religious questions, he can only stimulate thought by asserting that all religions serve their purpose in their time, all are equally valid.

> Taking them all for what they are worth and
> not a cent more,
> Admitting they were alive and did the work
> of their days. . . .
> ("Song of Myself," sec. 41)

The basic concepts of Whitman's ideas on religion can be found in Elias Hicks. He was well aware of this in later life when he wrote on Hicks and George Fox. The difference lay in the fact that Whitman's ideas were uprooted from religious form, even from Quaker form, which, with its discipline of silence and purity, is in a way the most binding of all forms of discipline. Through some miracle of sublimation he managed to translate the inspiration of the Inner Light into poetry. It may well have been a kind of spiritual defeat for the man, but it was an immeasurable gain for the poet and for literary culture.

It is interesting now to look back from the modern point of view at the doctrine of the Inner Light. Brand Blanshard has noted four ways in which elements of truth in the Quaker doctrine have persisted into modern language and ways of thinking:

> The doctrine of the Inner Light was . . . an insistence, and a justified insistence, on first-handedness and genuineness in religious and moral experience. . . .
>
> As against the whole tribe of relativists and subjectivists, the early Friends were thoroughly right in maintaining that we had knowledge, as certain as knowledge can be, about good and evil, right and wrong and duty.
>
> They were correct, once more, in holding that the Inner Light does not apply merely to the moral and narrowly religious spheres. . . . The Light gives guidance on matters that we should now call metaphysical. . . .
>
> They were sowing seed whose natural flowering was in a religious cosmopolitanism and a theological charity which were far wider than they knew.

The chief difficulty from the modern point of view, according to Brand Blandshard, lies in the Quaker dualism: the tendency to keep up the partition between the natural and the supernatural, the human and the divine. It is precisely from the modern point of view that we can understand both the likenesses and the differences between Elias Hicks and Walt Whitman. Whitman was modern in his tendency to break down the partition and to escape from the obscurantism that resulted from the otherworldly emphasis. Yet he maintained from his childhood a sense of the divinity and genuineness of individual experience which could lead to a democratic unity and brotherhood. Whitman's poetry is to a large extent an attempt to synthesize the natural and the supernatural, and it is not too

much to say that he received his impetus in this direction both negatively and positively, from Quakerism and Elias Hicks.

Source: Lawrence Templin, "The Quaker Influence on Walt Whitman," in *American Literature*, Vol. 42, No. 2, May 1970, pp. 165–80.

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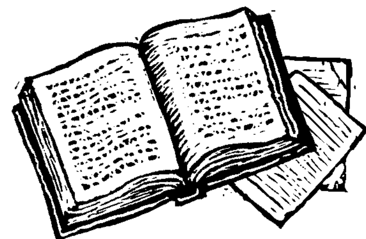
Outside History

EAVAN BOLAND

1990

In "Outside History," the Irish poet Eavan Boland touches on themes characteristic of much of her work. In this poem, which first appeared in a volume of the same title, and in the longer poetic sequence of which it is a part, Boland discusses her sense of estrangement from Irish history. Throughout the poem's seven stanzas, Boland's feelings of isolation from both cultural and literary history are detailed. The tone is full of sorrow and remorse, and the theme of death is prevalent. At the same time, the poem, like many of Boland's works, evokes a sense of common humanity, or at least a desire for that ideal. Boland, a feminist, has discussed the long-held view in the world of Irish literature that the terms "woman" and "poet" are mutually exclusive, and her work consequently emphasizes the plight of outsiders and repeatedly conveys notions of exclusion and isolation. Her work is therefore often critically examined through this feminist lens, and "Outside History" lends itself to such an interpretation. The poem was originally published in 1990 in *Outside History: Selected Poems, 1980–1990* and was more recently made available in *New Collected Poems*, published in 2005.



AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Eavan Aisling Boland was born on September 24, 1944, in Dublin, Ireland. The youngest of the five children of Frederick Boland, a diplomat,

and Frances Kelly Boland, a painter, Boland was educated in England and the United States. Her father served as the Irish ambassador in London, to the Court of St. James, from 1950 through 1956 and then as an Irish ambassador to the United Nations, from 1956 through 1959. Boland attended Catholic schools in London and in New York City and endured anti-Irish attitudes in London as well as intense isolation in New York. These senses of exclusion and exile experienced during her youth would later inform her poetry. From 1959 through 1962, Boland attended a boarding school in Killiney, County Dublin. After graduating from Holy Child Convent, Boland worked as a hotel housekeeper in Dublin. She published a poetry chapbook (a small pamphlet of a limited number of copies), titled *23 Poems*, in 1962. She entered Trinity College in Dublin that same year and graduated with an English degree in 1966. After working as a junior lecturer at Trinity from 1967 to 1968, Boland found that an academic career was incompatible with her goals as a writer, despite her love of teaching. Her first full-length book of poetry to be published was *New Territory* in 1967. She married the novelist Kevin Casey in 1969, and they have two daughters. Her other volumes of poetry include *In Her Own Image* (1980), *Outside History: Selected Poems, 1980–1990* (in which "Outside History" was originally published, in 1990), and *Against Love Poetry* (2001). She has also written on the subject of the place of women in contemporary poetry in *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time* (1995). Boland has intermittently lectured at the School of Irish Studies in Dublin and published reviews and articles on literary topics for the *Irish Times*. Having published a number of poetry collections and coedited two Norton anthologies, Boland has also served as an English professor and as the director of the Creative Writing Program at Stanford University.

POEM SUMMARY

Stanzas 1 and 2

Boland's "Outside History" is divided into seven stanzas of three lines each. In the first two stanzas, Boland begins a process through which the stars in the January sky are compared to the people in Ireland. The first stanza opens with the recognition that there are always outsiders, a notion she will continue to develop throughout the poem. She points out that the light of the stars, the light that is now visible in the January sky in Ireland, was created millennia before the Irish experienced the pain of their own history. The reader is left to ponder the identity of the people referred to in the poem by the personal pronoun "our." Based only on what is explicitly stated in the poem, one may assume that the poet is referring to the Irish people in general through the use of this term. However, it is commonly understood based on Boland's larger body of work that women and Irish women poets are also considered by her to be outsiders.

In the first and second stanzas, Boland states that the stars have always been in existence; they are infinite and therefore exist outside the constructs of historical time. Furthermore, she stresses that within the notion of historical time, the Irish people have not merely existed but also have endured suffering. The idea of the timelessness of the heavens, an idea introduced in the two sentences that compose the first and second stanzas, provides the overarching structure of the poem.

Stanzas 3 and 4

In the third stanza, Boland emphasizes the distance that the stars keep from the people inhabiting the poem. It may be inferred that this distance is both physical and metaphorical. As Boland further explores the notion of the stars existing outside the confines of history, she seems to imply, in observing that humans live their lives under the stars, that humans are trapped within history. She states that it is under the infinite heavens that we humans have come to understand our own humanity. In the first line of the fourth stanza, Boland completes the sentiment: our understanding of our humanity encompasses our acknowledgment of our own mortality, that is, our inevitable death. In contrasting the idea of being human with the idea of the prolonged lives of the stars (which have existed for so long that they cannot be contained within the idea of what we understand as history), Boland begins to foreshadow the theme of human mortality and death that will continue to be explored in the remainder of the poem. Thus far, she has emphasized, on one hand, the long life and far-reaching light of the distant stars and, on the other hand, simple human mortality.

The second line of the fourth stanza marks the exact midpoint of the poem; it is also a distinct turning point within the poem. Here Boland states clearly that there is a choice to be made, a choice between two options. For the first time in the poem, Boland ends a sentence in the middle line of a stanza, forcing a pause during which the reader may consider what these two options may be. From what Boland has already discussed in the preceding three stanzas and the first line of the fourth, it may be inferred that the choice she insists it is time for is that of either embracing one's humanity and place *within* history or continuing to exist as an outsider, as distant as the stars. The choice seems to be one between counting, that is, mattering, or being counted out, being an outsider. In the last line of the fourth stanza, the poet tells the reader that she herself has made a choice.

Stanzas 5 and 6

In the opening line of the fifth stanza, we are told that the poet has elected to move from myth to history. By stating that she is moving from myth, she identifies herself with the stars as she has discussed them in the previous stanzas. Mythological figures, like ancient stars, live outside of the structure of historical time. While there is mystery and power associated with myth, there is also the aspect of being disassociated with truth, with reality. The poet, therefore, in moving from the world of myth to the world of history, has chosen to transform her status from that of outsider to someone who matters, someone whose presence in history must be taken into account. Doing so, however, comes at a cost, as Boland begins to explain in the remainder of the fifth stanza and the entirety of the sixth.

The dark pall of tragedy overshadows the notion of historical existence as Boland frames it in the fifth stanza. The concrete images created in the sixth stanza flesh out the vague notions of darkness suggested in the fifth. The reader is left with a sense of bloody, violent death by the end of the sixth stanza. Boland's word choice returns us as well to the imagery pertaining to the stars and the heavens with which the poem opened. Continuing into the seventh and final stanza, Boland emphasizes the slow and painful nature of human death, and having been reminded in the last line of the sixth stanza of the stars, the reader is prompted to ponder the similarities between the dying light of the stars and the extinguishing of human life. Entities that live both outside and within history experience death in similar ways. Long after a star dies, its light remains visible.

Stanza 7

Long after a person dies, Boland seems to be suggesting, his or her memory or spirit is kept alive through other people, through the human process of recording history. Despite such human effort, Boland emphasizes in the last stanza of the poem, it is not enough, for we are, she repeats, perpetually too late. Boland, however, does not explicitly state what the people who kneel beside the dying, people who whisper to them, are too late for. It may be that she is suggesting that they cannot be saved, cannot be rescued from slipping back into myth, out of reality, and outside of history.

THEMES

Myth versus History

In "Outside History," Boland explores the notion of historical time and contrasts the ideas of what it means to live within history with what it means to live outside of it. Throughout the poem, Boland examines the role of the outsider, depicting such an individual as someone who has been shunted aside, someone who exists without mattering in the real world of human history. The poem opens with a statement about the permanent reality of outsiders: they are always there. In general, the term *outsider* has a negative connotation, and in Boland's poem, this nuance is upheld and further explored. She states that just as there exist the two possibilities of living within or outside of history, there also exists a time to choose between these notions. The reader's understanding of the two choices is generated as much by what Boland states explicitly as by what her words and images suggest. To live outside of history is associated by Boland with the stars, with myth. Boland links the stars' existence with living in a world beyond the pain of those who live within history. The word *myth* itself is one that is suggestive both of supernatural figures—gods—and of fiction. Myth is a world disconnected from reality, from the history populated by real people. Yet the world of historical reality is characterized by death and by darkness. Boland envisions this world in stark terms, using words that conjure up notions of bloody, violent deaths. She depicts human

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY

- "Outside History" is the twelfth and final poem in Boland's poetic sequence of the same name. Read all of the poems in the sequence. How do the poems relate to one another? Are there common themes? Does each poem have the ability to stand on its own, or do the poems make more sense in their relation to one another and to the sequence as a whole? In your opinion, why would the poet link these poems together as a sequence? Write an essay in which you address these questions and give your opinion regarding the value of linking the poems in this manner.
- In "Outside History," Boland makes reference to the notion of myth, and in one of the poems earlier in the sequence, "The Making of an Irish Goddess," she discusses myth in greater detail. In particular, she mentions Ceres, the Roman goddess of agriculture. Research Irish mythology. Do figures like Ceres appear in Irish myths? What characteristics are particular to the figures in Irish mythology? Who are the heroes and heroines of Irish mythology? Do Irish myths feature deities, or do they involve other types of heroic characters instead? Write a report on your findings.
- Boland's poetry is often focused reflexively on her status as a female Irish poet. Her emphasis on a sense of exclusion inherent in poems such as "Outside History," and comments in her preface to *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time*, imply a dearth of women as authors of Irish poetry. Research the role of women in the history of Irish literature. What historical female Irish literary figures might Boland and her contemporaries have turned to in looking for role models? Compile an overview of female Irish writers, and create a time line on poster board referencing the time frames in which they wrote and the types of works they specialized in. Can you find any female Irish writers who published before the time of the Anglo-Irish novelist Maria Edgeworth (1767–1849)? What female Irish writers gained prominence in the twentieth century alongside Boland? Do you find Boland's observations regarding the historical lack of female Irish poets to be accurate? Make sure to incorporate visuals in your time line. Present your findings and time line to your class.
- Much of Boland's poetry is written in the style of the free-verse lyric, and her poetry often focuses on the components of identity. For example, in "Outside History," Boland suggests that our relationship to history contributes to our sense of personal identity. After reviewing descriptions of free-verse poetry and lyric poetry, compose your own free-verse lyric in which you consider your own ideas regarding personal identity, and share the poem with your class.

history as a painful ordeal, but one in which she is a willing participant. There is nothing within the poem that valorizes human existence. Yet the idea of living outside of history appears abhorrent to the poet. By stating her decision to move from the world of myth into the world of history, Boland highlights the detestable nature of living as an outsider. Even though she paints the whole of human historical existence without a glimmer of light or hope, the idea of being an outsider any longer is unacceptable. By insisting on her place within history, the poet suggests her desire to be accounted for, to matter within the course of human events. The choice between myth and history that she presents and the clarity with which she declares her own preference suggest

Starry night sky *(Image copyright Rashevska Natalila, 2009. Used under license from Shutterstock.com)*

the poet's own history of alienation from history and her desire to no longer accept the status of outsider.

Death

Boland views death in "Outside History" as inevitable and painful. In fact, the poem appears to treat life itself as merely a long, drawn-out process of dying. It is a trial to be suffered, as she implies in the poem's fifth stanza. In the sixth stanza, her usage of the imagery of the sky once again draws the reader back to the ideas of the opening stanzas, of the stars and their long-dying light. She seems to find that life is as cluttered with the dead and dying as the heavens are with the dying light of stars. The final stanza of the poem emphasizes the prolonged nature of the process of death. When Boland repeats the sentiment of being late, forever too late, she evokes a sense of regret and loss, as does the imagery of mourning individuals, those who kneel and whisper at the side of the dead. At the same time, a double meaning may be at work here, as the word "late" in everyday parlance also possesses the connotation of death (as when a person referring to her late mother is speaking of her dead mother). By stating that we are perpetually too late, Boland may be suggesting that the shadow of death is always hanging over us. Boland focuses on the extinguishing of human life, without a sign of hope for any possibility of an afterlife, and without any uplifting words about the likelihood of experiencing joy in one's life. Her exploration of the theme of death in this poem is unrelentingly bleak.

STYLE

Free Verse

"Outside History" may be described as a free-verse lyric poem. In free verse, the poet's language may resemble the comfortable nuances of natural speech, rather than being formed into a more structured metrical pattern. In metered poetry, each line of poetry adheres to a set pattern of accented and unaccented syllables per

line, establishing the poem's rhythm. In free-verse poetry, both the number of syllables and the pattern denoting which syllables are accented and which are not may vary with each line. The free-verse poem may consist of any number of stanzas, or of none at all. "Outside History" consists of seven stanzas of three lines each. The free-verse lines are intimate in tone, complementing the poet's serious and thought-provoking subject matter. Boland's use of free verse in this poem contributes to the effect of the poet sharing deep and private thoughts with the reader.

Lyric

As a lyric poem, "Outside History" is one that conveys the poet's thoughts and emotions. It is not narrative in nature; that is, it does not tell a story or relate in any chronological way a series of events. Rather, it is a subjective expression of feelings on a particular subject or related themes. Lyric poems like "Outside History" are often meditative in tone: Boland appears to be deeply immersed in her own thoughts about death and one's participation in human history. Lyric poems are not always structured as free verse, as "Outside History" is, but may instead be more traditional poetic forms, such as sonnets or ballads.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Irish Literary Traditions

Although she admits that she is not a scholar in the field of history, Boland places herself and other Irish women poets within the context of Irish literary history in the preface to her 1995 nonfiction work *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time*. Boland discusses the roles of women and poets in Irish history, roles that she maintains have been mutually exclusive for some time. She states that she began writing poetry "in a country where the word *woman* and the word *poet* were almost magnetically opposed." Boland explains that when she began writing poetry (publishing her first collection, a chapbook titled *23 Poems*, in 1962), poets held an honored place in Irish culture and history, but the life of a woman during that time was not viewed as "exemplary in the way a poet's was." By the 1990s, Boland states, the situation was reversed. Women were revered, and the lives of women were idealized, but poets were increasingly seen as obscure figures estranged from everyday society and its concerns. This is Boland's literary and cultural historical context as she views it.

Looking deeper into Ireland's literary past, the scholar John Montague addresses the struggle of the Irish poet to identify him- or herself as uniquely Irish. As Montague explains in the 1974 introduction to *The Book of Irish Verse: An Anthology of Irish Poetry from the Sixth Century to the Present* (which includes selections by Boland), by the eighteenth century the English language and the native Gaelic language of Ireland were both in use, but literature was increasingly written in English. In the nineteenth century, Irish literature written in English began to differentiate itself as specifically Irish, and poets would continue to struggle to express their own unique Irish identity for years to come. As Montague states, the contemporary Irish poet may be viewed as inhabiting "a richly ambiguous position, with the pressure of an incompletely discovered past behind him, and the whole modern world around." Boland's poetry arises, then, out of a literary tradition marked by the struggle faced by Irish poets in an increasingly British world.

Postcolonialism

The Irish history to which Boland repeatedly refers in her poetry is a troubled and violent one. While Boland was born in 1944, some two decades after the 1921 ending of the war between Great Britain and Ireland, her poetry in general is heavily concerned with Irish history since that earlier time period, and the poem "Outside History" refers specifically to the pain persistently present in the modern history of the Irish. Directly following the ending of the Anglo-Irish War, a civil war broke out between supporters of a treaty with Great Britain (which would have required an oath of allegiance to the British Crown) and those Irish who favored the idea of an Irish republic. Those who supported the treaty were defeated, and the civil war ended in 1923. As the Irish Free State, the country's status was somewhat ambiguous; it was considered a part of the British Commonwealth but retained some degree of independence at the same time. In 1949, the Republic of Ireland Bill was passed, and Ireland (excluding the portion that had previously been cordoned off and is now known as Northern Ireland) became an independent republic.

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **1990s:** In 1990, Ireland elects its first female president, Mary Robinson, marking a victory for self-described feminists like Boland. Thomas McCarthy, a reviewer for the *Irish Times*, will later suggest that President Robinson's constituency is drawn in part from readers of Boland's feminist poetry. In 1997, Ireland elects its second female president, Mary McAleese.

  Today: In 2001, President McAleese mentions Boland, among other Irish writers and artists, in a speech honoring the fiftieth anniversary of Ireland's first Arts Act, legislation designed to offer government support to the arts and artists. President McAleese is reelected in 2004.

- **1990s:** Eavan Boland is one of only a few prominent female Irish poets with a number of collections in print by the 1990s. Other established female Irish poets include Medbh McGuckian, Mary O'Malley, and Paula Meehan.

  Today: Having benefited from the inroads made in the realm of contemporary Irish poetry by the female poets who preceded them, a new group of female Irish poets begins to achieve popular and critical attention. These women include Colette Bryce, Leontia Flynn, Caitríona O'Reilly, Leanne O'Sullivan, and Mary O'Donoghue.

- **1990s:** Contemporary Irish poetry often takes the form of free verse and is influenced both by Ireland's own literary history and by America's, with critics observing connections between the work of Irish poets and American poets of the past and present, including Walt Whitman and John Ashbery.

  Today: Irish poets continue to experiment with free verse and to draw on Irish mythology as well as on the work of American writers. The influences of such American authors as Sylvia Plath, Dorothy Parker, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Robert Lowell are discussed among critics and poets.

For decades, the provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) fought to make Great Britain relinquish its hold on Northern Ireland, and Ireland watched its brother state experience violent bombings and unsuccessful attempts to force the British from the island of Ireland all together. In 2005, the Army Council of the IRA announced an end to its armed campaign. In the Republic of Ireland, years of economic difficulties and low living standards for the Irish people began to draw to a close toward the end of the twentieth century. With the 1992 ratification of Irish participation in a united European community, the European Union, by the Republic of Ireland, the political status of the nation stabilized, and its economic situation began to improve. Amid this tumultuous history, Boland established herself as a poet, and her work is inextricably tied to her nation's status. "Outside History" was published in 1990, the same year that the Irish elected the republic's first female president. From her position as an established Irish female poet, Boland had much to look back on that year as she contemplated Irish history and claimed her place in it in her poem.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

While there is limited criticism available on the individual poem "Outside History," discussions of other works in the twelve-poem poetic sequence bearing the same title and of Boland's work in general often apply to this particular poem. In discussing Boland's body of work, Jane Dowson and Alice Entwistle, in their 2005 book *A History of Twentieth-Century British*

Winding, unpaved road *(Image copyright Oksana Perkins, 2009. Used under license from Shutterstock.com)*

Women's Poetry, maintain that Boland uses the poetic form as a vehicle for scrutinizing "Ireland's overlapping literary and political history" and for criticizing "the exclusion of women from native poetic traditions." This point is certainly addressed in "Outside History," in which Boland focuses on the feeling of existing outside of the realm of Irish history. Margaret Mills Harper's essay on Boland's poetry collection *Outside History* is included in the 1997 volume *Representing Ireland: Gender, Class, Nationality*, edited by Susan Shaw Sailer. In this essay, Harper discusses how Boland's poetry often explores the theme of death. Harper states that "the intimacy of death and language form the backbone of Boland's work, both as a structural principle and an aesthetic position." In "Outside History" Boland offers just such an intimate exploration of the idea of death, addressing as well the failure of Irish literary history to incorporate the figure of the female poet.

In an essay on postcolonialism (the cultural and political aftereffects of being a colony, such as of Great Britain) in Boland's work, appearing in *Contemporary Women's Poetry: Reading/Writing/Practice* (2000), Rose Atfield likewise examines the estrangement Boland emphasizes. Atfield observes in Boland's work a sense of exclusion that stems from her status as a female Irish poet. Catriona Clutterbuck, as well, in a 2005 essay for the *Yearbook of English Studies*, centers a study of Boland's work on the poet's efforts to recover the experience of the outsider, or "the Other," as termed by Clutterbuck. The whole of Boland's poetry, Clutterbuck asserts, represents an effort to bring the voice of "the Other," the outsider, the estranged, "from outside to inside history." Boland's troubled relationship with her historical status is further explored in Shara McCallum's 2004 essay appearing in the *Antioch Review*. McCallum offers a detailed analysis of the relationship between myth and history in Boland's poetry. McCallum additionally studies Boland's use of the free-verse lyric form. McCallum finds that Boland uses the lyric to her advantage and provides a "welcome respite" from debates among poets and critics between those who favor either pure lyric or pure narrative forms. Despite Boland's often-conflicted attitude toward her cultural and literary historical

'OUTSIDE HISTORY' IS ESSENTIALLY A POEM ABOUT STRUGGLE AND CONFLICT. THERE IS, HOWEVER, A POINT OF STILLNESS AT THE CENTER OF THE POEM'S TRANSITION AND TURMOIL, AND THAT IS IRELAND ITSELF."

heritage, as McCallum affirms, "Boland's poems make their own best argument for not only her right but also her ability to lay claim to Irishness and Ireland."

CRITICISM

Catherine Dominic

Dominic is a novelist and a freelance writer and editor. In this essay, she explores the contrast between the sense of turmoil and struggle presented in "Outside History" and the idea of permanence suggested by Boland's depiction of the relationship between the Irish people and the land of Ireland itself.

In Boland's poem "Outside History," the poet depicts a transition within herself, a choice to move from one position or vantage point to another. She describes the moment of choosing between existing as an outsider and living within the confines or structures of history. Many critics have observed, and Boland herself has explicitly explained in her nonfiction, that as a poet and a woman she has often felt herself to be living a life of exclusion from the social, cultural, and literary history of Ireland. In many ways, her poem may be understood as a reaction to this sense of exclusion and isolation. "Outside History" is essentially a poem about struggle and conflict. There is, however, a point of stillness at the center of the poem's transition and turmoil, and that is Ireland itself. Boland depicts her native land as a solid, immovable essence amidst the conflict, sorrow, and death in the poem.

In the preface to her nonfiction work *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time*, published in 1995, Boland explains that when she began writing, poets held a respected place in Irish culture and society, and that the very "idea of the poet" served as "an emblem to the whole culture that self-expression and survival could combine." Later, as Boland describes, this notion fell out of fashion, to be replaced by a new emblematic idea, that of the female life, with the richness of "its ritual, its history," now viewed as "a brilliantly lit motif." Boland discusses in *Object Lessons* a sense of

WHAT DO I READ NEXT?

- *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time* (1995) is a nonfiction work in which Boland combines autobiography with argumentative essay in order to explore the experience of women in Ireland and the life of the poet, and to comment on the overlap and connection between these two identities.
- *New Territory* (1967) is Boland's first full-length volume of poetry. It is characterized by her interest in language and identity and by her deeply emotional responses to life.
- *W. B. Yeats and His World* (1970), by Boland and Micheál MacLiammóir, is a biography of William Butler Yeats (1865–1939), an Irish poet, dramatist, and author whose work was, like Boland's, inspired and informed by Irish mythology and history.
- *Self-Portrait in the Dark* (2008), by Colette Bryce, represents the work of one of several female rising stars in the world of Irish poetry. Like Boland, Bryce acknowledges the challenge of having few female Irish poets with whom one may seek connection and inspiration.
- *Over Nine Waves: A Book of Irish Legends* (1995), retold and edited by Marie Heaney, is a collection of Irish folktales and mythology written in an accessible, modern style. The volume offers a glimpse into the foundations of Irish literature that influenced so many later Irish writers.

connection to her society at first as a poet but not as a woman, then later as a woman but not as a poet, and this fractured sense of self is apparent in her poetry. Rose Atfield, in her study of postcolonialism in Boland's poetry (in *Contemporary Women's Poetry: Reading/Writing/Practice*), investigates the way Boland seeks to restore a sense of "identity in terms of place, history and literary tradition." Other critics, such as Jane Dowson and Alice Entwistle (in *A History of Twentieth-Century British Women's Poetry*), have also examined Boland's "sense of exile," while Shara McCallum (in the *Antioch Review*) has observed Boland's "desire to etch out a space for women within Irish history and poetry as subjects rather than objects."

Given Boland's own statements, and these critical interpretations of Boland's poetry in general, one may reasonably infer that the outsiders Boland refers to in "Outside History" are those classes whom she has previously acknowledged as existing, at one time or another, outside of Ireland's social, cultural, or literary history: women and poets. In this poem in particular, Boland portrays a moment of choice, the choice between existing as an outsider or living with the right to be included in history. This moment is painted in terms of turmoil and darkness. She depicts the choice as one clouded by the specter of death, and slow, painful death at that. The precise instant at which she states her need to choose is found in the exact middle of the poem. All the lines that precede the choice are colored by the concept of movement, by a sense of progressing through centuries of historical time. Boland speaks of the distance of the stars, the millennia that have transpired since the light of those stars first shone, and the years of pain endured during the course of Irish history. The sense of movement through time conveyed by Boland is powerful, and it stops abruptly at the moment of her choice.

The lines that follow that moment are equally filled with a sense of movement, though not the rush of thousands of years but the slow, plodding, painful movement of death. The poet's expression of the desire to exist not in the realm of myth as an object, one written about, but in the historical world as a subject, a contributor to history, is a metaphorical transition from insubstantiality into reality, from fiction into fact. Boland is quick to point out that with reality comes death. Death in the subsequent stanzas is depicted in stark and traumatic imagery, as a drawn-out struggle peopled by mourners who kneel beside the dying and lament the fact that the past is fixed. To fully understand the remorse of the final line of the poem, it is helpful to review an idea from another Boland poem, one from the greater series in which this one appears, "Outside History: A Sequence." In the last line of "Outside History," Boland reiterates the title of another poem in the sequence, that of the tenth poem, "We Are Always Too Late." In this poem, Boland explores the way we attempt to remake history through the reenactment of our memories. Yet despite our efforts, we are too late to change things. We arrive at the moment in our minds after it has already happened, as it already exists within history, and this is the very idea Boland stresses in the final line of "Outside History," when she declares that we will always arrive on the scene too late to change it, too late to forestall death.

The poem as examined thus far reveals Boland's desire to claim a place for women in Irish cultural and social history, a place for the female poet in Irish literary history, and most significantly, a place for herself in a world she has long felt excluded from. "Outside History" is additionally marked by a sense of movement, whether it be the vigorous onslaught of time in the first half of the poem or the plodding march toward death in the second half of the poem. "Outside History," then, is characterized by transition (movement through time and toward death) and struggle, by the tension between two modes of existence—between living within the insubstantial world of myth as an outsider and living within the realm of history in a life viewed, apparently, only in relation to death. Embedded within all the conflict, struggle, transition, and tension of the poem, however, is a sense of something permanent, lasting, fixed, and solid.

In the second line of the first stanza Boland refers to Ireland specifically, describing January in Ireland in terms that connote a strong sense of constancy. Later, the pivotal idea in the third stanza presents itself as a strong sense of place, a sense of Ireland as the place where one's humanity has become apparent. Again, in the first line of the fourth stanza, the landscape becomes an anchor for the next idea. It is on this particular landscape, the Irish landscape, where one's mortality is made known. Additional references to various physical aspects of

the land, to rivers and roads and fields, are made in the sixth stanza. Through such examples, and by linking the elements of the landscape to the places where the dead lie and where we find ourselves kneeling alongside the dead and whispering to them, Boland associates her visceral sense of place with the particular notion of history that she is attempting to solidify in the poem. Ireland as a place becomes the soil within which its history is rooted, the history within which Boland demands to be recognized, accepted, and acknowledged. The primary tension in the poem, then, exists between the insubstantiality of myth and existence as an outsider on one side and the permanence of place, of history, of Ireland on the other.

The last line of the poem insists remorsefully on the fact that we are perpetually late, and this insistence engenders a sense of futility. However, the final image of the poem occurs in the preceding line. The image is one of people kneeling alongside the dead, in the road where the dead lay cluttered. With the image of our knees on the ground, our bodies bent toward the earth, Boland suggests something of the connection between the Irish people and their land. Despite the persistence of the idea of death, one's connection with the land, with that sense of permanence, is at least as emphasized by Boland as is one's connection with death. It cannot be said that such a relationship between people and place as depicted by Boland is a hopeful one, or that it undercuts the idea of the inevitability of death. Nevertheless, the notion that such a strong and permanent connection exists is a reminder of the meaningfulness of the relationship between the living and the land. The trauma of death is at least somewhat alleviated by the hint that in this relationship, life does retain some sense of meaning. This is the redeeming value of a sense of place, of Ireland, in Boland's poem.

Source: Catherine Dominic, Critical Essay on "Outside History," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2010.

Debrah Raschke

In the following excerpt, Raschke asserts that Boland's "Outside History" and "In a Time of Violence" demonstrate the dangers of myth, particularly in relation to women and the concrete world.

Cliffs of Moher, County Clare, Ireland (© Ros Drinkwater / Alamy)

Eavan Boland's poetry has been described as "impeccably scornful," as "denunciatory," as too "strident" and too "vehement" (Henigan 110), and as justification for "her dangerous attachment to bringing up babies" (Reizbaum 472). She has been accused of unduly elevating the domestic, of mythologizing the suburbs, and of betraying an Irish literary tradition, which, in emphasizing Gaelic roots, relies heavily on mythical images. Such claims relegate Boland to a preoccupation with trivia, to plebeian tastes. Yet Boland's two latest works, *Outside History* and *In a Time of Violence*, contain some of the most poignant lyrics written within the Irish and British traditions in the last half of this century. Her poetry and her criticism, as Hagen and Zelman note, display "a painterly consciousness, a keen, painful awareness of the shaping power of language, and a fundamental sense of poetic ethics" (443). Take, for example, the conclusion of "Outside History" for which her penultimate collection is named:

MYTH, AS WELL AS HISTORY CONFLATED WITH MYTH (LEGENDARY ORACLES AND DIVINE RIGHTS), IS DANGEROUS. IT BLINDS, CONSUMES, AND KILLS."

> Out of myth into history I move to be
> part of the ordeal
> whose darkness is
> only now reaching me from those fields,
> those rivers, those roads clotted as
> firmament with the dead.
> How slowly they die
> as we kneel beside them, whisper in their ear.
> And we are too late. We are always too late.

Here and elsewhere within her last two collections there is a haunting lyricism, which, nonetheless, does not back down from conviction. Rescuing the physical world from the dung heap, Boland's *Outside History* and *In a Time of Violence* use the concrete, physical world to revise notions of what sustains, to query historiography, and to expose the dangers of mythology.

Like many contemporary women poets and novelists, Boland uses the concrete to create spiritual sustenance. In the first chapter of *Outside History*, entitled "Object Lessons," simple things (objects to which we become attached)—a black lace fan given to her by her mother, the empty chair of another woman poet, her lover's mug "with a hunting scene on the side"—take on a heightened significance. These images and the scenes created within this first section of poems become "object lessons" necessary for memory and for life—how barren our memories would be without their physical referents. How barren poetry would be without the concrete. The concrete in "The Room of Other Women Poets" becomes a statement of Boland's poetics and, too frequently, "what we lost." Likewise, in *In a Time of Violence*, the individual moments sustain and heal, as in "This Moment," where the instant in which a "woman leans down to catch a child" juxtaposes stars rising, moths fluttering, apples sweetening in the dark.

More radical, however, is Boland's use of the concrete to reveal missing stories and missing histories. In *Outside History*, Boland claims history should be personal and ordinary lest it shift truth, a theme that emerges even more strongly in *Violence*. Like much current fiction (Penelope Lively's *Moon Tiger*, Graham Swift's *Waterland*, and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*), the first section of *Violence*, "Writing in a Time of Violence," ponders the problems of historiography—the inefficiencies of empirical recording, the failures of reason, the missing suppressed stories. Boland uses these insufficiencies to unveil the hidden stories in Irish history. In the opening poem, "That the Science of Cartography Is Limited," maps fail. They cannot relay the "shading of / forest." They "cannot show the fragrance of the balsam," or "the gloom of the cypresses." These gaps are what Boland wishes to "prove" as she peers over a map of Connacht, which does not tell the history of the famine road or the hunger cries of 1847 during which approximately one million Irish died. The map, metonymic for a silenced Irish history, distorts the story—an "apt rendering of / the spherical as flat." Similarly, in "Death of Reason" the Peep-O-Day Boys lay "fires down in / the hayricks," igniting the "flesh-smell of hatred." The history of the Peep-O-Day Boys, an Irish Protestant sect active in the 1780's who raided Catholic villages under the guise of righting the wrongs of the Protestant peasantry, remains a buried history in this poem, an untold story. All we can see is the fire. This untold story juxtaposes another buried history—that which eighteenth-century portrait painting masks. Here eighteenth-century portrait painting is a disingenuous empiricism. It renders a century's apparent calm and control through the perfected face in the portrait: "the painter tints alizerine crimson with a mite of yellow" and finds "how difficult it is to make the skin / blush outside the skin." The face in the portrait, supposedly an accurate facsimile, conceals an underlying violence:

> The easel waits for her
> and the age is ready to resemble her and
> the small breeze cannot touch that powdered hair.
> That elegance.
> But I smell fire.

Portrait painting, and all with which it is associated, disguises the real face. The portrait lies. Paired with a poetics of control and elision and with histories that gloss, it is ultimately doomed.

"The Dolls Museum in Dublin" suggests another silenced event in Irish history. Like the map of Connacht, the Dublin dolls enshrined in a glass museum case do not give the full story. "Cradled and clean," the dolls are a re-creation of Easter in Dublin. "Their faces memorized like perfect manners," the dolls are what is left of the past and the present, who "infer the difference / with a terrible stare." They, however, do "not feel" the difference and do not "know it." One senses, though, it is not just the dolls who do not know the history they represent, that those who look upon the dolls also see nothing of the underlying history. Doubly mirrored, the "terrible stare" is not just the stare of the dolls, but the look of one who remembers what is generally forgotten and who knows that others have forgotten.

Once again, there is a cryptic history. "The Dolls Museum in Dublin" depicts Easter in Dublin—a seemingly innocuous subject—but if one remembers the history, one recalls one specific Easter in Dublin, Easter 1916, when rebellion erupted in an attempt to overthrow British rule. Recalling also the imagery of Yeats's "Dolls" (which Boland having written on Yeats would know), Boland's "The Dolls Museum in Dublin" extends Yeats's theme. Yeats's demonic dolls rail against their dollmaker and his wife for their new infant, which currently occupies the cradle, seeing it as an "insult" and a "disgrace" to their more perfected, inhuman state. Boland changes Yeats's story, revealing the old paint on the dolls' faces, the "cracks along the lips and on the cheeks" that "cannot be fixed," silencing the dolls' protest to a stare; for Boland, an aesthetic that ignores the human and a political stance that ignores the particulars fail.

"Writing in a Time of Violence" concludes this first section and extends Boland's critique to the concealment embedded in language. Ostensibly about an essay the persona wrote in college on Aristotle's *Art of Rhetoric* (a paradigm of the rhetorical refinements of concealment), the critique of glossed histories here extends to glossed language. Going beyond the particular commentary on Aristotle's rhetoric, this critique extends to all language: all poetry and all history that conceal and all mythology that hides under the camouflage of beauty are guilty. Such camouflage yields a fallacious and perilous picture:

> we are stepping into where we never
> imagine words such as *hate*
> and *territory* and the like—unbanished still
> as they always would be—wait
> and are waiting under
> beautiful speech. To strike.

As Boland notes: "In Ireland, we've always had this terrible gap between rhetoric and reality. In the void between those two things some of the worst parts of our history have happened" (Consalvo 96). Boland wants the gaps unveiled. Language is clearly a means for control. Avoiding the hard pictures, the abstract may temporarily provide respite, but such camouflage breeds a violence that will eventually erupt. Even pleasurable camouflage is rejected as seen in an earlier poem "Fond Memory" in *Outside History*. "Fond Memory" tells of playing English games in school, of trying hard to learn lessons in English history—the value of the Magna Carta (and the unspoken divine right of kings to exploit Ireland). She looks forward to a different refuge, to coming home to the solace of her father playing the "slow / lilts of Tom Moore" on the piano. The song for her was a "safe inventory of pain." The poem, however, concludes with: "And I was wrong." There is no safety. In Stephen Dedalus' words, there is no "breakwater of order and elegance against the sordid tide of life" (*Portrait* 98).

Boland's use of the concrete does not stop at disclosing hidden Irish history and camouflaged language; she extends this critique to mythology and particularly mythology about women. For clearly, one of the missing histories to which Boland alludes is the presence of women. Traditionally, women have been captured by myth. Myth elevates and, in elevating, it frequently runs from life and, in running from life, it distorts and kills. . . .

Myths, inescapably, are part of our ordinary lives—they enrich the intensity, depth, and mystery of ordinary experiences. In *Violence's* "The Pomegranate," the myth of Ceres and Persephone becomes metaphor for the love and feared loss the mother feels for her child. The myth intensifies an ordinary moment of the mother watching the daughter with a "can of Coke" and a "plate of uncut fruit."

But myths are also the catalyst for doom, particularly when we attempt to live our lives as if they were myth. In "Love," myths collide—one of grand passion, which features its participants in some heroic epic script, one of an ordinary existence, which pales before the former. "Moths" ups the ante. First, there are the legends

of moths: "Ghost-swift moths with their dancing assemblies at dusk. / Their courtship swarms." Some "steer by / the moon." And then there are real moths, drawn by the light and heat, who will crackle, burn, and perish on that summer night. That "stealing of the light"—of myth—(for the moths and for the persona, who also is threatened with this "perishing") is alluring and deadly, an "Ingenious facsimile" that deceives and distorts. The dangers of myth are not, however, isolated to the personal and the romantic. In "In Which the Ancient History I Learn Is Not My Own," history becomes conflated with the oracular, with divine myth. In this poem there is another map laying out a vision of the world, this time of the English occupation of Northern Ireland where "the red of Empire" and "the stain of absolute possession" were clear. The persona becomes almost convinced, becomes "nearly an English child." She could "list the English kings," "name the famous battles," and "was learning to recognize / God's grace in history." In this history lesson, the Roman Empire, the "*greatest Empire / ever known*—" (until, of course, the emergence of the British Empire), juxtaposes the Delphic oracle, the imagined "*exact centre / of the earth.*" Greece, and by extrapolation, Rome and Great Britain, seemingly have some special connection with the gods. Occupied Ireland becomes more distant, the blue-green of the Irish Sea giving way to "the pale gaze / of a doll's china eyes—/ a stare without recognition or memory." Recalling the "Dolls Museum in Dublin" in which the dolls "infer the difference / with a terrible stare," but do not "feel it" or "know it," the "pale gaze / of a doll's china eyes" suggests the stupor that ensues from digesting a history and identity that is not one's own, of believing that erasure of one's own identity stems from the "grace" of God.

Myth, as well as history conflated with myth (legendary oracles and divine rights), is dangerous. It blinds, consumes, and kills. It is a particular problem for women, who are too frequently seen as myth—as not real—what Jacques Lacan suggests when he says that "Woman" does not exist. Myth is a way of distancing that avoids human relations, that, in essence, avoids life—the Platonic ascent, the forever unconsummated romance. In *Outside History's* "Listen: This Is the Noise of Myth," myth and legend deceptively keep human touch at a distance:

> Consider
> legend, self-deception, sin, the sum
> of human purpose and its end; remember
> how our poetry depends on distance[.]

"Gravity," however, "will bend starlight," will bring us down to earth. . . .

The first section of *In a Time of Violence* opens with the following epigraph from Book X of Plato's *Republic*:

> As in a city where the evil are permitted to have
> authority and the good are put out of the way,
> so in the soul of man, as we maintain, the
> imitative poet implants an evil constitution, for
> he indulges the irrational nature which has no
> discernment of greater or less.

It is a telling beginning. At first glance, it seems merely to call attention to Plato's banning poets from his ideal State and to the continually precarious position of the poet. However, like the many poems in this collection, this epigraph functions as palimpsest. As the epigraph indicates, Plato, in part, bans poets from his ideal State because the poet indulges the "irrational nature," but closer examination reveals that the excluded "irrational nature" is also associated with the feminine. Socrates tells Glaucon that the "best of us" when "we listen to a passage of Homer, or one of the tragedians, in which he represents some pitiful hero who is drawling out his sorrows in a long oration, or weeping, and smiting his breast," take "delight in giving way to sympathy" and "are in raptures, at the excellence of the poet who stirs our feelings most" (*The Republic* 535). Such delight, Socrates warns, is, nevertheless, dangerous:

> But when any sorrow of our own happens to us, then you may observe that we pride ourselves on
> the opposite quality—we would fain be quiet and patient; this is the manly part, and the other
> which delighted us in the recitation is now deemed to be the part of a woman.
> (335)

Thus, this epigraph, which immediately precedes Socrates' commentary on the poet's indulging the "irrational nature" and his subsequent identifying the irrational with feminine, underscores not only the exclusion of poets, but also the exclusion of the feminine from the ideal State. And by extrapolation it accentuates Boland's challenging, within several interviews, the exclusion of the female voice from Irish poetry (from the ideal Irish tradition), where the prevailing voice has emerged from an

exclusionary bardic tradition that relegates women to myth and muse (Consalvo 92–93, Reizbaum 479, Wright 10).

Book X of *The Republic* also dismisses poets because, as "imitators," they are "thrice removed" from "the truth" (*The Republic*). Socrates posits that since "God, whether from choice or from necessity, made one bed in nature and one only," the particular beds created by a bedmaker are imitations of a more perfected form. Thus, when a poet attempts to create an imitation of a particular bed, he is creating an imitation of an imitation (522–25). What is being dismissed here are the particularities, the "object lessons," which for Boland are essential. Thus, the epigraph that initiates this collection also functions as protest against a conception of truth that is distant, mythic, and abstract.

Outside History and *In a Time of Violence* both are testimony to Boland's desire to resurrect the concrete in history and aesthetics—in essence, to rescue the physical world from the dung heap. Throughout, Boland combines the sublime with the ordinary and critiques the suppression of the ordinary that frequently occurs in art—in sculpture, in writing *Violence*'s "We Are the Only Animals Who Do This" conjoins "the grey / undertips of the mulberry leaves" that melds into a "translucence which is all darkness" with the particularities of nature and the world of the ordinary—car keys, traffic, aging, the sobbing of her mother. Thinking of her mother weeping, the persona comments that "weeping itself has no cadence." Looking at a statue, a "veiled woman," she comments: "all / had been chiselled out with the veil in / the same, indivisible act of definition / which had silenced her." Perhaps what is so disquieting to some about Boland is her ability to conjoin these.

Source: Debrah Raschke, "Eavan Boland's *Outside History* and *In a Time of Violence*: Rescuing Women, the Concrete, and Other Things Physical from the Dung Heap," in *Colby Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 2, June 1996, pp. 135–42.

Jody Allen-Randolph

In the following review, Allen-Randolph points out Boland's role in bringing women poets to prominence in Ireland and praises "Outside History" as "a retrospective of Boland's most mature and best work."

Poetry in Ireland is still very much dominated by a male bardic tradition. Compared to their male contemporaries, women poets in Ireland get very little recognition and arouse tremendous controversy. Even as I write, the arts pages and opinion columns of Irish newspapers are crackling with a furious exchange of fire over the recently published *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, the most comprehensive re-configuration of the Irish canon in this century. It seems the all-male editorial committee failed to notice the contribution Irish women have made to social change and contemporary writing in the last quarter century, and their omissions have become the focal point in the continuing debate over women's writing.

IT IS COMMON FOR NEW LANDMARKS IN IRISH LITERATURE TO GO UNRECOGNIZED BY ITS CUSTODIANS. YET WHEN THE DUST KICKED UP BY THE CURRENT CANON DEBATE HAS SETTLED, I EXPECT WE WILL SEE *OUTSIDE HISTORY* FIRMLY ENSCONCED."

The controversy has created an atmosphere of intimidation which continues to help obstruct the emergence and recognition of women poets. When an arts administrator at a recent poetry conference complained of "the pornography of childbirth and menstruation in Irish women's writing," he went unchallenged. Critics and academics in Ireland still fail to take seriously even the most established women poets.

No one has done more to bring about a long-overdue reappraisal of this state of affairs than the poet Eavan Boland. In a series of essays and interviews over the past ten years she has borne passionate witness to the pressures placed on women writers in Ireland. More recently, she has written about how important it is for women poets who inherit a constraining national tradition to subvert that tradition.

Born in Dublin in 1944, the youngest child of an Irish diplomat, Boland spent most of her childhood in London and New York. Returning to Dublin as a teenager, she attended Trinity College and upon graduating was appointed lecturer in the English department. Deciding against an academic career, Boland worked for

many years as a literary journalist. Her first collection of poems, *New Territory*, appeared in 1967. Since then she has produced six books, three of which (including the latest) were Poetry Book Society Choices.

Outside History is a retrospective of Boland's most mature and best work. It contains a generous selection of poems from her last two volumes, *Night Feed* and *The Journey*, and a large body of new work as well. (By reversing the order, however, putting the newest poems at the front of the book and the oldest at the back, it makes it hard for the reader to follow the deepening patterns of meaning, resonance and reference over time.) Tucked away at the back of this book is a group of nine poems from *Night Feed* (now out of print), revised and rearranged into a sequence entitled "Domestic Interior." These are risky, short-lined poems, with a fresh, uncluttered, clean-edged presentation. Boland's acute observations of surfaces and textures in the ordinary world gives them their energy:

> This is my time:
> the twilight closing in,
> a hissing on the ring,
> stove noises, kettle steam
> and children's kisses. . . .
>
> the buttery curls,
> the light,
> the bran fur of the teddy bear.
> The fist like a nighttime daisy:
> damp and tight.
> ("Energies")

Her descriptions of ordinary objects can resonate suddenly with a shimmer of enchantment. In a poem exploring the monotony of caring for a small family, for instance, we find this image of a doorstep milk bottle:

> Cold air
> clouds the rinsed,
> milky glass,
> blowing clear
>
> with a hint
> of winter constellations. . . .
> ("Monotonies")

The precedents for these poems are not in verse but in painting. Boland turned to the still lives and domestic interiors of Jean-Baptiste Chardin and Jan van Eyck for technical example. By conferring distinction upon the homely, Chardin and van Eyck revealed their objects as much as they described them, and Boland's technique of imbuing ordinary things with such fresh significance that they become a universe in themselves is learned from these painters. In the title poem of the sequence, a poem which takes van Eyck's *The Arnolfini Marriage* as its starting point, she explains:

> But there's way of life
> that is its own witness:
> put the kettle on, shut the blind.
> Home is a sleeping child,
> an open mind
>
> and our effects,
> shrugged and settled
> in the sort of light
> jugs and kettles
> grow important by.

By taking as her subject the routine day that most women in Ireland live (caring for children, washing, cooking and sewing), Boland renews the dignity of demeaned labor and establishes a precedent for its inclusion in Irish poetry. By summoning up a tradition of artists like Chardin and Van Eyck, she authenticates her own poetic stance. But by emphasizing her identification with the female subjects, rather than the male painters, she also subverts their tradition.

Her technique both in these poems and those of *The Journey* owes much to her fine understanding of light, tone, color and composition (Boland's mother, an early influence, is painter Frances Kelly). In "Self-Portrait on a Summer Evening" from *The Journey*, Boland examines a painting by Chardin:

> All summer long
> he has been slighting her
> in botched blues, tints,
> half-tones, rinsed neutrals.
>
> What you are watching
> is light unlearning itself,
> an infinite unfrocking of the prism.
> Before your eyes
> the ordinary life
> is being glazed over:
> pigments of the bibelot,
> the cabochon, the water-opal
> pearl to the intimate
> simple colors of
> her ankle-length summer skirt.

It is this talent—the skillful setting off of one light effect by another, the interplay of the smallest touches of color with touches of rhyme ("tints" with "rinsed," "blues" with "neutrals"), repeated as though at random, always discreet but always there—that gives us the

sense of a delicate under-structure throughout Boland's work. At the end of this poem, the woman in the painting becomes the poet herself. As she crosses the yard, keeping one eye on the garden and the other on her children, she announces: "I am Chardin's woman/ edged in reflected light, / hardened by / the need to be ordinary." It is this fidelity to ordinary human experience in the astute consciousness of the poet that makes these poems unpretentious, understated and exhilarating.

In the poems from *The Journey*, the ordinary experience of the present is layered with a rich sense of the past. The theme of storytelling as both the archive of female history and the memory of a nation is explored in "The Oral Tradition." The poet lingers in gentle reflection at the end of "a reading / or a workshop or whatever":

> only half-wondering
> what becomes of words,
> the brisk herbs of language,
> the fragrances we think we sing,
> if anything.

The leisurely pace of the slant rhyme ("words" with "herbs," "languages" with "fragrances") shifts into internal rhyme ("Wood hissed and split / in the open grate, / broke apart in sparks"), quickening the impact as the climax approaches. The poet overhears a story shared between two women, and is caught up in the drama as the great grandmother of the teller gives birth in an open field. The diction modulates from colloquial to poetic and the music rises as the poet imagines the moment when

> . . . she lay down
> in vetch and linen
> and lifted up her son
> to the archive
> they would shelter in:
>
> the oral song
> avid as superstition,
> layered like an amber in
> the wreck of language
> and the remnants of a nation.

It is this discovery of the past through recognizing the difficulty of turning it into the present that undergirds the *tour de force* of this book, the ambitious title sequence, "Outside History." The history of the title is at once Eavan Boland's personal history and the history of her nation. When she uses one as a metaphor for the other, as she does in "The Achill Woman" and "What We Lost," she writes with an unforgettable mixture of courage and perception. In "What We Lost," using a voice that has deepened in resonance and authority, Boland tells the story of a child (her mother) who is told a story which, "unheard" and "unshared," is forgotten:

> Believe it, what we lost is here in this room
> on this veiled evening. . . .
>
> The fields are dark already.
> The frail connections have been made and are broken.
> The dumb-show of legend has become language,
> is becoming silence and who will know that once
> words were possibilities and disappointments, . . .

The formal structure of the sequence is as fully accomplished as its themes. It has an ingenious clock-like configuration: twelve poems cycle through timescapes of changing light and changing seasons, suggesting both the twelve positions on a clock-face and the twelve months of the calendar. In a private interview, Boland described the sequence as a study in the breakdown of control: "It deals deliberately with the artificial construct of time and the seasons, and the ways in which these artifices of control ultimately breakdown." Myth for Boland is another form of control (earlier in the sequence she defines it as "the wound we leave in the time we have"). "The attachment of somebody like myself to myth," she explained, "is very much the flirtation and engagement with the idea of control, the way that we restrict meaning by controlling it. We restrict meaning and finally we restrict reality. We tamper with our own mortal nature, and therefore with love and therefore with time."

In the final poem of the sequence, which Boland describes as "an intense formalization of the breakdown of time," she rejects the controlling impulse of myth. The muscular cadences of the poem pull us along in their undertow:

> Out of myth into history I move to be
> part of that ordeal
> whose darkness is
>
> only now reaching me from those fields,
> those rivers, those roads clotted as
> firmaments with the dead.
>
> How slowly they die
> as we kneel beside them, whisper in their ear.
> And we are too late. We are always too late.
>
> ("Outside History")

I THINK IT'S IMPORTANT THAT WOMEN WRITERS DON'T HAVE TO BE FEMINISTS, DON'T HAVE TO BE ANYTHING. THEY JUST HAVE TO HAVE ENOUGH OXYGEN TO WRITE. I DON'T CARE WHAT THEIR POLITICAL PERSUASIONS ARE."

The power and sweep of the sequence is a function of the silences into which it taps. The silences of women in these poems are all the more poignant because they are widened to include so many people, male and female, past and present: the conquered Gaels, the casualties of the potato famines, the immigrant Irish, and the victims of recent sectarian killings in the North.

It is common for new landmarks in Irish literature to go unrecognized by its custodians. Yet when the dust kicked up by the current canon debate has settled, I expect we will see *Outside History* firmly ensconced. By then Eavan Boland's work will have made and found a context at the heart of her national literature, and in doing so, forced a more generous shape upon it.

Source: Jody Allen-Randolph, "A Passion for the Ordinary," in *Women's Review of Books*, Vol. 9, No. 7, April 1992, pp. 19–20.

Eavan Boland

In the following excerpt from an interview with Wright and Hannan, Boland discusses the pressures that women poets, particularly Irish women poets, face in the literary world.

[Means Wright and Hannan:] A first-rate Irish woman poet would appear to receive less recognition in Ireland than even a third-rate male poet. Do you find this to be true?

[*Boland*:] I was on a panel in Boston recently at a festival of Irish poetry, and exactly that point was with me. In the audience there were a number of male poets, but I knew of five or six wonderful Irish women poets that nobody in that audience would have heard of. And the breaking-through point for them is more at risk, I think, than for the male poet. My problem is, and certainly my ethical worry is that the woman poet doesn't even get considered: she's under so much pressure in this particular country.

Can you describe these pressures?

We like to think that in a country like Ireland that is historically pressured and has been defeated and has had minorities within it, that people get the permission equally to be poets. We like to think that, but they don't. There is not an equal societal commission here for people to explore their individuality in an expressive way—for a woman to cross the distance in writing poetry to becoming a poet. "If I called myself a poet," a young woman in one of my workshops told me, "people would think I didn't wash my windows." This was a piercingly acute remark on the fracture between the perception of womanhood in a small town in the southeast of Ireland and the perception of the poet. So the second part of the equation of not getting an equal societal permission is that I couldn't say that the people who have had permission—in other words, the bardic poets, who are male—that they have in every case generously held out their hand to these women, that they have equally encouraged them, given them a hearing. The proposals that happen under the surface to make a canon—that are subterranean and invisible—have been radically exclusive. The male writers in Ireland traditionally, in both prose and poetry, do have a kind of bardic stance; they do see themselves as inheriting a kind of bardic role. They have been disdainful of women writers with women's themes; they use a language I don't think you'd see in Canada or the United States. Only recently, for example, someone well involved with literary things in Ireland got up in a conference on "Women and Writing" to complain of the "pornography of childbirth and of menstruation in Irish women's writing."

This kind of discrimination has certainly existed in the United States.

Yes, but you have the huge diversity, that wonderful diversity of pressure and voices and liberalism. Ireland is a very small country, and its literary community is, over the past forty years, very staid in its perceptions. There isn't a lot of oxygen for the young woman poet—who is tremendously vulnerable to how she's perceived.

Rita Ann Higgins, for example, the young working class poet in Galway, or Moya Cannan or Eva Bourke, who can't find their books in the Dublin bookstores?

Yes, there's a huge amount of literary activity going in Galway. Jessie Lendennie [poet-editor of Salmon Press in Galway] was in my national workshop in 1984—a wonderful presence in it. I've known of those tentacles of energy for years, but it hasn't been easy to get any visibility for them. It's easier for me because I'm older, because I've always lived in a metropolitan area.

Is it easier for a women poet in academe, like yourself, to attain recognition?

I'm not in academe. I was a writer in residence last year at Trinity, and this year at University College Dublin, but I would think of myself as academically far from grace. Interestingly, the contemporary poetry course in Trinity this year carried not one woman poet! It's extraordinary to be taught outside in other countries and not anywhere in your own. This is the reason why when I'm in Boston I'm not inclined to be quiet or conciliatory about it: because these things have happened again and again and because they have been passively sanctioned. The male Irish poets have treated exclusion as invention, but there is absolutely no doubt that that exists. There is no give on this issue. It is a matter of fact.

Are there academics in Ireland who would promote the work of women? Women academics? The theme for the American Conference for Irish Studies conference this fall is "Women and Children First."

Yes, that's very interesting. If you look back at *Eire Ireland*, for example, there are almost no references to women's writing. The ACIS—yes, there are wonderful women there, but I think that ACIS itself has been conservative, the institution itself. The academic in Ireland has had remarkably little to do with the writing of poetry, but it has a great deal to do with the dissemination of it. The problem, I think, is a compound psycho-perception in this country that women are in many ways the caryatids of community. They hold on their shoulders the lives and the shelters—and it's not to say a great regard is not had for them—but as the unindividualized generic feminine presence.

In your American Poetry Review *essay, "Outside History" [April 1990], you rue the fact that male poets have made "the image of the woman the pretext of a romantic nationalism."*

Certainly: and the nation is an old woman and needs to be liberated. But she's passive; and if she stops being passive and old she becomes young and ornamental. Therefore, within our perception of women as being in the house, as being in the kitchen, holding things together, there's the perception of the male very often as the active and anarchic principle: and therefore nominated as male is the individual, the bardic, the dangerous, the expressive, partly because those were male, but partly because the transaction between the male and the female in literature is an active-passive one. But basically this community nominates women as the receptors of other people's creativity and not as the initiators of their own. Then we have the Church to support and give a sacro-quality to these perceptions. If you take a woman in a town which no doubt is strongly influenced by its Catholic past and its rural customs—where women were counseled patience and its silent virtues—a woman who suddenly says, "Now I'm going to express myself," that society is not going to give her the same permission as to a 23-year-old male with black curly hair. So she's already under a lesser set of permissions to explore her own gift, and a greater sense of inferences that that gift is dangerous to her tradition of womanhood. These are huge pressures!

Enough to make feminists out of women poets?

I think it's important that women writers don't have to be feminists, don't have to be anything. They just have to have enough oxygen to write. I don't care what their political persuasions are.

You're not a separatist.

No, I'm not a separatist. I think that separatism in a small country like Ireland would be another form of censorship. In a funny way, being a separatist might have been advantageous to me. It would probably have made me a less suspect figure on the left of the women's movement here—who I think have had difficulties with me. They wouldn't see me as feminist enough, you see. It's the old story of the hare and the tortoise. They always see me as the tortoise. They don't understand that often you're just trying to get discriminatory funding out of the Arts Council so there are not six traveling fellowships for women under thirty, or artists under thirty, so that women with children can't take them up. But I think the maximum pressure

should be kept up to bring these male resistances into the open.

About five years ago you would have found male writers saying, "Yes, there are women writers." But the inference would be: "These are women writers and not Irish writers—they don't belong to the great main discourse." One very eminent Irish poet said to me in New York: "I do accept that the energies of women writing are unctioned." Big deal! It's a very late in the day recognition! You can't be congratulating people on the recognition of human rights and the expression of it. So I think male writers might consider that I have an unconciliatory pose: and I think some of the left of the movement, as I said, too moderate. So it's an awkward position.

Your themes come out of women's experience. Won't the male poets and critics continue to object to that?

But it's the male poets who are separatist, you see; this is their separatism. They want to say, "There's a niche for this, a category for this. There's a cupboard for this—we can get rid of her: this is women's poetry." I certainly call myself a woman poet and I don't allow them to contaminate that particular category. But there is no way that they are not saying that ours are poems of human resonance and human import. I could certainly recommend to all women poets in this country that they argue on their own terms whether a poem is good or bad. We are not going to have an Irish poem to be a poem about a city or a bull or a heifer, but all the poems we write about—houses or children or suffering in the past—are women's poems. And that is where the argument is at the moment.

You won't get into a Virginia Woolfian dialogue on the aesthetics of the female sentence?

No, it's wonderful to talk about. But this argument may be in a cruder stage here. I think it may be at a more pressurized stage, and the ugly part is the intimidation for a woman to write a poem, get a book together, wonder where it's going to be published, how it will be received. In other words, the ugly part in every single minority in a writing culture is, "Where does the power lie? Who has the power?" I remember a woman poet who said to me, "I can't publish with a woman's press. I have to publish with another one so that I have credibility." To me that was a heartbreaking sentence because it represented all the oppressions women are under in this country. A well disposed male poet said to me, "If Salmon publishes just women (which it doesn't), it will do them harm." I said, "Why will it do them harm? You have been publishing just men for years!" Tears come into these chaps' eyes because they think: Here's Eavan on a social occasion, saying these hard things to me. Here is one window that is shut off. I think you must be very careful and try to open the window and not break it. You come to a point, you know, where you feel like breaking all the windows. And I have really been getting near that point.

Can you talk about the critique in Ireland; where does it come from?

Everything I've been talking about is due to the fact or emanates from the fact that the critique in this country remains obdurately male and patriarchal. It's a complex matter where a critique in a country comes from. It comes in a very simple way from the contracting out to reviewers by the literary editors, and that's a complicated system. I no longer review any Irish writers. Five years ago I decided not to do that anymore; I wasn't going to waste time. Therefore you have a critique partly made by the reviews contracted by the literary editors. Then there are the critiques undoubtedly made in the universities; and there's a minimum interaction between the newspapers and the universities. Then there's the sort of hum in a literary writing community which is made up of shorthands and off-the-cuffs—that sort of hand-to-mouth critique, which I have a great respect for. Although a great deal of vital work by women has been done, the critique is really sitting on top of it. It's made up of the defense mechanisms of an older writing culture which is predominantly male, and it's made up of everything, I'm afraid, from sneers to pious statements of what makes excellence. The great cry is that all this terrible sewage that people like myself have released into the literary waters is diluting the excellence of our great literature. Though how you can get an excellent literature if it is exclusive, I don't know.

And the language used in this critique? Words like "miniature" and "painterly" and "she's not representative of her sex" as a kind of backhand approbation?

Yes, there are all these code words like "domestic," which imply a restrictive practice within the poem itself. A woman said to me of a male editor, "He said the best poems I wrote were the least female"—instead of looking at the thing the right way around, which is to look at the work of young women, and asking, "How

are they putting together the Irish poem differently?" That is the real question. They are putting it together differently, and that means in itself to cast a light around what is being done in other ways and at other times. We need to look at all this as part of the legitimate energies that affect one another and country. But if you look at it that way, the critique is actually obstructing the perspective on that. So we are not able at the moment to consider in this country: how do young women put together that poem? What do they put into it and what do they leave out of it? We can't see that because the whole jargon surrounding it is very emotive. The most significant review to me was one in the *Irish Times* on my pamphlet, "A Kind of Scar"—the same essay that appeared later in the *APR* as "Outside History." The work was utterly dismissed. My editor said, "Should I do something about it?" I said, "Leave it." It's always to me a good thing when the murky undertows come to the surface.

Source: Eavan Boland and Nancy Means Wright and Dennis J. Hannan, "Q. and A. with Eavan Boland," in *Irish Literary Supplement*, Vol. 10, No. 1, Spring 1991, pp. 10–11.

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Runagate Runagate

ROBERT HAYDEN

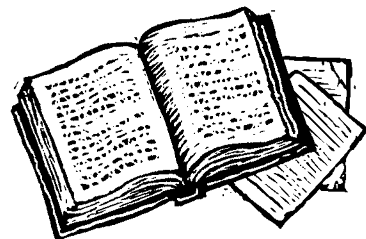
1966

"Runagate Runagate" is a poem by American poet Robert Hayden. It was first published in *The Poetry of the Negro*, edited by Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps, in 1949. Hayden later revised the poem, and in its final version it appeared in his *Selected Poems* in 1966 and was reprinted in his *Collected Poems* in 1985.

Set in the American South in the 1850s, "Runagate Runagate" is about the escape of African Americans, via the Underground Railroad, from slavery to freedom in the North. The poem is a celebration of freedom, a tribute to the determination of slaves to brave the many perils of their long journey, in which they were pursued by slave catchers with their dogs. In particular, "Runagate Runagate" is a tribute to Harriet Tubman, one of the great African American leaders of that time who not only escaped from slavery herself but helped hundreds of other slaves to do the same.

The poem is notable for the variety of voices and points of view that Hayden incorporates, including slaves, slave owners, and slave catchers. He includes quotations from and allusions to Negro spirituals and to contemporary documents, such as newspaper advertisements calling for the return of runaway slaves and wanted posters.

One of Hayden's most popular poems, "Runagate Runagate" is among several he wrote on historical themes concerning the experience of African Americans during the period of slavery.



Robert Hayden *(© Pach Brothers / Corbis)*

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

American poet Robert Hayden was born on August 4, 1913, in Detroit, Michigan, to Asa Sheffey and Ruth Flinn, an impoverished couple who soon separated and moved away. The child, named Asa Bundy, was left with neighbors, William and Sue Ellen Hayden. The Haydens raised Asa as their own son, naming him Robert Earl Hayden, although they never formally adopted him, a fact that Hayden did not discover until 1953, when he applied for a passport. Growing up with extreme nearsightedness meant that he did not participate in school sports; instead he took to reading, and he began to write poetry at a young age. By the age of sixteen, when he was attending Northern High School in Detroit, his ambition was to become a poet. His first published poem appeared in 1931, shortly after he graduated from high school. Hayden then attended Detroit City College (now Wayne State University), leaving in 1936 and not formally graduating until 1942. After college he began work as a writer and researcher for the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Project Administration. During this time he studied black history, especially the Underground Railroad and antislavery movement in Michigan. He wrote scripts for a radio station and news stories for the Negro Progress Exposition in Detroit in 1939. He also wrote reviews of movies, plays, and music for the *Michigan Chronicle*, a weekly newspaper read by black people.

In 1940, Hayden published his first collection of poems, *Heart-Shape in the Dust*. In the same year he married Erma Inez Morris, a schoolteacher, and studied under W. H. Auden at the University of Michigan, where he received a master of arts degree in 1944. He became an assistant professor at Fisk University, in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1946, and remained there for twenty-three years, rising to the rank of professor. In 1969, he became professor of English at the University of Michigan and remained in that position until his death.

Hayden published many books of poetry, establishing himself as one of the leading African American poets of his time. From 1976 to 1978, he was a consultant in poetry at the Library of Congress, the first African American to hold this position. His works include *Figure of Time: Poems* (1955), *A Ballad of Remembrance* (1962), *Selected Poems* (1966), in which "Runagate Runagate" appeared in its final version (the first version having appeared in *The Poetry of the Negro* in 1949), *Words in the Mourning Time* (1970), *The Night-Blooming Cereus* (1972), *Angle of Ascent: New and Selected Poems* (1975), and *American Journal*, published in a limited edition in 1978 and posthumously in an enlarged edition in 1982. His *Collected Poems*, edited by Frederick Glaysher, was published in 1985.

Hayden died of cancer on February 25, 1980, in Ann Arbor, Michigan, at the age of sixty-six.

POEM SUMMARY

Section I

"Runagate Runagate" begins with a seven-line unrhymed description of the flight of a runaway black slave in the American South. *Runagate* is an archaic form of the word *runaway*. The slave is trying to escape from slavery in the South to freedom in the North. The desperate nature of his flight is conveyed, as he runs at night, in darkness, through wooded terrain, unable to see much of where he is going, and falling often. He is pursued by men with dogs, tracking him down. It is a cold night, and morning is a long way off.

The runaway slave must cross a river, while legendary monsters (jack-muh-lanterns) five feet tall try to lure him into the swamps where he will drown. He just has to keep on moving until he reaches his goal.

The word *runagate* is then repeated three times, on three successive lines, each line typographically arranged so the line consists of that single word set progressively closer to the right-hand margin. These one-word lines are followed by a reference to a Negro spiritual, "Many Thousand Go," about the number of slaves who have escaped to freedom.

The poet then hails the North as the desired destination, connecting it to the biblical city (Jerusalem or Zion, although neither is directly named) where God will protect his people and they will find their freedom. The North beckons them like a star, the North Star that literally guided the slaves as they headed for freedom.

In the next three lines the poet alludes to the variety of unusual ways in which slaves have made their escape. One man packed himself in a box and was transported as freight (this may be a reference to Henry Box Brown, who was shipped in a crate from Richmond to Philadelphia); others have disguised themselves by their clothing.

These lines are followed by three lines that contain more quotations from Negro spirituals. The spirituals are "Fare Ye Well" and, for the second time, "Many Thousand Go," which includes the refrain, "No more driver's lash for me," and is also sometimes known as "No More Auction Block for Me."

The next verse paragraph is in the form of a newspaper advertisement put out by a slave owner calling for the return of two of his escaped slaves named Pompey and Anna. The advertisement describes their appearance and what they may be wearing. Anna has been branded with letters on each cheek. The poster asks anyone seeing Pompey and Anna to catch them and return them to their owner. Issuing such advertisements as a way of recapturing runaway slaves was common practice at the time.

Then another voice, starting at line 6 in this verse paragraph, is heard. This is the voice of a slave catcher, and he warns that catching the runaways will be difficult. They are resourceful and may prove elusive. The poem makes reference to a legend surrounding the escape of a slave who swam across the Ohio River, pursued by his owner. When they got to the other side, the master found no trace of the slave and speculated that he had somehow gone underground.

This verse paragraph is followed by another two lines of a song, about being willing to die rather than be a slave. The song is titled "Oh, Freedom." This is followed by another reference to the North Star as the symbol of freedom, as great as any material riches, and a line from the traditional song "O Susanna."

Two more repetitions of the title word, on separate, double-spaced lines, bring the first section of the poem to an end.

Section II

In section I, the runaway slaves were generalized, but section II focuses on one person in particular, Harriet Tubman, the famed woman who escaped from slavery and then helped many others do so via the Underground Railroad. (The Underground Railroad was not an actual railroad but a network of safe houses and hiding places and safe routes that the slaves could take on their way to freedom in the North.) Tubman is presented as a woman who was somehow produced by all the agony and suffering of the slaves, as well as by the power they discovered in themselves. She is both flesh-and-blood woman, her back scarred by whippings, and also like a shining star for her people because of her determination to be free and to help others escape to freedom.

The introductory lines of section II give way to another verse paragraph, this one in the voice of an escaped slave who knew Harriet Tubman. He tells about how the slaves journeyed to freedom at night, pursued by slave catchers with their dogs. The word *patterollers* refers to patrollers, or members of the patrol system, who monitored slaves in the South to make sure they did not go out at night without authorization. The slaves are frightened and start to doubt whether they will be able to reach their goal. But then Tubman tells them to stop talking like that. She points a pistol at them, telling them they must keep going or she will kill them.

Next, spread over six lines, is the text of a wanted poster for Tubman, which gives some of the epithets by which she was known, including Moses, after the biblical figure who led the Israelites to the Promised Land. Tubman, the poster states, is working with many of the leaders of the abolitionist movement and those sympathetic to it, such as William Lloyd Garrison (1805–1879),

Amos Bronson Alcott (1799–1888), Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1883), Thomas Garrett (1789–1871), Frederick Douglass (1818–1895), Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862), and John Brown (1800–1859). The poster states that Tubman is armed and dangerous, and is wanted dead or alive.

The wanted poster is followed by two lines addressed by a slave to the biblical prophet Ezekiel, asking if he sees God coming to free him.

Four lines follow that evoke the fear in the slaves and the spooky night atmosphere in which they made their flight for freedom. There are ghosts in the air; the word *hant* is used in the South to refer to a ghost or other supernatural being. The slaves must always fear what lurks in the sounds of the night; perhaps the rustle of the leaves in the trees is in fact the whispered voice of a slave catcher.

The poem then makes reference to the train on which the runaway slaves ride. This is a reference to the metaphor of the Underground Railroad. A five-line, italicized verse paragraph describes the train, the difficult terrain over which it has to pass, and the religious significance it holds for the escapees.

The invitation to ride on the train is repeated, followed by the final lines of the poem, emphasizing the resoluteness and determination of the slaves to win their freedom.

THEMES

The Dangerous Quest for Freedom

The dominant theme is the quest for freedom, pursued against difficult odds. The slaves are utterly determined to escape their condition of bondage. They seek inspiration all around them, from what they know of the North as the shining city that awaits them to their spiritual songs, which tell of many people attaining freedom and encouraging others to seek it. The poem oscillates between the slaves' protests against their slavery and affirmations of the proslavery position (in the advertisement by the owner who wants his slaves back and the wanted poster calling for the capture of Harriet Tubman).

In this deadly struggle between irreconcilable forces, the slaves are determined to succeed by any means and show great creativity in pursuing their quest, in spite of daunting obstacles. They have to travel at night when they cannot see their way. They are pursued by slave catchers who will return them to their owners, who will in all likelihood punish them severely. It is cold and dark, and they must wade or swim across rivers and swamps. The slave catchers themselves know how determined the fugitive slaves are. The chase is constant, and the slaves cannot rest for a moment. The feeling of movement runs throughout the poem. In the darkness of the night, the slaves never know when they might be confronted by their pursuers. Danger lies everywhere in the form of patrols and slave catchers, all eager to win the rewards offered by slave owners for the return of their "property." Although the slaves are

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY

- Research the Underground Railroad and its routes. Make a map showing the principal escape routes (or mark them on an existing map). What route might Harriet Tubman have taken? Using your map, give a class presentation on the Underground Railroad.
- Prepare a time line for the life of Harriet Tubman and use it to prepare a short presentation on her life to your class. Refer frequently to the time line during your talk. What personal qualities did Tubman possess that made her so successful?
- Read Hayden's poem "Middle Passage," and write an essay in which you compare it to "Runagate Runagate." Does the poet employ similar techniques in both poems? What are the similarities or differences in theme and subject matter of the two poems?
- Research the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Write a poem based on a dramatic incident in the movement, such as the first march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, in 1965, when marchers were beaten by police. As Hayden does in "Runagate Runagate," try to recreate the atmosphere of the time and capture different voices and points of view.

Harriet Tubman (The Library of Congress)

hunted like animals, with dogs trying to pick up their scent, they are propelled by the immensity of their suffering, which fuels their desire for freedom and gives them a power that belies their apparently powerless state. The final line of the poem, with its triple repetition, drives home the determination they show in their quest. They are never going to turn back; they are totally committed to gaining their freedom. They are thus given the final word.

Overcoming Fear

The fear experienced by the hunted slaves pervades the poem. It is particularly emphasized at the beginning, when they are fleeing at night and imagine that any shape they see in the darkness might spell danger for them and lead to their capture. However, the slaves are not defeated by their fear. They show great courage and resourcefulness in their bid for freedom, although in one incident, dramatized in section II of the poem, they falter. One night when the light from the moon makes it difficult to hide, and the shouts of their pursuers and the baying of their dogs cuts the air, the slaves are fearful and begin to lose heart. But then their leader, Harriet Tubman, seeing that the situation is desperate, aims her pistol at them and tells them to keep moving or she will shoot them. This is based on a true incident involving Tubman. As Catherine Clinton reported in her biography *Harriet Tubman: The Road to Freedom*, sometime in the 1850s Tubman was guiding a group of twenty-five fugitive slaves to the North. They had to hide in a swamp all day and long after nightfall, and they began to lose their fortitude. One man said he was going to return to the plantation, and despite persuasion by Tubman and the other slaves, he refused to move on when the time came. Tubman drew her pistol, aimed it at his head, and said, “Move or die!” The man was persuaded, and the party moved on. Within a few days he was in Canada, no longer a slave.

After the section that describes the wanted poster for Tubman, the constant presence of fear is again emphasized. Every shadow, every sound, in the night might spell the doom of the slaves, and they must fortify themselves with their religious faith, their spiritual songs, and their hope for a better future.

STYLE

Collage

The poem is like a collage. This term is usually applied to artwork in which a number of different parts, such as paper or photographs, are glued or otherwise attached to a flat surface. The poem achieves this collagelike effect by combining many different elements that are “stuck” to the white space of the printed page. The elements include snatches of, and sometimes direct quotations from, Negro spirituals, hymns, advertisements for the recapture of fugitive slaves, a wanted poster (for Harriet Tubman), and other poetic passages. These elements are all clearly differentiated typographically on the printed page, with variations in line length and spacing, both between lines (use of double spaces) and in the placement of individual lines, only some of which begin at the left-hand margin. The effect is that the poem speaks in many different voices, including first-person singular, first-person plural, and third-person plural voice, each expressing a different point of view. The voices range from slaves to slave owners, slave catchers, and Harriet Tubman herself.

Imagery of Darkness and Light

The imagery of darkness and light is employed in the poem to create the effect of journeying from the darkness of slavery to the light of freedom. It suggests that the physical journey is also a spiritual journey, like that of the Israelites in the Bible who were brought from bondage in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land. The word *darkness* is used three times in the first two lines to create the prevailing atmosphere, and is reinforced by a similar choice of words in lines 4 (twice) and 6. The slaves travel by night to escape detection. The image of darkness is then contrasted with the North, which is seen as a bright star beckoning, leading the slaves into the light. The star image is repeated near the end of section I. Harriet Tubman is also described in terms that suggest she is the bringer of light to her people. Darkness is evoked again in the four-line stanza that occurs near the end of the poem, and also in the four lines that speak metaphorically of the Underground Railroad. The images suggest that life, at least for the slaves, is a contest between darkness and light, and they intend to make sure that the light wins.

Metaphor

Beginning eight lines from the end, the poem alludes to the Underground Railroad by employing the metaphor of a train to describe the flight of the slaves. The poet seems to use two different speakers to convey the metaphor. The first voice occurs in a one-line refrain in which the speaker invites others to join the train. The second voice uses a five-line italicized passage in which the metaphor is extended, with references to the track on which the train runs, the name of the train, and the stations at which it stops, all metaphorically presented.

Syntax

Syntax refers to the way in which words are arranged in phrases and sentences. The first seven lines produce the effect of constant breathless movement as the harassed slaves run for their freedom. There is no punctuation in these lines, which means there is nothing to slow them down for the reader. The phrases are linked not by commas or semicolons but by the repetition of the word *and*, which occurs twelve times in these seven lines, evoking the continual succession of obstacles that keep piling up for the runaways and the sense that their flight is unending. This is also conveyed by the many repetitions of individual words and phrases in these lines.

The first line begins with four successive verbs with no subject. The reader is thrown into the action, the constant movement, without even being told who is doing the running and the falling. The subject who performs these actions, which would normally be used in conjunction with the verb, is not introduced until line 6, with the first-person pronoun. This is itself a surprise, since those initial four verbs are in the third-person singular, which would lead one to expect the subject, when it finally comes, to be "he" or "she." The technique in these lines suggests a film sequence in which people are seen from afar, running in darkness, with no explanation of who they are, and then the camera moves in on one person, as representative of the group but still not distinguished in any individual way.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Underground Railroad

During the early part of the nineteenth century, runaway slaves had only the North Star to aid them on their perilous journey to freedom in the North. But by the 1840s, the complicated secret network that became known as the Underground Railroad, run by antislavery activists and sympathizers, black and white, was well established. It stretched from the slave states all the way up to Canada. During the 1850s, it is estimated that about one thousand slaves each year reached the North with the help of the Underground Railroad, the majority being young males from the slave states of Maryland, Virginia, Kentucky, and Missouri rather than the Deep South.

Members of the Underground Railroad, almost all of whom were men, used code words drawn from railroad terminology to describe the way the system functioned. Members were "agents"; "stations" and "depots" referred to safe houses where the runaways could stay during the day. "Stationmasters" were those in charge of the safe houses. There were also "conductors" who escorted the "cargo" (the slaves) on a particular segment of their journey, and "abductors" who went into the South to fetch the slaves and guide them out.

Runaway slaves traveled by night, mostly by foot or by wagon but sometimes also by boat or train. Traveling either alone or in small groups, they would generally be able to cover about ten miles a night on foot. On reaching a safe house,

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **1850s:** At the end of the decade, there are 3,953,760 black slaves in the American South. Although the abolition movement is gaining strength, the *Dred Scott v. Sanford* Supreme Court case in 1857 is a setback. The Court rules that no black person can become a citizen of the United States. The ruling affirms the legality of slavery.

  1960s: The civil rights movement leads to more opportunities for African Americans. The Civil Rights Act, which bans racial segregation in schools, the workplace, and public places, is passed in 1964. The Voting Rights Act, which removes obstacles designed to prevent African Americans from voting, is passed in 1965.

  Today: Although the African American community faces many challenges, there is an established black middle class, and African Americans hold senior positions in government and business.

- **1850s:** The vast majority of African Americans in the United States live in the South. At the end of the decade, there are 226,152 African Americans in the North, and they are all free. In the South, there are 4,215,514 African Americans, including 261,918 free blacks.

  1960s: This decade is the last of the Great Migration, which refers to the migration of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North. The Great Migration began in 1890. Sometimes the period from 1940 to 1970 is known as the Second Migration, in which about 4.5 million African Americans move from the South to the North, West, and Midwest. More than 80 percent of African Americans live in cities. Fifty-three percent still live in the South.

  Today: In what is called the New Great Migration, African Americans are returning to the South, reversing the historical trend of over one hundred years. The return is largely due to economic growth and improved race relations in the South.

- **1850s:** The fight against slavery produces many African American leaders and heroes, including Harriet Tubman; Frederick Douglass, a former slave who escaped in 1836 and became an abolitionist, statesman, and reformer; and William Still, a freeborn man who was a civil rights activist in Philadelphia and a conductor on the Underground Railroad, helping sixty slaves a month to escape.

  1960s: Martin Luther King, Jr., a Baptist clergyman from Georgia, leads the civil rights movement and becomes a hero to millions of Americans, black and white. He wins the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964 but is assassinated in 1968.

  Today: In 2009, Barack Obama becomes the first African American president of the United States. African Americans are inspired by his success.

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the stationmaster would send a message, often coded, to the next station, alerting the agent there that the fugitives were on their way. Strict secrecy had to be observed because rewards were offered for the capture of runaway slaves, and professional slave catchers posed a constant threat. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 required that captured slaves be returned to their owners. The act also imposed penalties, including six months' imprisonment, for anyone who aided a runaway slave. Catherine Clinton notes the case of Jonathan Walker, a white sea captain who was an abductor in the Underground Railroad. Convicted in Florida in 1844 of aiding runaway slaves, he was locked into a pillory and pelted with rotten eggs. He also served nearly a year in jail and was branded on his right hand with the letters S. S., standing for "Slave Stealer." Clinton

Illustration of slaves escaping on the Underground Railroad (The Library of Congress)

also notes the wider significance of the Underground Railroad as "a full-fledged grassroots resistance movement, representing the true national goals of democracy and liberty."

Harriet Tubman

The renowned Harriet Tubman was born Araminta Ross sometime between 1820 and 1825 (no exact date is known) in Dorchester County, Maryland, the child of slaves. She had a harsh upbringing and even as a child was subject to whippings. She was also injured when struck in the head by a heavy object thrown by an overseer, and she suffered from headaches and seizures all her life as a result. She also had visions and vivid dreams.

In 1844, she married John Tubman, a free black man. Five years later, Tubman left her husband and escaped via Delaware to Philadelphia. No details of her escape are known; Tubman never spoke of it, but it is likely that the Underground Railroad facilitated her flight to freedom. To mark her freedom, she changed her name to Harriet. Her escape was remarkable, since few women attempted such a difficult task. As Clinton comments, "That she made this treacherous and unknown journey shows the nerve and resourcefulness that would become her trademark." The following year, Tubman returned to Maryland to help her family escape, including her niece and her brother. As a conductor of the Underground Railroad, she made more trips to the South and guided more slaves to freedom, becoming known as "Moses," who like the biblical Moses led her people to freedom. Over a period of eleven years, Tubman made thirteen trips to Maryland, rescuing more than three hundred slaves, including her parents. During these extremely risky expeditions, the last of which took place in December 1860, she was sustained by her strong faith in God; she also on more than one occasion had to think quickly and act with ingenuity to avoid being recognized by her former owners. The slave owners in the region knew of her activities and offered rewards totaling $40,000 for her capture. However, Tubman was never caught, nor were any of the slaves she guided to freedom.

Tubman settled for a while in Canada. During the Civil War she enrolled in the Union army and worked as a nurse. After the Civil War, she

lived in Auburn, New York, where she became an advocate of women's rights. She died on March 10, 1913.

The Civil Rights Movement

"Runagate Runagate" was published during the civil rights movement. Many historians say that the movement began in 1955 with a bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, which was aimed at ending discrimination against African Americans in public transportation. Over the following ten years the movement, led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., had considerable success in ending racial segregation in the South and ensuring that African Americans had the right to vote. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were both products of the civil rights movement. In 1966, the civil rights movement entered a new phase with the rise of the Black Power movement, which did not share the nonviolent philosophy espoused by King and his followers. "Runagate Runagate" is a potent reminder, as African Americans struggled to obtain full civil rights, of what their ancestors had suffered in their attempts to escape slavery a hundred years earlier.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

"Runagate Runagate" is regarded as one of Hayden's most popular and successful poems. Fellow African American poet Gwendolyn Brooks, in a 1966 review of Hayden's *Selected Poems* in *Negro Digest*, refers to "Runagate Runagate" as a "well-made and passionate" poem. In a 1971 review of another volume of Hayden's poems, Julius Lester, in the *New York Times Book Review*, refers to "Runagate Runagate" and Hayden's poems "Middle Passage" and "Frederick Douglass" as "three of the finest poems about the black experience in the English language." In a 1985 review of Hayden's *Collected Poems* published in the *Nation*, Edward Hirsch notes that "Freedom is the great subject of Hayden's work" and that "Runagate Runagate," as well as other historical poems by Hayden, succeed by their use of "the ironic juxtaposition of different voices," which gives such poems "an uncanny ethnographic basis, a profound sense of the human suffering caused by slavery." In his essay in *Robert Hayden: Essays on the Poetry* (2001), Critic Darwin T. Turner also notes this technique "of developing a poem through several speakers or voices rather than through the one voice," and suggests that Hayden's "interest in drama caused him to create a poetry dependent on several voices." In creating such poems, the reader "must distinguish the voices by the subject, the diction, the language, or the tone." Critic John Hatcher sees the poem in the context of the other history poems in *Selected Poems*. Noting Hayden's strong religious faith (Hayden was a member of the Baha'i World Faith), Hatcher observes in *From the Auroral Darkness: The Life and Poetry of Robert Hayden* that "the struggle of this one people [African Americans] clearly symbolizes in Hayden's poetry the aspiration of all mankind."

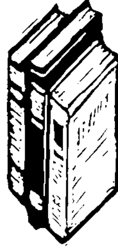
CRITICISM

Bryan Aubrey

Aubrey holds a Ph.D. in English. In the following essay, he examines Hayden's refusal to define himself as a "black" poet and the ways in which "Runagate Runagate" is not only a poem of the African American experience but also one with a universal meaning.

In many ways Robert Hayden's "Runagate Runagate" is a quintessential poem about the African American historical experience. Not only does it evoke the fierce struggle for freedom that slaves in the South engaged in for so many years, it at times uses a black regional language to tell the story. It is by an African American poet who spent many years, especially in the late 1930s and early 1940s, studying the history of the slave trade, slavery in the United States, and the Underground Railroad. Along with "Middle Passage," a poem about the rebellion on the slave ship *Amistad* in 1839, in which the black slaves took over the ship; "The Ballad of Nat Turner," about the leader of a revolt against slavery in Virginia in 1831; and "Frederick Douglass," about the former slave who became a noted abolitionist and statesman, "Runagate Runagate" is one of four historical poems about the African American experience that appeared in Hayden's *Selected Poems* in 1966. It might therefore come as a surprise to discover that during the mid-1960s, Hayden was challenged by other black poets and civil rights activists for not being sufficiently "black" in the way he perceived his poetic vocation.

How could such an unexpected situation have come about? The answer lies in the history of the1960s, one of the most turbulent decades in recent American history. Few felt that turbulence



WHAT DO I READ NEXT?

- W. E. B. Dubois was one of the most prominent African Americans of the twentieth century. In his highly influential book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, first published in 1903, he opposed Booker T. Washington's approach to racial issues in favor of a more radical program that demanded equal rights for black Americans rather than accommodation to existing inequalities. Several modern editions of this book are available.
- *Selected Poems (P. S.)* by Gwendolyn Brooks (2006) contains the best poetry of an African American poet who won the Pulitzer Prize in 1950 and was a contemporary of Hayden. Brooks held Hayden's poetry in high regard, writing a very favorable review of his *Selected Poems* in 1966.
- *The Vintage Book of African American Poetry*, edited by Michael S. Harper and Anthony Walton (2000), is an anthology of the work of fifty-two African American poets. The book covers a period of over two hundred years, from eighteenth-century slaves to poets born after World War II.
- *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes* (1990) presents the work of the leading poet of the Harlem Renaissance and one of the influences on Hayden's early work. When Hayden met Hughes, Hughes told him to concentrate on developing his own voice.

more than the African American community, which saw the dramatic success of the civil rights movement in the early part of the decade slow down and appear to stall by the mid-1960s. This led to the emergence of a more militant strain of black activism, known at the time as "Black Power," under the leadership of such fiery figures as Stokely Carmichael. The new young black activists expected those in positions of authority and prestige within the black community to speak out aggressively against racism and in favor of

HAYDEN, A QUIET, DIGNIFIED MAN WHO WAS DEVOTED TO THE PERFECTION OF HIS CHOSEN ART FORM, REFUSED TO GO ALONG WITH THE DEMANDS THAT POETRY WRITTEN BY BLACK WRITERS SHOULD IN EFFECT BECOME PROPAGANDA FOR A PARTICULAR POLITICAL CAUSE."

immediate political and social change. Hayden, a quiet, dignified man who was devoted to the perfection of his chosen art form, refused to go along with the demands that poetry written by black writers should in effect become propaganda for a particular political cause. Matters between Hayden and his detractors came to a head in 1966, the year in which "Runagate Runagate" was published in *Selected Poems*. Hayden at that time was a professor of English at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, a historically black college, where he had been teaching since 1946. Fisk was the venue for the First Black Writers' Conference, and Hayden found himself under direct attack by some participants who felt that his poetic creed, which he expressed during the conference as "the beauty of perception given form . . . the art of saying the impossible" (quoted by John Hatcher in *From the Auroral Darkness: The Life and Poetry of Robert Hayden*), was irrelevant for the times in which they lived, which called for militant social activism on behalf of a political cause. Hayden was criticized for not being an effective role model or teacher for black students. Hayden, however, stood his ground. At the conference he read some lines written by the Irish poet W. B. Yeats and commented that he did not need to be Irish to appreciate them. He insisted throughout his career that he was not a "black poet" but simply a black man who wrote poetry, and that he should be judged not by his advocacy of a cause but by the quality of his art.

Today, Hayden's stature as an American poet is securely established. Few would disagree with the assessment of Fred M. Fetrow in *Robert Hayden*, published just a few years after Hayden's death in 1980, that Hayden was "one of the most sensitively acute and expansive chroniclers of

modern American history and culture." However, it is interesting to return to that poem of the 1960s, "Runagate Runagate," and note how well it measures up to Hayden's goal of poetic excellence, as distinct from its subject matter, and also to ask the question: is the poem entirely about African American concerns, or is there a universal message in it also?

To begin with, the form of the poem, with its swift-moving montage of different voices and types of material, is unusual. It is hard to think of anything that resembles it, other than Hayden's own poem, "Middle Passage." The poem begins with a marvelous evocation of the struggle of one representative slave as he runs and runs in the night on a desperate mission of escape. As commentators often note, there is a sense of constant movement in these opening seven lines, which are not only long but lack any punctuation. The repetition of several key words creates not only the dark atmosphere but also the sense of the apparent endlessness of the slave's trek. One danger or difficulty after another presents itself to him. The fact that lines 2, 3, and 4 begin with the same two words, starting with the conjunction *and*, reinforces this effect. The present-tense narration gives a sense of immediacy, and the striking meter of the first line in particular reflects accurately the picture that is being presented to the reader. The first foot of line 1 is a spondee (two successive stressed syllables) and is followed by two trochaic feet. A trochaic foot consists of one stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable. It is the opposite of the more common iambic foot, in which an unstressed syllable is followed by a stressed one. The iambic foot might be thought of as the basic rhythm of the English language, so variations from it are easily noticeable. Trochaic meter is known as "falling meter," as opposed to the "rising meter" of an iambic line. It provides exactly the right effect in this first line, which is about the slave stumbling and falling as he runs.

After these seven opening lines, snatches of Negro spirituals appear, giving the poem its characteristic sense of the coexistence in the slaves' lives of suffering and jubilation, fear and hope, sorrow and exultation. In fact, the trochee that begins line 7 with the word *morning*, suggestive of light entering the darkness, has already set this dynamic in motion. The coexistence of opposites, the sense that life is a struggle between opposing forces, is what lifts the poem beyond its African American subject matter to embrace a universal theme. The universality is hinted at in the presentation of Harriet Tubman as a kind of mythic heroine who carries within herself opposing values. She comes from the earth, like all humans, but she also shines like a star, and is thus a beacon light for others. Her back bears the scars of whippings endured in childhood, and this might be understood as a metaphor for the wounds that all men and women, not only the African American slaves, carry in their struggle through life. To be human is to be wounded, to be scarred, but also to aspire to the freedom of the stars. As this poem, so full of kinetic energy—which represents the life force itself as it burns on toward its goal, overcoming fear, pain, and injustice—moves to its conclusion, the extended railroad and train metaphor carries it to its emphatic last line, the triple repetition ringing out like the triumphant final chords of a Beethoven symphony. This of course is not to deny that "Runagate Runagate" is primarily a poem that celebrates the indomitable spirit of African Americans at one of the most difficult times in their history, but it is also a universal poem in the sense that it speaks to all, black and white and all shades in between, who cherish freedom, both political and spiritual, in the land of the free—or in any land on the earth.

Source: Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on "Runagate Runagate," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2010.

Fred M. Fetrow

In the following excerpt, Fetrow suggests that biographical factors contribute to the sense of alienation in Hayden's poems, including "Runagate Runagate."

Robert Hayden (1913–1980), the first black poet to serve as Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress (1976–1978), both experienced and expressed the role of the "outsider," coping with personal demons of alienation while chronicling in artistic objectivity modern man's wandering ways in a psychic "no man's land." Perhaps because he was a minority in race, raised from infancy by foster parents, a convert to a religious sect of obscure and often misunderstood nature, and a dedicated artist in a society which does not much value poets, Robert Hayden found an affinity with others outside the mainstream of ordinariness or acceptability. As he often expressed his interest in poetic characterization in terms of "baroque" personalities, so he crafted many poems about those

Harriet Tubman (far left) with six slaves she helped guide to freedom (*The Library of Congress*)

he called "outsiders, pariahs, losers." Such works range in content, coverage, and theme from psychological profiles of fictionalized characters (often exhibited through dramatic monologue), through several heroes from black history, to personae in biographical revelation of the poet himself.

Study of these poems reveals not only much about the artist and his perception of the artist's role in society (an often lonely calling), but suggests as well the thematic paradox which Hayden found so intriguing: ironically, it is the outsiders who provide an "inside" view of society's values, its psychic energies, its most and least attractive features. Poems like "The Rag Man,""Aunt Jemima of the Ocean Waves,""[Incense] of the Lucky Virgin," and "Witch Doctor" subtly characterize modern society while portraying its victims. More generally, portraits of such black heroes as Nat Turner, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Malcolm X, and Paul Robeson collectively emphasize human strength and endurance in resisting oppression and persecution. And finally, most specifically, such works as "Names," "For a Young Artist," "The Tattoed Man," "Elegies for Paradise Valley," and "American Journal" lend understanding to the life, canon, and career of one of America's best and least appreciated contemporary artists.

Robert Hayden emerged from childhood feeling alienated and adrift both personally and culturally; his endeavor in an artistic calling verified that status for much of his life. Ironically, the legacy he leaves is a perception of the outsider's point of view, an inside look at alienation as a psychological state, as an informing element of poetic creation, and as a theme endemic and pervasive in American literature during the twentieth century. As I earlier summarized in another context,

> [p]erhaps the ultimate irony of Robert Hayden's life and art is that this "alien," this "minority" in race, in unique family background, in religious denomination, in "ivory tower" profession, and in lonely artistic calling, for all his singularity, was one of the most sensitively astute chroniclers of modern American history and culture. His themes are *the* American themes; his artistry in expression of them should put him in the first

WHATEVER EMOTIONAL PRICE IT COST HIM TO LIVE THE ROLE OF THE OUTSIDER, THAT PAYMENT HAS AFFORDED HIS READERS AN INSIDER'S VIEW OF THEMSELVES AND THEIR CULTURE."

rank of contemporary American poets. The same history for which he had such a great respect will in time return that respect in full measure.

When I suggested that Hayden was an outsider from the start, I was not exaggerating. Born Asa Sheffey Bundy (and named after his father), Hayden as an infant was left in the care of neighbors by his natural parents, while they went their respective ways in search of separate lives and livelihoods. Ruth Bundy expected to return for her son, but as those early years passed, William and Sue Ellen Hayden raised the boy as their own, giving him their name, along with almost equal portions of love and guilt. His foster mother never let the boy forget her charity, his ingratitude, and his natural mother's unworthiness. His foster father devoted his hard-shell Baptist morality toward an upright raising of his son; Hayden thus oscillated among love, gratitude, recrimination, guilt, and downright emotional confusion. His natural mother's return to the old Detroit neighborhood during his early adolescence did not simplify matters.

Some of Hayden's most widely anthologized work indirectly and artistically reflects these childhood circumstances and ambivalences. "The Whipping" recalls the stress of psychic punishment associated with ordinary discipline, and while the poet distances the actual experience (if indeed the poem does grow out of a real event) with careful combinations of point of view, tone, and symbol, the final appeal of the poem is its universality. Hayden thus reminds us all of the love-hate dynamic which both bonds and repels parent and child, as he recalls such emotional trauma:

His tears are rainy weather to woundlike memories:

My head gripped in bony vise of knees, the writhing struggle

to wrench free, the blows, the fear worse than blows that hateful

Words could bring, the face that I no longer knew or loved. . . .

Well, it is over now, it is over, and the boy sobs in his room,

And the woman leans muttering against a tree, exhausted, purged—

avenged in part for lifelong hidings she has had to bear.

He treats his foster father more gently in "Those Winter Sundays," but the regret for lost opportunity to express love resides within this poem as well. Hayden phrases the unappreciated devotion of his foster father as "love's austere offices," thereby implicitly characterizing even the warmth of familial love in terms of cold silence:

When the rooms were warm, he'd call,
And slowly I would rise and dress,
fearing the chronic angers of that house,
Speaking indifferently to him,
who had driven out the cold
and polished my good shoes as well.
What did I know, what did I know
of love's austere and lonely offices?

(*Collected Poems*)

The writing of such poems did not come easily to the artist; he often suggested the need to achieve what he called "psychic distance," a form of objectifying through carefully crafted poetic art. That need seemed almost to haunt him, as if he could put his past in perspective only by expressing its joy and pain in verse, but rarely did he indulge in confessional lyric unguarded or unannealed with the truth of art. For example, when he was in his forties and planning a trip abroad, in the process of getting a passport, he sent to Lansing for a copy of his birth certificate, using the name of Robert Hayden, since he had been told by his foster parents that they had adopted him as an infant. He discovered that he did not exist as Robert Hayden, that he had never been adopted, and that he had, in effect, lived his life under an assumed name. Not surprisingly, his mid-career poem "Names" expresses the psychic trauma associated with this realization:

When my fourth decade came,
I learned my name was not my name.
I felt deserted, mocked.
Why had the old ones lied?
No matter. They were dead.

And the name on the books was dead,
like the life my mother fled,
like the life I—might have known.
You don't exist—at least
not legally, the lawyer said.
As ghost, double, alter ego then?

(*Collected Poems*)

Indeed, with both his foster parents dead by then, he had to have his natural mother sign an affidavit affirming that Asa Bundy was in fact Robert Hayden (or vice versa). In that same era, while living and teaching in Memphis (another displacement, since he had great difficulty in adjusting to the racist, Jim Crow atmosphere or that Southern city in the 1940s), he read a newspaper article about a lost child who either could not or would not reveal his identity. Hayden immediately and emotionally responded to this all-too-familiar plight; a few months later he objectively responded with the account which allegorically tracks his own dilemma. The poem, entitled "'Mystery Boy' Looks for Kin in Nashville," after the news story caption, concludes,

And when he gets to where the voices were—
Don't cry, his dollbaby wife implores;
I know where they are, don't cry.
We'll go and find them, we'll go
and ask them for your name again.

(*Collected Poems*)

Little wonder, then, that Robert Hayden took special interest in the loners and loners of life. Perhaps originally without conscious intent, he eventually evolved into a deliberate spokesman for those dropped out or left out of social intercourse. As the portraits of such individuals increase in number, diversity, and subtlety, a reader of Hayden's works can discern recurring traits common to these "outsiders," traits which at once suggest the poet's moral priorities and society's questionable values.

All of these characters are intrinsically interesting as fictional creations and psychological profiles, but they also can be seen as either victims or survivors of social evil. One such victim in a poem called "Incense of the Lucky Virgin" has lost her man and her hope; all she has left is the overwhelming demand of caring for three children with absolutely no ways or means to do so (*Collected Poems*). After unsuccessfully turning to cultural conjure in the forms of "High John the Conqueror" and "[Incense] of the Lucky Virgin" (brand names for potions supposed to bring good luck and fortune), and after trying orthodox Christian religion (lighting candles in the church) to no avail, the woman despairs, loses her sanity along with her hope, and murders two of her three children so that they will not go hungry (the young son, like the father before him, runs away too quickly for her). Hayden does not moralize beyond the implicit circumstances of this modern rendition of the Medea myth; he simply presents the story in the dramatic monologue of her rambling discourse, letting the victim tell her own story with no self-conscious acknowledgment of effect, much less cause. . . .

Other outsiders in Hayden's pantheon seem to need neither our sympathy nor understanding—they perhaps tell us more about ourselves than we wish to know. "The Rag Man" is an interesting case in point. The speaker therein encounters what we would now call a "street person," a picker of rags who parades his poverty with inordinate pride. In the eye of the beholder the rag man appears both disdainful and mysterious; he cares not a whit for creature comfort or the approval of his supposed superiors. That seeming indifference unsettles the observer-speaker. As an exercise in psychological projection, the poem saw much about our social and moral values. As the speaker notes, the rag man has "rejected all / that we risk chills and fever and cold / hearts to keep" (*Collected Poems*). And he asks, "Who is he really, the Rag Man?" Hayden's poem makes that inquiry literally a rhetorical question; as he makes artistically evident, the rag man is his version of King Lear's "unaccommodated man," "the thing itself" which reveals the truth we need to face about human charity. As the poet's analysis of alienation so vividly shows, we value the wrong things. Because our compassion is only "our brief concern," we cling to our own rags of materialism and avoid looking too closely at the rag men among us. If we can't bribe our consciousness with a used coat or a bowl of soup, "we'd like to get shut of the sight of him." He may be the outsider, but we are just as alienated, if not more so, from each other, from our true selves.

Another profile of earlier origin yet similar ilk demonstrates an intriguing progression in Hayden's personal attitude and artistic development. "Aunt Jemima of the Ocean Waves" depicts a carnival sideshow character, a sterotyped black "mammy" who frolics among other more blatant freaks of nature, such as the snake-skinned man and spider girl. Hayden reported that he observed

just such a person once, and his initial poetic documentation of the encounter exhibits little curiosity and less compassion. As Hayden's speaker in that first version reductively dismisses the logic that makes "confederates" of freaks and racial stereotypes, he turns away, "weary of this stale American joke." In subsequent versions, however, Aunt Jemima emerges as a prototype of resilient endurance, a sarcastic, self-aware survivor, rather than either a contemptible con artist or pitiful victim. The "new" narrator's final image contrasts sharply with that former "joke"; the "new" Jemima is imaged as "'Sable Venus' naked on / a baroque Cellini shell—voluptuous / imago floating in the wake / of slave ships on fantastic seas" (*Collected Poems*). While this brief grouping does not exhaust Hayden's "baroque" character studies in verse, it does represent his interest in and portraiture of fictionalized "outsiders," whether they be drawn from his biography, his observations, or his intense imagination.

The poet's catalogue of historical outsiders is no less striking for the range of its inventory or the individuality of its members. In one of his favorite (and most anthologized) poems, Hayden captures the significance of Frederick Douglass in terms of what the poet deems the legacy of this black hero. Because the inspiring example of Douglass began a progress of the race toward freedom, Hayden in a masterful sonnet asserts that subsequent lives lived in *real* freedom will be Douglass's ultimate memorial. And he summarizes this notion through the contrast between exclusion and inclusion, as he claims that when freedom is "finally won,"

> this man, this Douglass, this former slave, this
> Negro beaten to his knees, exiled, visioning a
> world where none is lonely, none hunted, alien,
> this man, superb in love and logic, this man
> shall be remembered. (*Collected Poems*)

Harriet Tubman is similarly recalled and portrayed as a solitary figure fighting against overwhelming odds to establish personal and group liberty. Hayden also emphasizes her status as an outcast, as a criminal with a price on her head but also as an almost mythic liberator to her fellow abolitionists and "runagates." In the poem which he called "Runagate Runagate," Hayden thus symbolically "recaptures" Tubman and her role in self-emancipation, as she

> Rises from their anguish and their power,
> Harriett Tubman,
> woman of earth, whipscarred, . . .
>
> Wanted Harriet Tubman alias The General
> alias Moses Stealer of Slaves
> in league with Garrison Alcott Emerson
> Garret Douglass Thoreau John Brown
> Armed and known to be Dangerous
> Wanted Reward Dead or Alive
>
> *Collected Poems*

Significantly, although Hayden puts his heroine in the company of several prominent abolitionists when listing those "in league," in the narrative/dramatic segments of the poem he locates Tubman either alone or at the front of group of escaping slaves. She stands out because Hayden perceives her in those solitary terms: as an outsider determined to bring her "flock" safely through on that "ghoststory train" with its "first stop Mercy and the last Hallelujah."

In the Tubman poem, Hayden posited a portrait within a dramatically active poem, where the crafted rhythms of repetition and line lengths echo the pace of running cadences. In another virtuoso correlation of form and function, he briefly sketches a hero obscured by time and historical neglect. Indeed, the very brevity of the poem subliminally suggests that omission. Crispus Attucks, among the first to fall in the American Revolution (in the Boston Massacre), is explicitly tagged no more than a "Name in a footnote. Faceless name." Hayden's Attucks is a "Moot hero shrouded in Betsy Ross / and Garvey flags—propped up / by bayonets, forever falling (*Collected Poems*). In these four brief lines the poet manages through allusion and symbolism to speak volumes about patriotism, sacrifice, liberty, and racial freedom.

If Hayden's Attucks has dropped from the pages of history to mere footnote status, his Malcom X, like Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, has plunged outside of history. Hayden presents this controversial figure in terms of a spiritual quest for identity, and while the poem's title appropriately renames Malcolm with his self-chosen Sunni Muslim name (El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz), the subtitle more clearly indicates the nature of this identity quest. That line, "O masks and metamorphoses of Ahab, Native Son," clearly designates Malcolm both the culprit and the victim of a racist society similar to his fictional counterpart, Bigger Thomas, the original "Native Son" (*Collected Poems*). But the reference to Ahab also indicates the obsessive nature of Malcolm's fight for justice, his war against the evil he perceived in the white majority rule of American society.

From the solitary confinement of his prison cell Malcolm evolves into a militant racist with an almost noble hatred. Only late in his abruptly ended life does he find the revelation of spiritual unity—his "final metamorphosis," as Hayden calls it. This outsider finds a spiritual home in the company of true believers of Islam, as "He fell upon his face before / Allah the raceless in whose blazing Oneness all / were one."

Hayden's own conversion and his allegiance to the Baha'i Faith no doubt influenced him favorably toward the spiritual progression he discerned in Malcolm's life, and he said on more than one occasion that he felt Malcolm would have come to a faith similar to the Baha'i belief in the unity and brotherhood of all mankind. In that sense, Hayden's final view of this controversial outsider is one of admiration, where the positive elements in the man's life outweigh the negative. . . .

The life of the poet is a lonely calling based on solitary achievement; Hayden's career provides articulate testimony to that fact. But that outsider status also provides a unique vantage point from which to view, judge, and document the triumphant and tragic aspects of the society from which the artist has sprung. Paradoxically, the Outsider seems uniquely qualified not only to judge but to articulate that judgement with special sensitivity.

Robert Hayden more than once presumed to do just that to or for his native land. Perhaps the most successful and prominent example is still his "American Journal." written originally to commemorate the bicentennial of the United States as a nation (*Collected Poems*). Here the poet adopts a guise as far "outside" as one can imagine. His persona is literally an alien, an extraterrestrial from another galaxy, sent to live among, study, and scientifically assess the human species, specifically those of "American stripe." Hayden phrases his observations as entries in a journal kept by the investigator (hence the title/premise of the poem).

Without belaboring the detail, the "drama" of this journal involves the alien's inability to retain his objectivity, his uncertainty about how to capture in scientific analysis the essence of American "humanhood." His increasing fondness for his subject and its subjects becomes for him an emotional problem: how can he complete his mission and satisfy his superiors if he cannot reduce his observations to clinical statistics? In the final analysis of even the most casual reader, Hayden's "alien" is the poet himself, drafting a love-hurt letter to and about his "native land." The poet, the outsider who infiltrates his own society, concludes indirectly that the essence of America is that ambivalence, that attraction-repulsion of the best and worst that we are as a people.

From a man who considered himself an outsider in more ways than this brief essay suggests, we can learn more about those from whom he felt alienated and about those with whom he shares that sense of alienation, because finally and ironically, most readers from time to time probably belong to one or the other or both of these categories. Whatever emotional price it cost him to live the role of the outsider, that payment has afforded his readers an insider's view of themselves and their culture. Robert Hayden paid his dues to art; and we can share his legacy if we are willing to deal in the same currency.

Source: Fred M. Fetrow, "Minority Reporting and Psychic Distancing in the Poetry of Robert Hayden," in *CLA Journal*, Vol. 33, No. 2, December 1989, pp. 117–29.

Edward Hirsch

In the following review of Hayden's Collected Poems*, Hirsch identifies freedom as Hayden's "poetic touchstone."*

In "American Journal," the last poem in [*Collected Poems*] Robert Hayden—who once said that "nothing human is foreign to me"—wryly assumes the voice of an extraterrestrial observer reporting on a "baffling/multi people," a country of charming and enlightened savages, "brash newcomers lately sprang up in our galaxy." The engaged yet alienated observer was a fitting persona for a man who always identified with the figure of the outsider and who often referred to himself as an "alien at home." . . .

[It is] revealing that Hayden's alien stand-in observes and contemplates not the entire earth but only the portion of it called America, a place which is, as he says, "as much a problem in metaphysics as/it is a nation." For Hayden, America represented "a kind of microcosm," a heterogeneous new world working out an emblematic destiny. He was repelled by our "strangering" racial distinctions but intensely attracted to our ideal of freedom and, like his alien ethnographer, he spent much of his intellectual energy trying to penetrate and name some American "essence" or "quiddity." However internationalist he was in outlook, his life's work makes clear that he was an American poet, deeply engaged by the topography of American myth in his efforts to illuminate the

American black experience. He read American history as a long, tortuous struggle in psychic evolution, an exercise in humanity. An alien at home, he nonetheless contended with America as the place where "we must go on struggling to be human." His *Collected Poems* should become one of our exemplary poetic texts. . . .

Hayden's *Collected Poems* brings together work from nine books written over more than forty years. His first volume, *Heart-Shape in the Dust*, published in 1940, and his two pamphlets, *The Lion and the Archer* (1948) and *Figure of Time: Poems* (1955), are poorly represented here because he came to feel they poorly represented him. He considered his early poems "prentice pieces" and only a limited number survived for publication in his first mature volumes, *A Ballad of Remembrance* (1962) and *Selected Poems* (1966). Hayden's early work dutifully followed the themes and forms of the Harlem Renaissance and relied heavily on his experience as a folklore researcher for the Detroit branch of the Federal Writers' Project in the late 1930s. As his work progressed, he began to shed his first poetic models: Edna St. Vincent Millay, Carl Sandburg, Langston Hughes and, most important, Countee Cullen. Slowly he developed a consciously modernist style, a type of tersely written symbolic lyric, often with an Afro-American inflection, that was all his own.

By the time of *A Ballad of Remembrance*, which starts off the *Collected Poems*, Hayden had already developed his characteristic style: "meditative, ironic, richly human," as he wrote of Mark Van Doren. He was a "romantic realist," a formal lyricist with a feeling for the baroque, a symbolist poet who distrusted external reality but nonetheless felt compelled to grapple with history. Like his mentor Auden, with whom he studied, Hayden's work is a little anthology of poetic forms, though in general he favored two types over others: the spare, well-chiseled, "objective" lyric and the long, fragmentary, collage-like history poem. Hayden was never prolific and his *Collected Poems* is not a long book—in addition to *A Ballad of Remembrance*, it consists of *Words in the Mourning Time*, *The Night-Blooming Cereus*, *Angle of Ascent* and *American Journal*. And yet it has a profound and passionate scope. Every one of its poems is meticulously crafted. . . .

Freedom is the great subject of Hayden's work, his poetic touchstone. He considered the need for freedom a constant beyond history—"the deep immortal human wish,/the timeless will," as he said in "Middle Passage"—but understood that the struggle for freedom takes place inside history. In a number of long poems dealing with nineteenth-century America (which he once planned as a unified series to be called *The Black Spear*) Hayden rediscovered and celebrated a group of individual heroes, primarily blacks, who ferociously opposed slavery: Sojourner Truth, who "comes walking barefoot/out of slavery"; Cinquez, who led the successful slave rebellion on the *Amistad*; Harriet Tubman, who escaped from slavery and then became one of the most spectacular agents of the underground railroad, continually making the hard journey from "Can't to Can"; Nat Turner; John Brown; and, of course, Frederick Douglass. Hayden's characteristic method in these poems is the collage, a form which works by the ironic juxtaposition of different voices. In "Middle Passage," for example, he mixes his own descriptive commentary with the voices of slave traders, hymn singers and even the dead. So, too, he splices together and adapts descriptions from journal entries, ships' logs, depositions and the eyewitness accounts of traders. These formal innovations give his history poems an uncanny ethnographic basis, a profound sense of the human suffering caused by slavery.

Like Harriet Tubman, all Hayden's heroes "Mean mean mean to be free," and lead others to freedom. Their legacy is the lives their lives insure: the nameless slaves escaping to freedom in "Runagate Runagate," the "many lives" transfigured in "Middle Passage." This idea is resoundingly expressed in Hayden's sonnet to Frederick Douglass. . . . Hayden's fine rhetorical poem, reminiscent of Hopkins's sonnet "That Nature Is a Heraclitean Fire," asserts that what matters is not freedom for the self alone but the communal realization of the dream. In this sense he is a utopian poet.

Hayden's historical and public poems are counterbalanced by personal lyrics like "Homage to the Empress of the Blues," "Mourning Poem for the Queen of Sunday," "Summertime and the Living . . . ," "The Rabbi" and, my personal favorites, "The Whipping" and "Those Winter Sundays." Written at various times during his life, these poems rely on childhood experiences in a Detroit slum ironically known as Paradise Valley. Hayden refused to sentimentalize his past—as a child growing up his primary desire was to escape the world that surrounded him, and he also determined to remember it accurately. He was born

Asa Sheffey but raised as Robert Hayden (a duality that haunted him) and he knew both his natural and foster parents. He was bound to his childhood as the foster son of poor working-class people and remained committed to what he liked to call "folk" people: poor, uneducated, dignified, all those who quietly fulfilled "love's austere and lonely offices."

There is a certain detachment even in Hayden's most personal lyrics, a slight distancing of what he calls "the long warfare with self/with God." He once said that "Reticence has its esthetic values, too," and his typical method was to exteriorize and objectify the past by speaking about it in the third person, or by using the disguise of a persona. In a sense he was like the diver in the opening lyric of the *Collected Poems*: a man who needed to keep control as he moved down into the oceanic depths, who longed to fling aside his mask and be done forever with the "vain complexity" of the self but continually managed to pull himself away from the silenced wreck and re-commence "the measured rise." There is a muted but powerful longing for transcendence in Hayden's work, and the diver is close kin to the figure of the old man with bloodstained wings in "For a Young Artist," who begins sprawled out in a pigsty but ends by somehow managing to fly again, "the angle of ascent/achieved." Both the diver and the old man are figures of the triumphant artist. . . .

Source: Edward Hirsch, "Mean to Be Free," in *Nation*, Vol. 241, No. 21, December 21, 1985, pp. 685–86.

John S. Wright

In the following excerpt, Wright traces the trajectory of Hayden's career and discusses the motivations and inspirations behind his work.

In one of the quieter moments in the expanded edition of his last book, *American Journal*, Robert Hayden offers a rare, unmediated comment on the trajectory of his life: "When my fourth decade came, / I learned my name was not my name. / I felt deserted, mocked . . . And the name on the book was dead, / like the life my mother fled, / like the life I might have known." Other names, unwanted names—"Four Eyes. And worse"—kept Hayden inside and isolated as a boy, plying his abysmally poor eyesight with books. So "Old Four Eyes fled / to safety in the danger zones / Tom Swift and Kubla Khan traversed." That world of the artist's imagination seems to be a place of refuge but is in fact a danger zone, Hayden later concluded, because art is both cruel and mysterious. The cruelty of art, he alleged, is that it mockingly outlasts those who make it. The mystery of art he voiced in a simple question: "Why does it mean so much that it can determine one's whole life, make a person sacrifice everything for it, even drive one mad?"

HAYDEN WAS SEEKING WAYS, ON HIS OWN TERMS, TO MAKE THE TECHNIQUES AND INNOVATIONS OF THE NEW POETRY MOVEMENT OF THE TWENTIES AND THIRTIES HIS OWN, TO BRING *ALL* THE RESOURCES OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE—CLASSICAL AND VERNACULAR, POPULAR AND ACADEMIC—TO BEAR ON THE ILLUMINATION OF AFRO-AMERICAN EXPERIENCE."

The mystery of his own art he was most sanguine about, saw himself, in fact—in that veiled, allusive way he usually treated the details of his own biography—as a "mystery boy" looking for kin. If Robert Earl Hayden had been a confessional poet, he would probably have made more capital out of a life rich with the dramatic tension he wanted his poems to have. He would have worked more pointedly the flamboyant ironies of a World War I era boyhood in the "Paradise Valley" section of Black Detroit. He would have exposed and explored how his work's almost ritual preoccupation with identity, with names, and with ambiguous realities reflected the bruising fact that "Robert Hayden" was his adoptive, not his legal name and that discovering what that "real" name was served as part of his initiation into fuller manhood. If the confessional mode had better fit him, he would have chronicled also the "burdens of consciousness" that his dual commitment to human freedom and artistic integrity made him bear; he would have logged and jagged confrontation with the Black Arts writers which ultimately turned his long tenure at Fisk University into a trial of words and which made him for a moment seem a naysayer to blackness and so become one of a younger generation's many scapegoat kings.

But Hayden was not a confessional poet like so many of his contemporaries because, as he acknowledged he entered his own experiences so completely that he had no creative energy left afterward. He could admire the way that Anne Sexton, Robert Lowell, John Berryman, and Michael Harper made poems out of devastating personal experiences; but he countered, in his own defense, that "reticence has *its* aesthetic values *too*." And so, with words at least, he wore the mask, and won in wearing it the detached control and objectivity without which poetic marvels like his most widely acclaimed poem, "Middle Passage," would not have been possible. From the apprentice work of his earliest book, *Heart Shape in the Dust* (1940), to the closing lines of *American Journal*, he pushed toward the mastery of materials, outlook, and technique that would enable him to strike through the masks reality wore. And so he made himself, like Malcom X of his honorific poem "El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz," one of Ahab's Native Sons, though rejecting Ahab.

The continuities in the progressive unmaskings, which Robert Hayden described as his "slim offerings over four decades," are striking. His absorption with the past, especially the black past, provided one axis of subject and theme for him—an absorption that brooked no lost Edens, no nostalgia, but which transformed archetype and artifact into a poetry of revelation. At the same time, he was drawn more to the dramas of human personality than to things or abstractions or philosophical ideas. In *American Journal*, as in all his books, the places, landscapes, and localities he re-creates so minutely live primarily through his heroic and what he called "baroque" people—more often than not outsiders, pariahs, even losers. As he revealed in an interview with John O'Brien, Hayden thought of himself as a "symbolist of a kind," as a "realist who distrusts so-called reality," as a "romantic realist." And he couched his symbolist explorations of human suffering and transcendence in a world-view permeated by an omnipresent, though never obtrusive, "God-consciousness." Poetry, indeed all art, he felt, was "ultimately religious in the broadest sense of the term"; if poets have any calling beyond fulfilling the demands of their craft, he insisted, "it is to affirm the humane, the universal, the potentially divine in the human creature."

Hayden was explicit about his own motives in a little book, *How I Write*, which he published with Judson Philips and Lawson Carter in 1972: "I write poetry," he said, because

> I'm driven, impelled to make patterns of words
> in the special ways
> that poetry demands. Maybe whatever it is I'm trying to
> communicate I can most truthfully express in poems. I think I have
> other reasons, too. At best, though, I can make only very
> tentative statements, and they're subject to change without
> notice. I suppose I could say, with fear of contradicting myself
> later, that writing poetry is one way I have of coming to grips
> with both inner and external realities. I also think of my writing
> as a form of prayer—a prayer for illumination, perfection.

But he wasn't satisfied with any of this, thought it sounded pompous, high-falutin', though he knew it was about as close as he could come to an answer. The fuller answer, if more oblique, is projected, of course, in the body of his work. There Robert Hayden the timekeeper, Robert Hayden the symbol-maker, Robert Hayden the believer, Robert Hayden the wrestler with language and form, all voice in concert "the deep immortal human wish" that man be "permitted to be man," that injustice, suffering, and violence must yield, along with the inability to love on which they feed, what Hayden's Bahai prophet, Baha'u'llah, envisioned as the absolute, inescapable necessity for recognizing the fundamental oneness of mankind.

Far from embodying any naive optimism or sentimental religiosity, Hayden's vision of the human predicament and of human possibility presents love as characteristically an *agon*, presents God and nature as beneficences shrouding caprice or indifference, presents our slow progress toward the godlike in man as a scourging, scarifying journey through maze and madness. That "voyage through death to life upon these shores" (which his "Middle Passage" chronicles, for example) discovers its metaphors for sin, sickness, and salvation in the historic matrix of the Atlantic slave trade and racial slavery. But the death wish, the masks, the phantasms that lure the crew and cargo of the slave ship *Amistad* figure no less potently in the timeless and seemingly antithetical "easeful

azure" world of disquieting natural beauty into which the awestruck persona of Hayden's "The Diver" descends.

But lest we overstress the dark side of Hayden's poetic world, I should add that nothing in his work is *less* ambiguous, nothing *more* affirming of human hopes for illumination, perfection, and freedom than his gallery of portraits sketching the possibilities for heroic action in the face of even the most murderous and dispiriting forces. The flight *to* and fight *for* freedom dramatized in "Runagate Runagate," the rectifying resurrecting images in his "Ballad of Nat Turner," the transcendent fortitude captured in his dedicatory sonnet "Frederick Douglass," the unbowed tradition of communal artistry celebrated in "Homage to the Empress of Blues"—combine to create a lineage of heroic *presences* painted in rich hues and delivered from oppression and obscurity, presences to which all of us, at the level of will and aspiration, are kin.

As in the collections containing these earlier poems, in *American Journal* Hayden's portraits of the famous and the faceless alternate. The opening poem, "A Letter from Phillis Wheatley," is suffused with all the ironist's recognition of incongruities and his controlled acceptance of them: the Sable Muse holds tears and outrage in check with exquisite syntax and diction and with the somber humor that, in Idyllic England, notes the Serpent's hiss on the flickering tongues of the "foppish would-be wits" who dub her the "Cannibal Mockingbird," humor that dispels unseemly gloom with the amusement won from a soot-faced English chimney sweep's query, "Does you, M'Lady, sweep chimneys too?" Hayden's rendering of John Brown, originally commissioned to accompany a portfolio of paintings by Jacob Lawrence, reveals a man not cruel, not mad, but unsparing, a life with the "symmetry of a cross," driven by the "Fury of truth, its enigmas, its blinding illuminations." These familiar lives Hayden counterweights with those of the anonymous Rag Man who faces the wind and the winter streets with scarecrow patches "and wordless disdain as though wrapped in fur," rejecting the world and its fleeting pity; or "The Tattooed Man," a "grotesque outsider" whose body is a bizarre, sideshow mosaic that feeds his pride and repels the love he wants but "cannot (will not?)" cleanse his flesh to win. His is the heroism of the stoic ("all art is pain / suffered and outlived") and of the realist ("It is too late / for any change / but death. / I am I").

The poetic inspiration behind Hayden's images of the heroic came early in his career and stayed late. The apprentice poems of *Heart-Shape in the Dust* were largely imitative of the themes and conventions of the New Negro Renaissance, and reflected a young poet still in search of his voice. These first poems nonetheless made the rich storehouse of legend and lore (acquired by Hayden as a folklore researcher for the Federal Writer's Project in the late thirties) into an enduring framework for later achievements. In this first book, his long mass chant "These Are My People," his portrait of gallows-bound slave rebel Gabriel Prosser, the blues-toned resilience he pictures in the "po'colored boy" of "Bachanale"—all offered shadings of the ordinary extraordinary heroic spirit that Hayden would continue to sing long after the formulaic stridency and vaguely socialistic ideology in which these poems were couched had disappeared from his poetic scheme.

During these formative years, Hayden absorbed and reconciled a variety of poetic influences—Dunbar, Cullen, Langston Hughes, Millay, Sandburg, Hart Crane, Stephen Vincent Benet, Eliot, and Yeats. In his second book, *The Lion and the Archer* (written with Myron O'Higgins and published in 1948), and in *Figures of Time* (1955) Hayden showed the impress of what he later called "a strategic experience" in his life: as a graduate student at the University of Michigan he had studied with W. H. Auden and Auden had shown him his strengths and weaknesses as a poet in ways no one else had done. *The Lion and the Archer* and *Figures of Time* presented Hayden *as stylist* moving toward the baroque, the surreal, and away from what he rejected as "chauvinistic and doctrinaire." The dated dialect and colloquialism of his earliest work gave way now to dense, sculpted language which glittered and whirled like a prism. And though his folk themes and heroic motifs acquired a new kind of grandeur, his audience—his black readers in particular—were not uniformly pleased with the changes. *Heart-Shape in the Dust* had been praised in *Opportunity* magazine as "a tree marriage of form and content, a happy fusion of mastery of technique with the rough and raw material of life." And Robert Hayden had been pictured to be a worthy challenger to Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown as an interpreter of Afro-American experience.

But as the scathingly sarcastic review in *Crisis* magazine of *The Lion and the Archer* showed, Hayden's movement toward a more complex and consciously modernist poetry exacted the

high price of what would be a recurrent accusation: that he had abandoned his people and his political commitments for a poetry of arcane, overwrought diction and professorial pretension.

There is little doubt that Hayden's development as a poet has placed increasing demands on his readers; and Hayden himself—unceasingly self-critical—has acknowledged that he was inclined to be "perhaps oversensitive to the weight and color of words." But the poetic language and form he experimented with during that crucial phase of his career was no mere library poet's fixation on the ornamental and esoteric, nor any reclusive linguistic introversion. Hayden was seeking ways, on his own terms, to make the techniques and innovations of the New Poetry movement of the twenties and thirties his own, to bring *all* the resources of the English language—classical and vernacular, popular and academic—to bear on the illumination of Afro-American experience. He had "always wanted to be a Negro poet . . . the same way Yeats is an Irish poet." So he had always resisted the private temptation and the public call to restrict himself to the treatment of exclusively black experience. Yet he felt it was no paradox that he consistently found his most intensely universal symbols for human striving and strife in the materials of Afro-American life.

So with the appearance in 1962 of his fourth book, *A Ballad of Remembrance*, it was a Robert Hayden "meditative, ironic, and richly human"—qualities he ascribes to Mark Van Doren in that volume's title poem—who, full-voiced and with consummate control, created from "the rocking loom of history" and the scenes of modern American life the sweeping mosaic of word, color, image, syntax, music, and portraiture that won him the grand prize for poetry at the first World Festival of Negro Arts at Dakar, Senegal, in 1966. With this book the recognition of Hayden's achievements on the terms he sought it—as a poet and not as "a species of race-relations man"—was assured by the brilliant performances of "The Diver," "The Ballad of Sue Ellen Westerfield," "An Inference of Mexico," "Tour 5," "Homage to the Empress of the Blues," "Witch Doctor," "Mourning Poem for the Queen of Sunday," "Those Winter Sundays," "Middle Passage," "The Ballad of Nat Turner," "Runagate Runagate," and "Frederick Douglass."

Between 1962 and his death in February of 1980 Robert Hayden published five more books of poetry: *Selected Poems* in 1966, *Words in the Mourning Time* in 1970, *The Night-Blooming Cereus* in 1972, *Angle of Ascent* in 1975 (which recapped the work of the previous fifteen years); and finally the first edition of *American Journal* in 1978. In 1967, he published *Kaleidoscope: Poems by American Negro Poets*; and in 1971, *Afro-American Literature: An Introduction*. After twenty-two years' service at Fisk University, he went home to Michigan in 1968. He spent the final decade of his life dividing his time among his family, yet another generation of students, and a poetry that (after his favorite volume, *The Night-Blooming Cereus*), was less embossed, less erudite, more serene even when dealing with the violence and chaos of the times, unguardedly conversational, and measurably freer—freed now, as one perceptive reviewer realized, through an imagination given wings by wisdom, style, and the science of language.

That hard-won freedom permitted Hayden in *American Journal* to return with greater imaginative detachment and detail than before to the scenes of the childhood where, by his own acknowledgment, "cruel and dreadful things happened and I was exposed to all kinds of . . . really soul-shattering experiences in the home and all around me." And indeed, the book's emotional center lies in the *Elegies for Paradise Valley* stirred by the poet-persona's memory of a seance his mother arranged with a counterfeit gypsy to contact the spirit of a murdered uncle. Returning with Uncle Crip from now vanished rooms and dead streets to flood the poet's mind are the names and faces that make Paradise Valley a human kaleidoscope. And here in kaleidoscopic whirl, carefully wrought but unobtrusive, are all of Hayden's trademarks as a poet: the sensuous delight with aural texture and rhythm; the fluid syntactic and semantic shifts between the spare and the ornamental, the colloquial and the esoteric; the line lengths expanded and contracted for sinuous and staccato effects; the haiku-like concentration of image. Limned with panoramic sweep and surreal juxtapositions amidst a progression of subtly shifting stanzaic forms, human character here takes on the intense coloration of the exotic, the idiosyncratic, the alien, yet is shaded as almost always in Hayden's work by the common bonds of dying, of loving, and of evil. . . .

By contrast, the poems in the book's fourth section—on a loose spectrum of personal, religious, social, and political themes—are less intensely dramatic and ironic; and those that treat expressly

elements of Hayden's Bahai faith veer unperturbingly but less arrestingly toward the sectarian and declamatory. "Double Feature" playfully affirms the momentary relief cinematic fantasy offered to childhood comrades besieged by the miasmic ills of urban poverty. "Killing the Calves" links by cautious simile the squander abundance breeds with the murderous horror of My Lai. In "The Year of the Child," Hayden orchestrates a rite of passage for his newborn grandson, bestowing names as protective talismans "in a world that is / no place for a child." And in "The Islands" the collision the narrator feels between the tropics' lush "chromatic torpor" and the islanders' oppression-bred scorn, hostility, and raucous anger develops in lyric counterpoint first to the momentary fusion of his voice with their patois (a recurrent Hayden technique) and, then, to his release from history's endless, enervating evils in the fleeting, transcendental beauty of a "morning like a god in peacock-flower mantle dancing."...

Source: John S. Wright, "Homage to a Mystery Boy," in *Georgia Review*, Vol. 36, No. 4, Winter 1982, pp. 904–11.

Michael Paul Novak

In the following excerpt, Novak presents an overview of Hayden's oeuvre, highlighting "Runagate Runagate," and argues that the poet deserves more critical attention.

The emergence of Afro-American studies has caused a considerable scramble among publishing houses to produce anthologies of Black American Literature and to include black writers in anthologies of American Literature. Some of this activity has been admirable, atoning for a neglect, that probably only prejudice can finally account for, of writers of true significance like Frederick Douglass and Jean Toomer. But in the publishers' zeal to make amends and profits, sentimental and clumsy writers of the past, plus numerous contemporaries who try to substitute hysterical indignation for craft, are being presented as artists of importance. Anthology after anthology publishes black writers, particularly poets, who were neglected not because they were black but because they deserved to be neglected.

Robert Hayden, a black poet of considerable talent, was neglected for over three decades, and even today amid the hurried search for writers of his race he has not received his due. Hayden's first four volumes of poetry were all published in private or limited editions. His first significant recognition did not come until 1965, and, with ironic appropriateness, it occurred in Dakar, Senegal, where his volume of poems *A Ballad of Remembrance* (published in a limited edition in London) won the Grand Prize for Poetry at the First World Festival of Negro Arts. This was followed by his *Selected Poems* published in 1966 by October House and the 1970 *Words In the Mourning Time* by the same publisher. This latest book was nominated for the National Book Award.

AT THE CORE OF HAYDEN'S WORK IS SUFFERING, BUT THE SUFFERING IS NOT LIMITED TO THAT CAUSED BY RACIAL PREJUDICE."

Robert Hayden was born in Detroit in 1913 and educated at Wayne State University and at the University of Michigan where he won a Hopwood Award for his poetry. Most of his teaching has been done at Fisk University but recently he returned to the University of Michigan where he is now a Professor of English. He is married, the father of a grown daughter. A tall, attractive man, Hayden wears extremely thick eyeglasses and has had difficulty with his eyesight since childhood.

Although many of his poems deal directly with the experience of being black in America and have appeared in magazines like *Phylon* and *Negro Digest* and he has edited what is one of the better anthologies of the poetry of Negro Americans, *Kaleidoscope*, Hayden has stressed in his public statements that he does not want race to enter into judgements of his poetry. As the editor of *Kaleidoscope* he describes his own attitude in the third person: "Opposed to the chauvinistic and the doctrinaire, he sees no reason why a Negro poet should be limited to 'racial utterance' or to having his writing judged by standards different from those applied to the work of other poets." He obviously does not feel he inherited a black aesthetic with the color of his skin. Today when many of the young black writers in their understandable wrath against the criminal treatment of their people seem to be saying that suffering is an exclusive property of their race and that black writing is for blacks... Robert Hayden's attitude must sound suspiciously like the poetic version of integration.

Probably everything that needs to be said about being a black artist in America was said by Langston Hughes nearly fifty years ago in "The Negro Artist And The Racial Mountain." The opening passage of Hughes's article is often quoted against those writers who would deny their racial heritage.

> One of the most promising of the young Negro poets said to me once, "I want to be a poet—not a Negro poet," meaning, I believe, "I want to write like a white poet"; meaning subconsciously, "I would like to be a white poet"; meaning behind that, "I would like to be white." And I was sorry the young man said that, for no great poet has ever been afraid of being himself. And I doubted then that, with his desire to run away spiritually from his race, this boy would ever be a great poet. But this is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America—this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible.

But what has often been ignored is the conclusion of the article, which differs considerably from contemporary manifestos that call for a separation of black from white on all levels of culture. Hughes instead asked for a separation of the artist from his duller critics, white or black, with their preconceived notions. His is a call for the individualism of the black artist.

> We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.

Certainly there is nothing in Robert Hayden's work that would conflict with Hughes's seminal statement. There is no denial of race in Hayden nor is there any acceptance of a narrowness in technique, diction, or theme because of his race.

At the core of Hayden's work is suffering, but the suffering is not limited to that caused by racial prejudice. One finds it in personal sounding poems, in poems of Negro History and contemporary violence, in those about the Mexican poor, and even in his religious poems that center on Baha'u'llah, the cult figure of the Baha'i religion that Hayden professes. But also at the core of his work is hope—tough, unsentimental hope that challenges the pain.

"The Diver," the opening poem of Hayden's *Selected Poems*, sounds the keynote of much of his work. The speaker dives deep into the sea where he is drawn to the beauties of the water and the treasures of a sunken ship he finds there. In lines that seem to echo Keats, he considers remaining where he is, never again to rise to life, its confusion and pain:

> . . . have
> done with self and
> every dinning
> vain complexity.

But something ("Reflex of life-wish?" the speaker asks) makes him return as he

> . . . Swam from
> the ship somehow,
> Somehow began the
> Measured rise.

. . . "Those Winter Sundays," one of Hayden's quietest and most moving poems, portrays a father, misunderstood in childhood, understood too late now. The ending of the poem beautifully combines the particular details of the child's world with the agonizing realization of the adult's question.

> When the rooms were warm, he'd call,
> and slowly I would rise and dress,
> fearing the chronic angers of that house,
>
> Speaking indifferently to him,
> who had driven out the cold
> and polished my good shoes as well.
> What did I know, what did I know
> of love's austere and lonely offices?

Hayden's most characteristic style is a more explosive one than the above poems would suggest, filled with alliteration and complicated sound effects supported by a rather expansive vocabulary. At times his music and diction are reminiscent of Wallace Stevens, more often of Hart Crane, and in a few places, where the rhythms are most pronounced, of Vachel Lindsay. "Summertime and the Living . . . ," a vivid description of the limitations of a summer in the slums, has a quiet opening but ends on a note of high sound appropriate to dreams of escape:

> then Elks parade and big splendiferous
> Jack Johnson in his diamond limousine
> set the ghetto burgeoning
> with fantasies
> of Ethiopia spreading her gorgeous wings.

Robert Hayden's style and talent can best be seen in the title poem of his prize winning book, "A Ballad of Remembrance." The situation of the poem is confusing at first until the reader puzzles out that the speaker is a Northern black who has been suddenly plunged into the unnerving world of the Deep South city of New Orleans.

. . . As well as being a poem of striking and effective language and sound, "A Ballad of Remembrance" is a poem that confronts the choices that history has forced on most Black Americans today ("Accommodate... Love... Hate"). Hayden chooses the way of love, although not the way of the chiming saints, his being a human love that saves, one person for another, as the way out of the dilemma America has created for him.

Some of Hayden's finest poems are those concerning Afro-American history: "Middle Passage,""The Ballad of Nat Turner," and "Runagate, Runagate," the title a corruption of the word *renegade*—the runaway slave. In the latter poem we see the figure of Harriet Tubman, more vividly than in hundreds of pages by historians:

> And this was the way of it, brethren brethren,
> way we journeyed from Can't to Can.
> Moon so bright and no place to hide,
> the cry up and the patterollers riding,
> hound dogs belling in bladed air.
> And fear starts a-murbling, Never make it,
> we'll never make it. *Hush that now*,
> and she's turned upon us, levelled pistol
> glinting in the moonlight:
> Dead folks can't jaybird-talk, she says;
> you keep on going now or die, she says.

"Middle Passage" is Hayden's most ambitious poem and possibly his best. The title not only refers to the historical route of the slave ships but also to a middle passage in life, a place for a sea-change, a transformation. There are three historical speakers in the poem—the first a member of a crew troubled by the terrible treatment of the slaves, the second a tough slaver describing the purchase of the Africans... and third, a self-righteous member of *The Amistad* recounting the revolt led by the slave Cinquez.

The poem is controlled, however, by a fourth voice, out of time, who through a series of refrain-like passages gives us the meaning of the poem. Alluding ironically to *The Tempest*, Hayden shows the economic significance of "black gold."

> Deep in the festering hold thy father lies,
> of his bones New England pews are made,
> those are altar lights that were his eyes.

But through this "Voyage through death,/ voyage whose chartings are unlove" come other transformations, most significantly that of Cinquez, "the black prince." He becomes in his revolt a "deathless primaveral image/life that transfigures many lives." "Middle Passage" is a searing recreation of the horrors of the slave trade, one that plunges into the darkest and deepest meanings of history—through the "Voyage through death/to life upon these shores."

In the 1970 volume *Words in the Mourning Time* Hayden attempts to portray recent history. There are poems about the life and death of Malcolm X, Vietnam, the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, but the events often seem to overwhelm his craft. There are effective poems in the book but none as memorable as the best poems in *Selected Poems*. They seem thinner, more hesitant than the earlier work as if the mourning has become too great for the words.

The final poem of Hayden's *Selected Poems* is a masterful rolling piece of rhetoric that illustrates again his major themes of pain and hope. It is a poem both reminiscent of and in marked contrast with LeRoi Jones's more recent "A Poem for Black Hearts" about Malcolm X. The contrast might help in part to account for Jones's fame and Hayden's relative obscurity. Hayden's poem is entitled "Frederick Douglass."

> When it is finally ours, this freedom, this liberty, this beautiful
> and terrible thing, needful to man as air,
> usable as earth; when it belongs at last to all,
> when it is truly instinct, brain matter, diastole, systole,
> reflex action; when it is finally won; when it is more
> than the gaudy mumbo jumbo of politicians:
> this man, this Douglass, this former slave, the Negro
> beaten to his knees, exiled, visioning a world
> where none is lonely, none hunted, alien,
> this man, superb in love and logic, this man
> shall be remembered. Oh, not with statues' rhetoric,
> not with legends and poems and wreaths of bronze alone,
> but with the lives grown out of his life, the lives
> fleshing his dream of the beautiful, needful thing.

Source: Michael Paul Novak, "Meditative, Ironic, Richly Human: The Poetry of Robert Hayden," in *Midwest Quarterly*, Vol. 15, No. 3, Spring 1974, pp. 276–85.

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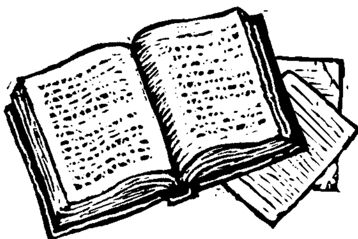
> Williams traces Hayden's development as a poet over the entire course of his career. She also includes a biographical sketch, a chronology of Hayden's life, a chronological listing of all Hayden's poetry, and a list of his readings.

Some People Like Poetry

WISŁAWA SZYMBORSKA

1993

Originally published in Polish as “Niektorzy lubia poezje” in the volume *Koniec i poczatek* (1993; the title translates to “The End and the Beginning” but was not published in English translation), “Some People Like Poetry” is a short poem in which the poet, Szymborska, explores the question of the nature and purpose of verse. The title is sometimes translated as “Some Like Poetry.” A Polish poet who witnessed and survived the Nazi invasion of Poland in World War II and the subsequent Communist takeover of her country, Szymborska’s poetry addresses the weighty themes of war as well as simple everyday experiences. Her work began being extensively translated into English following her winning of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1996. “Some People Like Poetry” is included in the 1998 collection *Poems: New and Collected, 1957–1997*, translated from the Polish by Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh.



Within the three apparently straightforward stanzas of “Some People Like Poetry,” Szymborska comments on each of the words in her title, investigating the greater complexity of the individual ideas. She questions which and how many people actually like poetry, contemplates the notion of what it means to truly “like” something, and then, in the final stanza, poses the enormous question of what poetry is. Not often treated individually by critics in assessments of Szymborska’s body of work, the little poem is exemplary in many ways of her ambiguous style,

Wisława Szymborska (AP Images)

in that it approaches a broad topic with great philosophical scope and yet treats the serious subject in an ostensibly lighthearted manner. Szymborska's structure, images, and word choice in this poem contribute to the reader's impression that the topic has been explored with intellectual precision but has remained unresolved.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Born in 1923 in the town of Bnin (now part of Kórnik) in western Poland, Szymborska and her family moved to the larger city of Kraków when she was eight years old. During the German occupation of Poland (1939–1945), Szymborska attended illegal classes and later, after the war, studied Polish literature as well as sociology at Jagiellonian University, in Kraków. There she met the well-known Polish poet Czesław Miłosz. In the years following World War II, Poland endured a Communist takeover under the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin, who was attempting to consolidate the power of the Soviet Union in Europe. For a time, poets in Poland faced censorship or political persecution if their work did not adhere to the Soviet proscription that literature be used as a means of state propaganda. Rather than not be published at all, Szymborska and others chose to conform to the Soviet demand for "socialist realism," in which works by visual and literary artists were required to exalt Communist social and political ideals. Szymborska's early poems reflect this propagandist goal.

Following a violent uprising by Polish workers in 1956, the Soviets began to ease the stranglehold of censorship on Polish writers and artists. Szymborska subsequently began to experiment with forms and styles that were more reflective of her personal artistic goals and viewpoints. Despite the absence of an overt renunciation of the work she did during the socialist realist years, her 1957 poem "Dwie Małpy Bruegla" ("Brueghel's Two Monkeys") has been viewed as her protest against the repression experienced under Stalinism. Following the 1995 English publication of *View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems*, a collection that includes translations of a number of Szymborska's earlier poems from several volumes and which was published in Polish a year later as *Widok z ziarnkiem piasku: 102 wiersze* (View with a Grain of Sand: 102 Poems), Szymborska was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1996. "Some People Like Poetry" was originally published in English translation that same year in two journals by different translators. Joanna Trzeciak's translation was published on October 21, 1996, in the *New Yorker*, and Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh's translation was published on October 28, 1996, in the *New Republic*. It was Barańczak and Cavanagh's translation that was later published in Szymborska's 1998 collection *Poems: New and Collected, 1957–1997*. Szymborska continues to live in Kraków and to write poems in Polish, many of which are translated for American journals and collections. Her latest collection of poetry in English translation is *Monologue of a Dog*, published in 2006.

POEM SUMMARY

Stanza 1

In each of the unrhymed stanzas of the short poem "Some People Like Poetry," Szymborska explains, qualifies, or explores a section of the title of the poem. In the first stanza, she discusses what is meant by the "some" in "Some People Like Poetry." She underscores the notion that the number of people who like poetry is quite limited, and she discounts appreciation of poetry that is accomplished in school, where at least a feigned understanding or enjoyment of poetry is required of students. Also eliminated from the equation are poets, who by virtue of their occupation must appreciate poetry and therefore should not be counted among the general population of people who might like poetry. In the poet's estimation, the final answer to the

question of who these "some" people are who like poetry, not counting students or poets, is approximately two people in every thousand. Szymborska's language in this stanza is straightforward, and the tone is lighthearted, despite the irony of her admission that very few people actually enjoy the art form through which she is conveying these sentiments.

Stanza 2

In the next stanza, Szymborska moves away from the almost mathematical analysis of the first stanza, in which she quantifies the notion of "some," to a linguistic study of the way in which something can be liked. She lists various things that people like, leaving it to the reader to assess the subtle differences in the way people like a favorite scarf or a color, for example, as opposed to a compliment or getting your way. Other items presented in the category of things people like are chicken noodle soup and petting one's dog. The list is quite varied and suggests that the notion of liking something is more complex than it appears at first blush. By itemizing these particular things that people like, Szymborska, without asking a direct question, hints that our liking of a thing, such as poetry, may be motivated by any number of variables, such as the tactile pleasure we derive from reading it, or the intellectual satisfaction achieved from understanding it, or the emotional gratification gained from participating in a tacit exchange with the poet.

Stanza 3

As the poem progresses, it grows increasingly more theoretical. In the third and final stanza, Szymborska poses a question that is even more philosophically bloated than the ideas presented in the first two stanzas. She asks what poetry actually is. This is the first time in the poem where she directly asks a question, as well as the first time she does not offer some inkling or guidance to the reader about the idea she is pondering. Rather, Szymborska acknowledges that many have attempted to answer this difficult question in the past. Rather than striving to do so herself, she insists that she will keep to the path of not knowing the answer. Furthermore, Szymborska indicates that in her experience, there is some redemption to be found in adhering to this path of not knowing. Her phrasing in the final lines of the stanza suggests not only that she does not know what poetry truly is but also that seeking an answer to the question is a counterproductive endeavor if one is to continue to write poetry.

THEMES

The Nature and Purpose of Poetry

Szymborska's "Some People Like Poetry" is about ideas. It suggests in particular the idea that poetry is a creation with a design, an intent to offer pleasure of some kind, to individuals prepared to appreciate it. While each stanza of the poem assesses an individual aspect of the poem's title, the stanzas work together to suggest what poetry possibly means, in terms of both its nature and its purpose, to Szymborska. Her analyses of the ideas of "some" and "like" and "poetry" essentially all appear to be attempts to pinpoint a definition or to flesh out a concrete understanding of poetry. Yet in the last stanza, the poet makes plain that such a precise comprehension is not only unnecessary but also perhaps undesirable. The last stanza, in fact, is a refutation of the process outlined in the first two stanzas.

This analytic process is almost scientific in its approach. Szymborska, through the course of the poem, comments on the title, exploring in an apparently methodical manner how many people actually like poetry, how people may truly like poetry, and what exactly it is they are liking. In the first stanza, Szymborska carefully explores the notion of "some" as a quantifiable group of people. From the group of people to whom poetry is possibly appealing, she eliminates those who are forced into the study of poetry (students) and poets themselves, since they obviously already appreciate poetry. The important point here is the poet's interest in actual assessment. Her estimation of the number of people who like poetry is not a vague figure, it is an actual number: possibly two people in every thousand. She takes equal pains with her assessment of what it means to like a thing. By itemizing a number of different things that people may like, Szymborska suggests the multiplicity in the meaning of liking: things may be liked in a variety of ways. Liking soup is related to nourishment and sensory pleasure; liking compliments is concerned with self-worth; liking a particular color is a somewhat random thing, whereas liking a scarf that has been in one's possession for

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY

- "Some People Like Poetry" is a free-verse poem in which Szymborska employs the openness of the form to explore philosophical questions about knowledge and poetry. Using Szymborska's poem for direction, compose and share your own free-verse poem in which you respond to Szymborska's by contemplating your own views on the nature and purpose of poetry.
- Szymborska was just establishing herself as a poet with the publication of *Wołanie do Yeti* (*Calling Out to Yeti*) in 1957, shortly after the socialist realist period. Her work has spanned decades. Select a poem from that volume (fifteen are included in *Poems: New and Collected, 1957–1997*) to compare with a poem from Szymborska's 2006 volume *Monologue of a Dog*. How has the poet's style changed over the years, if at all? Does she treat similar subject matter and themes? Consider the historical time period when each poem was written. Are differences in style, tone, and theme attributable to Szymborska's evolution as a poet, or are such differences particular to the times in which the poems were written? Write an essay on your findings.
- Many of Szymborska's poems were written during the period when Polish people lived under Communist rule. Research the Soviet occupation of Poland. How did the Communist government affect the everyday lives of Polish people? What political resistance did the government face from Poles? Consider as well the attitudes of the rest of the world toward Communist Poland. Did other countries intervene in Polish politics or offer asylum to Poles who left their homeland? Prepare an oral presentation or written report on your research.
- Much of Szymborska's poetry is characterized by her discussion or itemization of aspects of everyday life. For example, in "Some People Like Poetry," Szymborska lists various things that people may like (soup, scarves, colors, compliments, petting dogs, getting your way) in order to explore the numerous ways in which objects, activities, and feelings may be enjoyed or appreciated. Research everyday life in Poland today. What common foods do Polish people enjoy? What are their typical leisure activities or musical tastes? What books or movies are currently popular in the country? Create a presentation in which you display objects, images, or other examples of items representing everyday life in modern Poland.

some time is tied up intrinsically with memory and emotional attachment. Liking to have one's way is about personal satisfaction and ego, to some extent, and liking to pet one's dog may be as much about tactile enjoyment as it is about feeling comforted and offering comfort in return. By not stating directly how liking is actually related to poetry, Szymborska allows the reader to question his or her own response to poetry. Do we like it in the same way we like chicken soup, or in the same way we like having our way? What reaction does poetry create in us, and do we enjoy or appreciate that sensation? Through the examples given in this stanza, Szymborska suggests the variety of purposes poetry may serve for the reader, but she does not state her own purposes for reading or writing poetry. The open-endedness itself is perhaps part of her point.

In the poem's final stanza, the process of qualification and exploration of meaning established in the first two stanzas is abandoned. In the last stanza Szymborska focuses no longer on how poetry may be perceived and appreciated,

Chicken noodle soup *(Image copyright ifoto, 2009. Used under license from Shutterstock.com)*

instead turning to what it truly is. When confronted with the question of what poetry is, exactly, Szymborska embraces a willful ignorance. While acknowledging that many answers have been put forth to address the question, she does not list any of these possible answers, as she has done in the second stanza in listing the possible ways things may be liked. Rather, she simply states her preference for *not knowing* what poetry is. The not-knowing offers salvation, something she clutches like a tangible support, or a lifeline. The connotation is one bordering on desperation. The desire to retain an idea of poetry that cannot be inscribed by concrete boundaries is suggested by the poet's refusal to even attempt an explanation of poetry. Such a limitless view of the nature of poetry may provide Szymborska with the redemption she speaks of, and perhaps explains the value and the purpose of poetry for her.

Language and Meaning

Szymborska's approach to exploring the nature and purpose of poetry is one in which her focus on multiplicity of meaning is revealed. Just as she emphasizes the various ways in which poetry in general may be perceived by the reader, Szymborska also suggests the myriad ways in which individual words may be understood. Regarding Szymborska's use of the word "like," for example, one perceives the many shades of meaning conveyed by the word. For Szymborska, language is not locked into a concrete set of conventions; rather, there is a disconnect between word and meaning, between symbol and that which is symbolized. While some writers may exploit this disassociation between language and meaning in order to highlight a sense of loss, Szymborska seems to glory in the possibilities. Her poem, in its positive tone and emphasis on redemption, underscores the fullness of the potential of language rather than mourning an absence of understanding in the gap between language and meaning.

STYLE

Free Verse

Szymborska's "Some People Like Poetry" is an example of a free-verse poem. It lacks a pattern of accented and unaccented syllables (known as meter). Rather than following a metrical rhythm in her poem, Szymborska employs the rhythm of natural speech. Additionally, free-verse poems such as "Some People Like Poetry" are unrhymed. The lengths of the lines, in turn, are irregular, another hallmark of free-verse poetry. These elements combine to give Szymborska's poem an easy conversational tone. It is as if the reader is speaking with the poet, or at least hearing her think out loud.

Irony

Szymborska's poem employs verbal irony. Irony is a figure of speech in which the way a sentiment is expressed stands in contrast to what is actually meant or what the reader expects. Szymborska uses irony in several ways in this poem. While as a free-verse poem "Some People Like Poetry" lacks formal structure, rhythm, and rhyme, and even though Szymborska's tone is light and conversational, the poem nevertheless tackles the weighty philosophical issues of the nature and purpose of poetry. In the first stanza, Szymborska attempts to identify the number of people who truly like poetry. She discounts students in

school, where, she posits, you are required to like it. The irony in this line concerns the students who do, in reality, like poetry, regardless of the requirement that they study it; one might expect that the poet would not wish to discount any people who legitimately like poetry in her assessment. Poets are also eliminated from Szymborska's calculations, with the assumption being that they certainly must like poetry as practitioners of the art form. It is also ironic that Szymborska admits that such a small amount of people may actually like the art form she is currently engaged in creating.

The critic Ewa Gajer, in a 1997 article for the journal *Hecate*, discusses Szymborska's use of irony in "Some People Like Poetry." Gajer specifically points to Szymborska's emphasis on the word "like" and to the way the poet questions the way the word is used regarding one's feelings about poetry. The irony in this second stanza is that Szymborska compares the appreciation of a complex literary creation—a poem—to the simpler enjoyment one derives from eating soup or petting a dog, for example. Gajer observes that this same ironic attitude is employed by Szymborska in a large number of her poems, particularly in those in which she offers fresh responses to old problems. This, it may be argued, is precisely what Szymborska is attempting to do in "Some People Like Poetry"—to use irony in an effort to provide a new answer to the old question of what poetry truly is.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Communist and Post-Communist Poland

Szymborska began writing poetry for publication at the end of World War II, but just as she had finished crafting her first volume of poems, the harsh realities of being an artist in Stalinist Poland became apparent. During the war, Poland was a battleground between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. By the war's end, the Soviets, under the leadership of Joseph Stalin, had driven out the Nazis and had taken control of Poland. According to Edward Hirsch in his 1999 book *Responsive Reading*, Szymborska had her first volume of poetry slated for publication in 1949. During that year, Hirsch explains, the mandate of socialist realism was imposed on writers and artists by Soviet decree. Due to Szymborska's volume's focus on the war, it was deemed unpublishable, as it did nothing to glorify the Communist party. Such strict Stalinist censorship began to be loosened in 1956. That year in Poland, mass demonstrations against the Communist system of government occurred in the city of Poznań. Around this time, Nikita Khrushchev (who had assumed the role of First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1953 following the death of Stalin) denounced the Stalinist practices of the Soviet Communist Party. Szymborska was now free to publish poetry that served her own purposes, rather than serving the propagandist purposes of the Communist Party. Some censorship remained, but in general, works that did not overtly criticize the government were allowed to be published.

As the decades passed, despite brief periods of stability and economic growth, Poles grew increasingly discontent with their Communist overseers. During the 1980s, massive labor strikes resulted in the establishment of trade unions. With workers consolidating their power, the Communist leadership began to grow fearful of increasingly strident opposition to their rule. Martial law was imposed, and the 1980s were known as a decade of economic crisis in Poland. Szymborska, like other writers at this time, published her work in an exile periodical produced in Paris. It is within this framework that her later work must be understood. Under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev (who served as the last General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, from 1985 through 1991), the Soviet Communist Party allowed semifree elections during the final years of the 1980s, and by 1989, Poland had elected its own government, thereby ending Communist rule in Poland. It was under these stressful economic and political circumstances that Szymborska rose to literary prominence in her own country and around the world. When Szymborska wrote "Some People Like Poetry" in 1993, the first freely elected parliament had just served its full term, and the nation's second round of elections was taking place. Also at this time, the last of the Soviet troops had finally exited Poland. It was a time of optimism as well as reflection. Such varying viewpoints are expressed in the poetry Szymborska wrote in the early 1990s. Some of the poems in the volume in which "Some People Like Poetry" is included, *Koniec i początek* (The End and the Beginning), have dark themes and reflect the deep pain endured by the Poles for many years, while others focus on simple everyday

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **1990s:** The 1990s are the first years of Poland's status as a free and independent state. In 1990 a prominent figure in Poland's labor movement, Lech Wałęsa, is elected the first president of the Republic of Poland. He serves five years and then in the second general presidential election loses to Aleksander Kwaśniewski. President Kwaśniewski takes an active role in the endeavor to admit Poland into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

  Today: Poland plays an increasingly significant role on the European and world stages. It is accepted into the European Union in 2004. Lech Kaczyński, elected president of the Republic of Poland in 2005, actively urges the acceptance of the former Soviet republics of Georgia and Ukraine into NATO.

- **1990s:** Women in post-Communist Poland experience a diminishment in their personal freedoms. The paid maternity leaves enjoyed during the Communist years are for many women a thing of the past, while the increasing influence of the Catholic Church, which has been allowed to flourish since the dissolution of Communist power, results in a narrowing of women's reproductive rights.

  Today: Women's rights continue to be an issue in Poland, largely due to the conservatism and influence of the Catholic Church. Women still do not possess the same reproductive choices they had under Communist rule.

- **1990s:** Szymborska and Czesław Miłosz are widely regarded as Poland's two most prominent poets, both having won the Nobel Prize in Literature, Miłosz in 1980 and Szymborska in 1996. Contemporaries who are also considered masters of Polish poetry include Tadeusz Różewicz and Julia Hartwig.

  Today: The newest poets on the Polish literary scene are those, like Tadeusz Dąbrowski and Wojciech Bonowicz, whose work reveals a fascination with the electronic age and technological innovation. Yet the work of many of the new, younger poets is not treated with the respect and attention given to that of the older generation, who continue to publish numerous volumes of poetry.

experiences or on a variety of philosophical questions.

Trends in Translation

Since the end of Soviet Communist rule in Poland, the translated works of American, English, and other European writers have increasingly been available to Poles in Polish. Szymborska herself is well respected in Poland as a translator of French poetry. Similarly, post-Communist openness has also led to a rise in the number of works of Polish literature being translated into English and other European languages. With this increased exposure comes heightened acclaim. Szymborska won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1996 just as her works were first being translated into English and into various western European languages, thereby making her poetry accessible to a greater global public.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

Szymborska's poem "Some People Like Poetry" has received little individual critical attention, while her body of work as a whole has gotten only slightly more attention, most notably following her 1996 winning of the Nobel Prize for Literature. In a 1997 issue of *World Literature Today*, Bogdana Carpenter cites the "simplicity and directness" of Szymborska's work as

Pen and handwriting (*Image copyright Kaspars Grinvalds, 2009. Used under license from Shutterstock.com*)

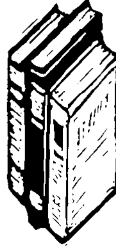
presenting "the greatest challenge to a critic" and contends that this might explain "a relative dearth of studies about her poetry." Like Carpenter, Frances Padorr Brent, in a 1998 article in the *Boston Review*, maintains that Szymborska's poems contain a deceptive simplicity and are often infused with irony, dark humor, and a fair amount of pessimism. Ewa Gajer, in a 1997 article for *Hecate*, finds that Szymborska is, in the volume containing "Some People Like Poetry," sensitive, reflective, and often playful. In fact, Gajer asserts, "Szymborska loves playing with words." The irony Gajer spots in "Some People Like Poetry" is deemed "typical" of many of the poet's works. Another feature typical of her work, suggests Edward Hirsch in his chapter on Szymborska in his 1999 volume *Responsive Reading*, is her "gift for pursuing large, unanswerable questions with an offhanded charm and nonchalance." Indeed, this is just what the poet achieves in "Some People Like Poetry."

Another important feature of criticism of Szymborska's work relates to the English translation of it. In translation, subtleties in meaning are often lost or otherwise transformed. In Frances Padorr Brent's review of Szymborska's collection *Poems: New and Collected, 1957–1997* for the *Boston Review*, the critic observes that different interpretations of "Some People Like Poetry" arose from two different published translations of the poem, that of Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh, which appeared originally in 1996 in the journal *New Republic* and later in *Poems, New and Collected: 1957–1997*, and that of Joanna Trzeciak, whose translation was published in 1996 in the *New Yorker*. Although the translations yielded English versions not terribly different in meaning, American poets, Brent explains, centered their attention on the "question of style and fluency" of the two translations.

CRITICISM

Catherine Dominic

Dominic is a novelist and a freelance writer and editor. In this essay, she compares the theories of poetics and knowledge that Szymborska outlines



WHAT DO I READ NEXT?

- *Monologue of a Dog*, by Szymborska, was published in 2006, presenting the original Polish text alongside the English translation by Clare Cavanagh and Stanisław Barańczak. The verses here are reflective of Szymborska's characteristically accessible style and her habit of mingling everyday observations with broad philosophical explorations.
- Szymborska's *Nonrequired Reading: Prose Pieces* (2002), translated by Clare Cavanagh, contains brief essays on ninety-four works of literature and provides insight into the author's own creative process and philosophical, literary, and cultural interests.
- *New and Collected Poems: 1931–2001*, by Czesław Miłosz, published in 2003, is a comprehensive collection of the poetry of Szymborska's fellow Polish poet and Nobel Prize winner. Szymborska and Miłosz are widely regarded as Poland's premier poets.
- *Polish Writers on Writing* (2007), edited by Adam Zagajewski, is a collection of prose essays, letters, and diary excerpts on the topic of writing. Represented are various Polish writers, including Szymborska, Miłosz, the poet Zbigniew Herbert, and the artist and author of short fiction Bruno Schulz.

in her poem "Some People Like Poetry" with the poet's more explicitly stated views as revealed in her 1996 Nobel Prize acceptance speech. Dominic maintains that for Szymborska, the philosophical ideal of questioning, of valuing the quest for understanding over the final result of knowledge itself, is the guiding principle exposed in "Some People Like Poetry."

It is often observed that Wisława Szymborska pursues philosophical questions of enormous import in her poetry, but in a style that is deceptive in its simplicity and in a tone that is ostensibly conversational and light. Bogdana Carpenter in a 1997 article in *World Literature*

IN THE BRIEF ANALYSIS AND COMMENTARY ON THE NATURE OF POETRY AND ON THE RELATED ISSUE OF *KNOWING* THAT SZYMBORSKA OFFERS IN 'SOME PEOPLE LIKE POETRY,' SHE OUTLINES A THEORY OF POETICS, A THEORY MORE FULLY EXPLICATED IN HER 1996 NOBEL ACCEPTANCE SPEECH."

Today describes Szymborska's work as "deceptively transparent" and notes that Szymborska is concerned with "philosophical reflection." Edward Hirsch devotes a chapter to Szymborska in his 1999 book *Responsive Reading*. Therein, he, too, discusses Szymborska's tendency to tackle large philosophical questions or "huge general subjects." Kristine S. Santilli's study of Szymborska's work focuses on the poet's darker themes but also notes that Szymborska's poems are often branded by her typical "lighthearted touch" and "conversational style." Her 1993 poem "Some People Like Poetry" is no exception to this general characterization. In this poem, Szymborska broaches the issues of what poetry is and how it is actually appreciated, not in schools or by poets but by the independently engaged reader. Furthermore, in this work Szymborska touches, however tangentially, on the vast philosophical issue of epistemology, or the study of the nature of knowledge. In the brief analysis and commentary on the nature of poetry and on the related issue of *knowing* that Szymborska offers in "Some People Like Poetry," she outlines a theory of poetics, a theory more fully explicated in her 1996 Nobel acceptance speech. A comparison of the poem with the speech sheds light on the poem in particular and on the philosophical and poetic aims of Szymborska's larger body of work in general.

In "Some People Like Poetry," Szymborska in the first two stanzas appears to be building an understanding of poetics, discussing in the first stanza who likes poetry, or how many people may actually appreciate it, and analyzing in the second stanza the range of possible ways something such as poetry may be liked, enjoyed,

appreciated, or found to be valuable in some manner. The first stanza leads the reader to refine his or her ideas about how many people actually like poetry. In this stanza, the poet has begun posing questions, thus far fairly straightforward ones, to the reader. The reader may even identify him- or herself with the two in every thousand who may be counted among people who like poetry. In the second stanza the reader begins to consider different ways poetry may be liked, appreciated, or enjoyed, or why one would keep returning to it. Yet Szymborska's list of things that people like urges us to ponder not only the infinite ways things can be liked but also how it is that we actually know that we like them. What, really, do we know of what it means to "like," after all? The second stanza forces the reader along a more complex philosophical path, although the path does not appear to be so difficult at first. One might initially contemplate one's personal feelings about chicken noodle soup, but by the end of the stanza, the reader begins to understand that the very hows and whys of liking are now topics for examination.

The third stanza is entered into perhaps with a number of questions still tumbling through the reader's mind. Now the reader is being asked to stop thinking about *why* we like poetry or *how* we like it and to wonder instead about the nature of the thing itself. In reading the poem, we find ourselves immediately in a large company of people who have wondered the same thing: Szymborska informs us that a number of answers to the question of what poetry is have been postulated in the past. She also hints at the shaky or uncertain nature of such knowledge, thereby comforting the reader about his or her own likely lack of confidence in addressing this vast question. Yet she goes further than just suggesting that this question is a challenging one to answer. Szymborska first asserts, in no uncertain terms, her own incomprehension on the matter: she emphatically does not know and will continue to not know what poetry is. Finally, then, her undercutting of the steps toward understanding that she has gradually made in the earlier lines of the poem is complete. Beyond the assertion that she will keep not knowing what poetry is, in the last line of the poem she indicates that she cherishes this ignorance as her salvation, thereby emphasizing the enormous significance of not knowing. The reader may be left wondering how this utter void of not knowing can be the only answer Szymborska offers to the question she has posed. It may seem initially as though she has simply skirted the issue, refused to answer the question on grounds that she also refuses to explain. Readers are left with the choice of either possibly feeling unsatisfied with her response and moving on or feeling compelled to continue to question Szymborska's apparent nonanswer.

The poem has ended, and the reader is left to wonder why it is better to not know what poetry is than to try and define it. While the poem asks questions that it apparently avoids answering with any directness, Szymborska returns to the very same topic in her 1996 acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize for Literature. In this speech, she repeatedly stresses how important "not knowing" is to a poet. While she mentions none of her poems specifically, the not-knowing emphasized by her repetition of the phrase "I don't know" in her speech may be directly correlated to the not-knowing she discusses in "Some People Like Poetry." Introducing the topic, she links it to the notion of inspiration, stating, "Whatever inspiration is, it's born from a continuous 'I don't know.'" She goes on to discuss the danger of assuming that there is nothing else to know, nothing else to be curious about: knowledge will die out if it does not lead to new questions. Returning to the phrase "I don't know," she attempts to explain her high estimation of it, her view that one's essential ignorance should be embraced and cherished. "It expands our lives," she states, leads to new discoveries. Szymborska ties the quest for knowledge inspired by the phrase "I don't know" to scientific discoveries before underscoring the significance of not-knowing for poets. Poets, she explains, true poets, must remember how little is known. Every poem written is an effort by a poet to address the statement "I don't know," Szymborska declares. Each effort, she goes on to say, is always questioned as possibly, even probably inadequate, which is why the poet continues to write poetry. Thus, *not-knowing*—the very not-knowing that blossoms at the end of Szymborska's "Some People Like Poetry"—is the life force of artistic creation, in Szymborska's estimation. This is the redeeming value of the not-knowing that "Some People Like Poetry" welcomes. The poem answers the question of "what is poetry" with a very telling reply. The last two lines of the poem may be paraphrased as "I don't know and I'll keep on not knowing, and that's what saves me."

Hand holding a handrail (© Gorilla Photo Agency Ltd / Alamy)

Szymborska in "Some People Like Poetry" is praising the value of questioning over answering. As readers of the poem, we are encouraged to embrace our own sense of not-knowing, our own sense of insecurity with not being able to confidently answer the question, "What is poetry?" Szymborska suggests in this poem the elusive nature of truth. She gently attacks the notion of *knowing* itself, and insinuates that perhaps ideas, ideas like that of poetry, or of liking, can never quite thoroughly be grasped, and that maybe one should never feel as though one does truly understand them. Knowledge, then, would be dead, as she observes in her Nobel speech. If not inspiring new questions, knowledge "fails to maintain the temperature required for sustaining life," Szymborska argues. The philosophical idea, then, that seems to shape Szymborska's work, the idea that "Some People Like Poetry" extols, is that knowledge as an end is not nearly as valuable as the means of questioning. As her Nobel speech explains and as this poem illustrates, questions intrinsically lead to other questions rather than final answers. This sense of yearning that characterizes much of Szymborska's work, including and particularly "Some People Like Poetry," is both poignant and affirming. Pinpointing this longing as her inspiration may be Szymborska's subtle way of answering the questions she poses.

POETS, IF THEY'RE GENUINE, MUST ALSO KEEP REPEATING "I DON'T KNOW." EACH POEM MARKS AN EFFORT TO ANSWER THIS STATEMENT: BUT AS SOON AS THE FINAL PERIOD HITS THE PAGE, THE POET BEGINS TO HESITATE, STARTS TO REALIZE THAT THIS PARTICULAR ANSWER WAS PURE MAKESHIFT, AND ABSOLUTELY INADEQUATE TO BOOT."

Source: Catherine Dominic, Critical Essay on "Some People Like Poetry," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2010.

Wisława Szymborska

In the following transcript of her Nobel address, Szymborska explores one of the themes of "Some People Like Poetry"—not knowing.

They say that the first sentence in any speech is always the hardest. Well, that one's behind me. But I have a feeling that the sentences to come—the third, the sixth, the tenth, and so on, up to the final line—will be just as hard, since I'm supposed to talk about poetry. I've said very little on the subject—next to nothing, in fact. And whenever I have said anything, I've always had the sneaking suspicion that I'm not very good at it. This is why my lecture will be rather short. Imperfection is easier to tolerate if served up in small doses.

Contemporary poets are skeptical and suspicious even, or perhaps especially, about themselves. They confess to being poets only reluctantly, as if they were a little ashamed of it. But in our clamorous times it's much easier to acknowledge your faults, at least if they're attractively packaged, than to recognize your merits, since these are hidden deeper and you never quite believe in them yourself. When they fill out questionnaires or chat with strangers—that is, when they can't avoid revealing their

profession—poets prefer to use the general term "writer," or to replace "poet" with the name of whatever job they do in addition to writing. Bureaucrats and bus passengers respond with a touch of incredulity and alarm when they discover that they're dealing with a poet. I suppose philosophers meet with a similar reaction. Still, they are in a better position, since as often as not they can embellish their calling with some kind of scholarly title. Professors of philosophy—now that sounds much more respectable.

But there are no professors of poetry. This would mean, after all, that poetry is an occupation requiring specialized study, regular examinations, theoretical articles with bibliographies and footnotes attached and, finally, ceremoniously conferred diplomas. And this would mean, in turn, that it's not enough to cover pages with even the most exquisite poems in order to become a poet. The crucial element is some slip of paper bearing an official stamp. Let us recall that the pride of Russian poetry, the future Nobel laureate Joseph Brodsky, was once sentenced to internal exile precisely on such grounds. They called him a "parasite," since he lacked official certification granting him the right to be a poet.

Several years ago, I had the honor and pleasure of meeting Brodsky in person. And I noticed that, of all the poets I've known, he was the only one who enjoyed calling himself a poet. He pronounced the word without inhibitions. Just the opposite—he spoke it with defiant freedom. This must have been, it seems to me, because he recalled the brutal humiliations he had experienced in his youth.

In more fortunate countries, where human dignity isn't assaulted so readily, poets yearn, of course, to be published, read, and understood, but they do little, if anything, to set themselves above the common herd and the daily grind. And yet it wasn't so long ago, in this century's first decades, that poets strove to shock us with their extravagant dress and their eccentric behavior. But all this was merely for the sake of public display. The moment always came when poets had to close the doors behind them, strip off their mantles, fripperies, and other poetic paraphernalia, and confront—silently, patiently awaiting their own selves—the still-white sheet of paper. For finally that is what really counts.

It's not accidental that film biographies of great scientists and artists are produced in droves. The more ambitious directors seek to reproduce convincingly the creative process that led to important scientific discoveries or to the emergence of masterpieces. And one can depict certain kinds of scientific labor with some success. Laboratories, sundry instruments, elaborate machinery brought to life: such scenes may hold an audience's interest for a while. And those moments of uncertainty—will the experiment, conducted for the thousandth time with some tiny modification, finally yield the desired result?—can be quite dramatic. Films about painters can be spectacular, as they go about re-creating every stage of a famous painting's evolution, from the first penciled line to the final brushstroke. And music swells in films about composers: the first bars of the melody that rings in the musician's ears finally emerge as a mature work in symphonic form. Of course, this is all quite naïve and doesn't explain the strange mental state popularly known as inspiration, but at least there's something to look at and listen to.

But poets are the worst. Their work is hopelessly unphotogenic. Someone sits at a table or lies on a sofa while staring motionless at a wall or ceiling. Once in a while this person writes down several lines, only to cross out one of them fifteen minutes later, and then another hour passes, during which nothing happens. Who could stand to watch this kind of thing?

I've mentioned inspiration. Contemporary poets answer evasively when asked what it is, and if it actually exists. It's not that they've never known the blessing of this inner impulse. It's just not easy to explain to someone else what you don't understand yourself.

When I'm asked about this on occasion, I hedge too. But my answer is this: inspiration is not the exclusive privilege of poets or artists. There is, there has been, there will always be, a certain group of people whom inspiration visits. It's made up of all those who've consciously chosen their calling and do their job with love and imagination. It may include doctors, teachers, gardeners—I could list a hundred more professions. Their work becomes one continuous adventure as long as they manage to keep discovering new challenges in it. Difficulties and setbacks never quell their curiosity. A swarm of new questions emerges from every problem that they solve. Whatever inspiration is, it's born from a continuous "I don't know."

There aren't many such people. Most of the earth's inhabitants work to get by. They work because they have to. They didn't pick this or that kind of job out of passion; the circumstances of their lives did the choosing for them. Loveless work, boring work, work valued only because others haven't even got that much—this is one of the harshest human miseries. And there's no sign that the coming centuries will produce any changes for the better as far as this goes. And so, though I deny poets their monopoly on inspiration, I still place them in a select group of Fortune's darlings.

By this point, though, certain doubts may arise in my audience. All sorts of torturers, dictators, fanatics, and demagogues struggling for power with a few loudly shouted slogans also enjoy their jobs. They too perform their duties with inventive fervor. Well, yes; but they "know," and what they know is enough for them once and for all. They don't want to find out about anything else, since that might diminish the force of their arguments. But knowledge that doesn't lead to new questions quickly dies out. It fails to maintain the temperature required for sustaining life. In the most extreme cases, well known from ancient and modern history, it even poses a lethal threat to society.

This is why I value that little phrase "I don't know" so highly. It's small, but it flies on mighty wings. It expands our lives to include spaces within us as well as the outer expanses in which our tiny Earth hangs suspended. If Isaac Newton had never said to himself "I don't know," the apples in his little orchard might have dropped to the ground like hailstones, and, at best, he would have stooped to pick them up and gobble them with gusto. Had my compatriot Marie Sklodowska-Curie never said to herself "I don't know," she probably would have wound up teaching chemistry at some private high school for young ladies from good families, and have ended her days performing that perfectly respectable job. But she kept on saying "I don't know," and these words led her, not just once but twice, to Stockholm, where restless, questing spirits are occasionally rewarded with the Nobel Prize.

Poets, if they're genuine, must also keep repeating "I don't know." Each poem marks an effort to answer this statement: but as soon as the final period hits the page, the poet begins to hesitate, starts to realize that this particular answer was pure makeshift, and absolutely inadequate to boot. So poets keep on trying, and sooner or later the consecutive results of their self-dissatisfaction are clipped together with a giant paperclip by literary historians and called their "oeuvre."

I sometimes dream of a situation that can't possibly come true. I audaciously imagine that I have a chance to chat with the Ecclesiastes, the author of that moving lament on the vanity of all human endeavors. I would bow very deeply before him, because he is one of the greatest poets, for me at least. Then I would grab his hand. "'There's nothing new under the sun': that's what you wrote, Ecclesiastes. But you yourself were new under the sun. And the poem you created is also new under the sun, since no one wrote it down before you. And all your readers are also new under the sun, since those who lived before you couldn't read your poem. And that cypress under which you're sitting hasn't been growing since the dawn of time. It came into being by way of another cypress similar to yours, but not exactly the same." "And Ecclesiastes," I'd also like to ask: "What new thing under the sun are you planning to work on now? A further supplement to thoughts that you've already expressed? Or maybe you're tempted to contradict some of them? In your earlier work you mentioned joy—so what if it's fleeting? So maybe your new-under-the-sun poem will be about joy? Have you taken notes yet, do you have drafts? I doubt that you'll say, 'I've written everything down, I've got nothing left to add.' There's no poet in the world who can say this, least of all a great poet like yourself."

The world—whatever we might think when we're terrified by its vastness and our impotence, embittered by its indifference to the individual suffering of people, animals, and perhaps even plants (for why are we so sure that plants feel no pain?); whatever we might think of its expanses pierced by the rays of stars surrounded by planets that we've just begun to discover—planets already dead? still dead? we just don't know—whatever we might think of this measureless theater to which we've got reserved tickets, but tickets whose lifespan is laughably short, bounded as it is by two arbitrary dates—whatever else we might think of this world, it is astonishing.

But "astonishing" is an epithet concealing a logical trap. We're astonished, after all, by things that deviate from some well-known and universally acknowledged norm, from an obviousness to which we've grown accustomed. But the point

is, there is no such obvious world. Our astonishment exists per se, and it isn't based on a comparison with something else.

Granted, in daily speech, where we don't stop to consider every word, we all use phrases such as "the ordinary world," "ordinary life," "the ordinary course of events." But in the language of poetry, where every word is weighed, nothing is usual or normal. Not a single stone and not a single cloud above it. Not a single day and not a single night after it. And above all, not a single existence, not anyone's existence in this world.

It looks like poets will always have their work cut out for them.

Source: Wislawa Szymborska, "I Don't Know: The 1996 Nobel Lecture," in *World Literature Today*, Vol. 71, No. 1, Winter 1997, pp. 5–7.

Joanna Trezeciak

In the following interview with Trezeciak, Szymborska reflects on her life, career, and influences.

"I'm drowning in papers," exclaims Wislawa Szymborska, pointing to piles of mail in the study of her fifth-floor, three-room walk-up in Kraków. Since receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature in December, this reluctant literary celebrity, previously little known to readers outside of Europe, has found that her sparsely furnished apartment is growing uncomfortably small, and she is preparing to move to a larger flat in this nondescript residential neighborhood.

"People confuse the Nobel Prize with a beauty pageant," she quips, recounting a conversation she overheard between two women in the fruit market. "'Did you see the Nobel Prize winner?' says one. 'Not much to look at, is she' says the other." Szymborska laughs.

In the aftermath of the Nobel announcement, which found the poet tucked away in Astoria, a writers' retreat in the southern mountain town of Zakopane, her life has changed considerably. For a poet accustomed to pen, paper, telephone and typewriter, life in the limelight has brought with it a whirlwind of modernization, as her capable young staff—a lawyer and secretary—manages the steady flow of faxes, voice mail, e-mail and the suddenly complicated contractual issues that confront a poet who has suddenly vaulted to international attention.

As the second Polish writer, after Czeslaw Milosz, to take the prize in the last 20 years,

UNDER HER PEN, SIMPLE LANGUAGE BECOMES STRIKING. EVER THE GENTLE SUBVERSIVE, SHE STUBBORNLY REFUSES TO SEE ANYTHING IN THE WORLD AS ORDINARY."

Szymborska has brought renewed attention to the poetry of her native land. In a rare interview with this writer, who has been translating her poetry since 1988, Szymborska lets on that she found the weeks leading up to the Nobel ceremony an anxious time. Never one to comment much on her work, averse to travel and reluctant to appear on television, she surprised even herself in Stockholm: accidentally reversing the ceremony's elaborate bowing sequence, she enlivened the proceedings with characteristic aplomb, getting on royally with Sweden's King Carl XVI Gustav, and by some accounts, establishing a record for the longest ovation ever at a Nobel address.

In its award citation, the Swedish Academy noted the "veritable ease with which [Szymborska's] words seem to fall into place." But it is that seeming ease in treating uneasy issues that has caught the attention of American poet and critic Edward Hirsch, who lauds Szymborska's gift for investigating "large unanswerable questions with terrific delicacy." Czeslaw Milosz calls Szymborska's triumph a confirmation of the place of "the Polish school of poetry." Szymborska, with characteristic modesty, would agree. "Poetic talent doesn't operate in a vacuum. There is a spirit of Polish poetry," she says. An elegant dresser, tall and slender, with a graceful carriage, Szymborska has a kind face and eyes that smile when she does. She seems much younger than her 73 years.

An Abundance of Translations

Interest in Szymborska in the United States was pioneered by translators Magnus Krynski and Robert Maguire with their *en face* collection titled *Sounds, Feelings, Thoughts: Seventy Poems* by Wislawa Szymborska (Princeton University Press, 1981) Philologically faithful and insightfully annotated, it is an invaluable companion

to the more extensive *View with a Grain of Sand* (Harcourt Brace, 1995), translated by Stanislaw Baranczak and Claire Cavanagh, a collection of poems published between 1957 and 1993. (Since the announcement of the prize, Harcourt has printed more than 70,000 copies in paperback.) A third translation, by Adam Czerniawski, is distributed Stateside by Dufour.

The most successful of these translations convey the wit and clarity of Szymborska's turns of phrase. Under her pen, simple language becomes striking. Ever the gentle subversive, she stubbornly refuses to see anything in the world as ordinary. The result is a poetry of elegance and irony, full of surprising turns. "You can find the entire cosmos lurking in its least remarkable objects," she is fond of saying. Inspiration, she explained in her Nobel speech, is the domain not only of poets, but of anyone who finds fulfillment in their work. For Szymborska, it originates with an inquisitive spirit that spurs sophisticated explorations of such everyday objects as a postcard, a rock or a cloud.

All of which befits a woman who has perfected the art of asking questions, but does not shy away from answering them, in poetry or in conversation, with an emphatic "I don't know." When asked to explain the sources from which her own writing springs, she replies that her inspiration is often indirect and mysterious. "It's just not easy to explain to someone else what you don't understand yourself," she says.

Up from Socialism

Named after Poland's largest river, the Vistula [Wisla in Polish], Wislawa Szymborska (pronounced Vees-WAH-vah Shim-BOR-skah) was born in Kórnik, in central west Poland, famed for its beautiful manor houses and gardens. When she was eight, the family moved to Kraków. Szymborska recalls that her father actively supported her first stabs at writing by giving her candy money for each poem she wrote. "I started earning a living as a poet rather early on," she says. German Occupation forced her to attend an underground school, since regular schools and universities were closed to Poles. After the war, she studied Polish literature and sociology at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, but never graduated, and to this day remains a little suspicious of academia.

Szymborska's life and literary activities have centered around Kraków. Her poetry came to public attention in 1945, with her debut in the *Polish Daily*. Over the next three years, she published in the press regularly but the political climate kept a planned first volume from ever appearing in print. Her subsequent two volumes, *What We Live For* (1952) and *Questions Put to Myself* (1954), contain only a few poems that survive the test of time. The remainder today read like socialist propaganda set to chamber music. While her youthful experimentation with socialism left her deeply distrustful of ideology, the idealism that motivated it matured into a deep humanitarianism as seen in *Calling Out to Yeti* (1957), her transitional volume. The collection that marked her arrival as a major poet was *Salt* (1962). Since then, Szymborska's popularity and critical acclaim have grown with every volume.

To escape from the city, she often slips out of Kraków to the nearby mountains. Nature suffuses her poetry, but her contacts with the natural environment are grounded in the simplest of observations. She finds in such objects as a piece of bone, a sprig of mistletoe or the sky itself ways of meditating upon our own contingent place in the cosmos. On another visit, while accompanying this writer along a steep path in Lubomierz, in the foothills of the Tatry Mountains, she quipped, "I like being near the top of a mountain. One can't get lost here." One would expect a comment about the splendid vistas laid out before us, but that's not Szymborska's style. To miss her subversion of expectations is to miss the essence of Szymborska's poetry. Irony permeates her verse, whether she is writing about nature, history, love or poetic craft, her dominant themes.

In a day and age when many writers have declared reality a social construct, Szymborska stands sober. Deeply touched by historical events that befell Poland—World War II, the Holocaust and Communism—she and the best Polish writers of her generation do not and cannot engage in the excesses of postmodernism, as she made clear in her 1991 Goethe Award address in Frankfurt, one of very few public speeches she's given: "All the best have something in common [...] a regard for reality, an agreement to its primacy over the imagination.... Even the richest, most surprising and wild imagination is not as rich, wild and surprising as reality. The task of the poet is to pick singular threads from this dense, colorful fabric."

Yet her depictions of events such as war and other atrocities, often include an element of the absurd and the comic. "In every tragedy, an element of comedy is preserved. Comedy is just tragedy reversed," she explains. In her poetry and her rare comments on poetry, Szymborska warns us not to lose sight of the individual. She has compared ideology to one of Charlie Chaplin's flimsy suitcases—too small to fit what we try to stuff into it.

Her poems about love are often laced with irony, whether she is evoking the ways physical closeness creates emotional distance or the ways love's fantasies labor to keep its realities at bay. *The End and the Beginning* finds its footing in yet another aspect of love: the strength of presence that absence can have. The volume is in large part an elegy for Szymborska's companion of 23 years, Kornel Filipowicz, a gifted poet and prose writer, who died in 1990. Outside of her poems, it's not a topic Szymborska talks much about.

One glance around her living room demonstrates that Szymborska's reading habits are both voracious and democratic. As usual, there are more books of every ilk than shelves to hold them. Her collection of whimsical book reviews, entitled "Extracurricular Readings," features selections from her weekly column that ran for eight years in *Literary Life*, a magazine on whose editorial board she served from 1953 to 1976. At *Literary Life*, she reviewed books on topics ranging from Kant to cacti. Asked if any of these subjects stand out as influences on her poetry, Szymborska answers obliquely: "Even the worst book can give us something to think about."

Her eclectic reading helps to set Szymborska apart from any intellectual or literary movement. When this interviewer broaches the topic of her contemporaries who perished in World War II, the poet Krzysztof Kamil Baczynski, whose name appears in a poem of hers, comes up. Szymborska refuses to brook any attempts at comparison: "When I mention somebody, that doesn't necessarily mean that I identify with him, personally or poetically. I'm extremely happy when I encounter poets who are different than I am. The ones who have their own distinct poetics provide me with the greatest experiences."

At the mention of American literature, Szymborska's eyes light up. "I've had the good fortune to read a lot of great American writers in translation, and my absolute beloved, for me one of the greatest writers ever, is Mark Twain. Yes, yes, yes. And Whitman, from whom the whole of 20th-century poetry sprung up. Whitman was the origin of things, someone with a completely different outlook. But I think that he's the father of the new wave in the world's poetry which to this very day is hitting the shore."

Have these readings nourished her own work? Szymborska replies with a shrug: "Well, one is inspired by the whole of life, one's own and somebody else's. You know how sometimes you hear great music, and music is completely untranslatable into words, into any words. A certain tension that is born when one listens to music could aid you in expressing something absolutely different."

For a poet who habitually shies away [from] such topics, it is as direct an answer as we are likely to hear. "I cannot speak for more than an hour exclusively about poetry," she declares with an impish smile. At that point, life itself takes over again.

Source: Joanna Trezeciak, "Wislawa Szymborska: The Enchantment of Everyday Objects," in *Publishers Weekly*, Vol. 244, No. 14, April 7, 1997, pp. 68–69.

Ewa Gajer

In the following essay, Gajer presents an overview of Szymborska's career and suggests that "Some People Like Poetry" is emblematic of the poet's "ironic attitude."

On October 30 1996, 73-year-old Polish poet Wislawa Szymborska won the Nobel Prize for Literature 'for poetry that with ironic precision allows the historical and biological context to come to light in fragments of human reality.'

Szymborska is the fifth Pole to win the prize. In 1905, the novelist Henryk Sienkiewicz won it for the book *Quo Vadis* which depicted the persecution of Christians in ancient Rome. Wladyslaw Stainslaw Reymont (who influenced some of Katharine Susannah Prichard's writing) got the prize in 1924 for *The Peasants*, an epic description of Polish country life. Fifty-four years later, Isaac Bashevis Singer, the Polish-Jewish writer living in the US, won the prize for his portrayal of the Jewish community in Poland. The poet Czeslaw Milosz, also living in the US, became the laureate in 1980.

Wislawa Szymborska was born on 2 July 1923 in Bnin near Poznan. She studied Polish literature and sociology at the Jagiellonian University in Cracow where she now lives. She published her first poem "I Seek the Word" in 1945

while still a student. In her first two collections of poetry, published in the early 1950s, she succumbed to the officially propagated stalinist line. However, she strongly renounced these beliefs in the next collection, *Calling Out to Yeti*, which came out in 1957. The Abominable Snowman from the title poem is commonly believed to represent Joseph Stalin.

Since then, Szymborska has clearly moved away from politics. She does not avoid 'big issues' confronting the world, such as war or racism, and her 1993 collection *The End and the Beginning* is proof of this, but overall her poetry is not political. She writes about everyday matters, feelings and frustrations with subtlety, sensitivity and reflectiveness. Although famous for her artistic detachment, she is never cold. That is probably why her poetry is perceived by many critics as very personal, while to others it is not personal at all. The Swedish Academy praised her writing for a 'striking combination of esprit, inventiveness and empathy, which calls to mind both the Renaissance and the Baroque.'

Szymborska loves playing with words, using old metaphors and fixed phrases in new contexts, giving them a humorous and surprising meaning. She often analyses ideas from an unexpected perspective. In the poem "Some Like Poetry," for example, she concentrates on the word 'like' and questions its use when describing one's attitude to poetry [the text of the poem reads]:

> Like—
> but one also likes chicken soup with noodles,
> one also likes compliments and the colour blue,
> one likes an old scarf,
> one likes to prove oneself right,
> one likes to pet a dog.

Such an ironic attitude is typical of many of Szymborska's poems, which try to provide new answers to old questions. The Academy described her as a poet who believes that 'no questions are of such significance as those that are naive.'

During martial law in Poland in the 1980s, Szymborska published in the exile periodical *Kultura Paryska* in Paris and in the underground *Arka* in Poland under the pen-name Stanczykowna. The name itself is quite significant. Stanczyk, the prototype of the pseudonym, was the most famous Polish jester. He made history as the person who, while playing the clown, could deliver the most bitter truth and whose political wisdom was highly valued by the king, Zygmunt Stary. There is certainly enough irony, sadness and truth about life in Szymborska's writing to indicate why she chose Stanczyk as her master.

Szymborska's name is often mentioned alongside the poets Zbigniew Herbert and Tadeusz Rozewicz whom, she believes, deserve recognition as much as she does. Neither of these two poets, however, (even though Rozewicz seems to be better known outside Poland than Szymborska) has managed to appeal to such a wide reading public. Szymborska's poetry, while often elusive, psychological, and metaphorical, remains surprisingly clear and has a strong general appeal.

Szymborska's popularity equals that of the late Polish poet Maria Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska. Szymborska, like Jasnorzewska, has always been a household name. Her poems are on school curricula, they are written on birthday cards, and are sung by rock stars. Kora, a lead singer from the group Manam, turned Szymborska's 1980 poem "Nothing Twice" into a hit. The same poem, translated into English by the Polish poet Stanislaw Baranczak and Clare Cavanagh, was the one most often quoted in press releases after Szymborska's award had been announced [the text reads]:

> With smiles and kisses, we prefer
> to seek accord beneath our star,
> although we're different (we concur),
> just as two drops of water are.

Szymborska's selected poems were translated into Swedish by Per Arne Bodin and Roger Fjelstrom in 1980. It was, however, Anders Bodeglrd's 1989 translation of her selected poems, released under the title *Utopia* which swung the vote in her favour. Bodeglrd's effort was highly praised both by the Academy and by Szymborska who herself translates French poetry.

Szymborska said in an interview that she would donate her prize money of $1.12 million to charity. The first announcement came before Easter. She donated one hundred thousand dollars to the fund managed by the former Social Security Minister Jacek Kuron whom she greatly admires for his social conscience.

Szymborska is a very private person. She declines invitations to functions in her honour and says that she hopes the Nobel Prize won't change her lifestyle. She wants to be left alone to do what she does best: write poetry.

Source: Ewa Gajer, "Polish Poet Wislawa Szymborska," in *Hecate*, Vol. 23, No. 1, May 1997, pp. 140–42.

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This book is a collection of essays on the evolution of cultural life in post-Communist countries. The introduction by the editors extensively references the work of Szymborska and provides an overview of the cultural challenges faced by post-Communist countries such as Poland, Bulgaria, and the Czech Republic.

Gillon, Adam, and Ludwik Krzyzanowski, eds., *Introduction to Modern Polish Literature: An Anthology of Fiction and Poetry*, Twayne Publishers, 1964.

In the introduction to this volume, Gillon and Krzyzanowski provide an overview of Polish literature from medieval times through the immediate post-World War II era. Written from an understanding of Polish literature as it existed when still under Communist governance, the introduction offers a foundation from which the nuances of recent Polish poetry may be more fully grasped.

Zamoyski, Adam, *The Polish Way: A Thousand-Year History of the Poles and Their Culture*, Hippocrene Books, 1993.

Zamoyski's highly regarded history details the political, economic, cultural, and social developments in Poland through the late 1980s and places Polish history in the larger European context.

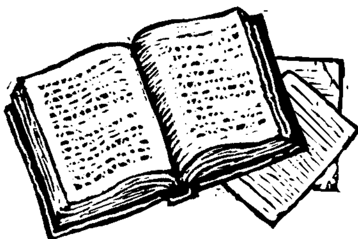
Storm Ending

JEAN TOOMER

1922

"Storm Ending" is a short poem by Jean Toomer that first appeared in the literary magazine *Double Dealer* in September 1922. The next year Toomer included it in *Cane*, a critically acclaimed collection of poetry and prose about the lives of African Americans in the rural South and in Washington, D.C. Although on the surface "Storm Ending" seems just an evocation of a nature scene, depicting the end of a rainstorm and the emergence of the sun, because of its placement in *Cane*, commentators sometimes attempt to connect it to African American themes. The poem has also been described as belonging to the modernist school of imagism and being a collection of not altogether coherent images. One pair of critics have described it as being "cubist," a reference to the experimental artistic movement of the early twentieth century usually associated with painters such as Pablo Picasso, in which objects are presented in fragmented form.

Although some of the poems in *Cane*, especially in the first part of the book, are written in conventional forms and have been described as lyrical or songlike, "Storm Ending," like the other poems in Part Two of *Cane*, is more experimental, being written in unrhymed free verse. Besides appearing in the various editions of *Cane* that have appeared since 1923, "Storm Ending" was also published in the 1988 edition of *The Collected Poems of Jean Toomer*, edited by Robert B. Jones and Margery Toomer Latimer.



Jean Toomer (© Bettmann / Corbis)

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Jean Toomer was born Nathan Pinchback Toomer on December 26, 1894, in Washington, D.C. He was the grandson of P. B. S. Pinchback, who served as acting lieutenant governor and then acting governor of Louisiana in the 1870s, and grew up in an affluent Washington neighborhood, mostly in his grandfather's house after his father, Nathan Toomer, abandoned the family. When the young Toomer was eleven, his mother remarried, and he moved with her and his new stepfather to New York. When she died of appendicitis in 1909, he moved back to Washington to live with his grandfather again, but this time in a less affluent, African American neighborhood.

Before this time, according to his unpublished autobiographical writings as reported on in John Chandler Griffin's *Biography of American Author Jean Toomer, 1894–1967*, Toomer had thought of himself as white, but he now became more aware of his black heritage. His grandfather had always claimed African ancestry, though Toomer would later suggest that he did so mainly for political advantage during the Reconstruction era, when being African American was helpful in winning political office. While Toomer's father claimed to be a wealthy Georgia plantation owner, he, too, may have had African blood.

Toomer's racial status is sometimes referred to as an "enigma," as Griffin puts it. In his early years as a writer, he became interested in the situation of African Americans and took a job at a school in Georgia, which helped inspire him to write the poems and stories about African Americans that went into *Cane*. When *Cane* was published in 1923, Toomer was hailed as an up-and-coming black writer. Toomer's publisher, Boni and Liveright, wanted to promote his work as that of an African American. Toomer, however, resisted, and in later years he distanced himself from the African American situation and, in a pamphlet quoted by Brian Joseph Benson and Mabel Mayle Dillard in their book on Toomer, said that his race was neither white nor black but American.

The successful portion of Toomer's writing career proved brief. He took up writing around 1920 after attending a number of colleges and universities around the country, studying agriculture, sociology, history, and psychology, but without ever taking a degree. He held a number of temporary jobs doing manual labor and office work, as well as selling cars, but eventually became associated with New York literary and intellectual circles, meeting writers and editors. Encouragement from these contacts, combined with inspiration provided by two trips to the South, led to an outpouring of literary works that he first published in various magazines and then gathered together in 1923 in *Cane*. "Storm Ending" (1922) was one of the poems published first in a literary magazine and then in *Cane*. Scholars differ on when exactly it was written; Benson and Dillard include it among the works inspired by Toomer's trip to Georgia in 1921, whereas Wolfgang Karrer, in his article in *Jean Toomer and the Harlem Renaissance*, says it was part of the manuscripts he produced before that time.

After 1923, Toomer published little. He not only distanced himself from the African American subject matter that had made him successful but also became caught up in the mystical spiritual movement led by George Gurdjieff, which led him to believe that writing was much less important than personal enlightenment. He did continue to write, but after his conversion to Gurdjieffian beliefs, his works became thinly veiled presentations

of Gurdjieffian philosophical concepts, and he found publishers for very few of them.

In 1931, Toomer married the writer Margery Latimer, who died giving birth to their daughter the next year. In 1934 he married Marjorie Content, a well-off daughter of a Wall Street broker. He became a Quaker in later years while still remaining an adherent of Gurdjieff, and he wrote on religious and spiritual topics. His last years were marked by ill health, and he died in a nursing home in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, on March 30, 1967.

POEM SUMMARY

Title

The title "Storm Ending" serves as a reminder that the focus of this poem is on how a storm ends. Although it contains some description of the storm before it ends, the heart of the poem is the emergence of the sun, causing the storm to lift and the rain to merely drip. On the other hand, the storm is just ending; it is not over, and even at the end of the poem there is thunder from which the earth flees.

Ann Marie Bush and Louis D. Mitchell, in their article on Toomer in *Black American Literature Forum*, suggest that "Storm Ending" can be divided into three "fragments" based on the poem's images. The first fragment or segment contains the opening four lines describing the thunder, the second contains the next four lines, and the last consists of only the final line.

Segment 1

In the first of the opening four lines the thunder appears above the heads of the people below and takes the form of beautiful blossoms. What is meant may be either that the thunderclouds look like blossoms or that the bursting outward of the sound of the thunder is like the sudden blossoming of a flower.

In the second line, flowers are described as being like bells. Some scholars see these as actual flowers on the ground below the thunderclouds. Others say the poem is continuing to describe the thunderclouds themselves as flowers. The poet may also be continuing a complex synesthetic metaphor describing the sound of the thunder with the visual images of flowers.

The third line refers to the wind and describes a rumbling sound, such as thunder would make, making it seem like the description is indeed about thunderclouds that look like flowers or thunder whose sound is like flowers rather than about actual flowers.

The first segment ends with a description of sight and sound, continuing the image of a bell by describing clappers reaching out to strike the ears of the people below. In other words, as Karen Jackson Ford suggests in her Toomer study *Split-Gut Song*, the thunder, or the lightning accompanying it, is striking from one cloud to another. There is thus the sight of the lightning and the sound that the thunderclaps make when they strike. Ford also suggests that the reason why Toomer creates the double comparison of thunderclouds to both bells and flowers is that while the bell image alone would suffice to indicate the noise of the thunder, the flower image is needed because flowers are alive. The suggestion, then, is that there is something alive about the thunder.

The punctuation at the end of the first fragment of the poem is somewhat odd. Instead of a period or the three dots of an ellipsis, Toomer puts in two dots. Bush and Mitchell say this is meant to indicate only a slight pause, intermediate between that of a period and that of an ellipsis.

Segment 2

The second segment begins with another description of flowers. Again, there is the question of whether these are real flowers on the ground or still the thunderclouds or thunder. As the following lines unfold, it seems to make more sense to see these flowers as a metaphorical description of the clouds rather than as actual flowers.

The cloud-flowers at the beginning of this segment, then, are described as having full lips. Ford notes that full lips are both a stereotypical characteristic of African Americans and also, elsewhere in *Cane*, are associated with singing and the connection of southern blacks with their African roots. This would thus be the moment in the poem that most connects it with the African American themes elsewhere in *Cane*.

The second line of this segment contains a singular description of the sun biting the flowers. Ford says this makes the sun seem destructive, which is not the conventional way of viewing the sun's emergence at the end of a storm. If the flowers here are still the thunderclouds, the sun is in effect attacking the thunder, taking an active

role in ending the storm and not just appearing after it is over.

The next line refers to rain for the first time, making one wonder if there has been rain all along or if it is only the sun's attack that has caused the rain to fall, which would be an unusual version of a storm. The rain in this line is said to be bleeding, which would be a natural result of the biting by the sun in the previous line. It as if the sun has caused the storm or the thunderclouds to bleed, and the blood is the rain that falls.

The last line of this segment changes the image of the rain from blood to honey. Now it is not blood that falls but something gold colored, such a color being the natural result of sunshine reflecting off raindrops, Ford notes. Honey is, of course, a much more positive image than blood. There is something positive as well as negative in this collision of sun and thunder. The second segment ends with a hyphen, the only punctuation mark in these four lines.

Segment 3

This segment contains only one line, about the earth fleeing from the thunder. The earth is called sweet; possibly it is sweet from the honeyed rain that has fallen on it from the storm, which might make one wonder why the earth should thus flee from the source of its sweetness. Ford wonders why it is the thunder and not the destructive sun that the earth should flee from. Of course, conventionally a storm and thunder are portrayed as dangerous, so it would be sensible to flee from them, but this poem does not seem to be portraying nature in conventional ways.

THEMES

The Beauties of Nature

William Wordsworth wrote about daffodils; John Keats wrote an ode to autumn; Gerard Manley Hopkins celebrated the beauty of the landscape in "Pied Beauty." Many poets have written of the beauties of nature. Toomer, too, sees beauty in "Storm Ending," but unconventionally he sees it in thunder, in the beautiful blossomlike clouds seen overhead in a thunderstorm, and even in the crackling of lightning—and then in the honeyed rain that falls at the end of the thunderstorm. This poem is less in the tradition of Wordsworth and Keats and more like William Blake's poem "The Tyger," about the ferocious and somehow mesmerizing tiger. Instead of praising gentle beauty, like fluttering daffodils or trees laden with fruit, Toomer focuses on more violent imagery, celebrating nature's power as a form of

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY

- Write a narrative or essay recounting your experience of a storm. Did it make you feel frightened? Were you relieved when it ended? Or did you somehow revel in its power?
- Explore the history of racial discrimination in the United States, focusing on one aspect, such as Jim Crow laws and segregation, lynching, the Ku Klux Klan, restrictions imposed on voting in order to exclude African Americans, or other discriminatory practices from the time of the Civil War through the first half of the twentieth century. Write a report on your findings.
- Does racial discrimination still exist? Now that Americans have elected an African American president, has everything changed? What effects have the civil rights movement and affirmative action programs had? Does the African American population still have a lower socioeconomic status than the white population, and if so, is this attributable to racism? Organize and moderate a class debate over the extent to which racial discrimination still exists in the United States. Prepare a list of stimulating questions on the topic and create rules for your debate, including time limits for participants.
- Research the history of the Harlem Renaissance. Who were its leading literary figures? What other academic fields were affected by it? Did the movement have political implications? Was it a conscious movement whose members worked together, or is the name just a label applied later? What effect did the renaissance have on black culture and the culture of the country generally? Give a class presentation on your findings.

Stormy sky *(Image copyright Mona Makela, 2009. Used under license from Shutterstock.com)*

beauty instead of warning the reader against it in the manner of Alfred Tennyson. Rather than paint a pleasing still life, Toomer conjures up an almost cinematic narrative, and like Blake he makes fearsomeness seem attractive.

Conflicts in Nature

Poets have written about conflicts in nature before. Alfred Tennyson, in "In Memoriam," suggests that nature is a battlefield of wild animals. And other poets have written about the fearfulness of storms. Again, however, Toomer approaches this subject unconventionally. For Robert Frost in "Storm Fear," the storm is a danger to be survived; the conflict is between human beings and the nature that threatens them. Conventionally, when a storm passes it is a relief to see the sun. In "Storm Ending," however, it is the storm that seems positive, even beautiful, and the sun is the destructive power. Moreover, the conflict is not between human beings and nature but between two natural phenomena: the sun and the thunder. It is as if Toomer wants to shake his readers out of their conventional modes of thought so that they can appreciate nature from an unusual point of view. This only works, however, if the reader is willing to let go of conventional approaches; otherwise the result may be bafflement.

Escapism

"Beehive," the poem that immediately precedes "Storm Ending" in *Cane*, ends with a bee wishing he were somewhere else, away from his hive, curled up in a distant flower. Similarly, "Storm Ending" ends with the earth itself seeking to escape, in this case from the storm that has just been described and is now ending. It is a motif that may have come to Toomer's mind because in his own life he seemed to spend a fair amount of time moving on, trying out one college or job after another, moving from city to city and from career to career. In this poem, as well as in "Beehive," the suggestion may be that there

comes a time to stop fleeing from what might actually be something positive. Or the message may be less judgmental and more an observation of the tendency to seek escape. The bee wants to get away in "Beehive," and the earth wants to escape, indeed does escape, in "Storm Ending." This may simply be what happens, according to Toomer, and perhaps nothing can be done about it.

The Struggles of African Americans

Beneath the surface imagery of storms and sunshine and honey, this poem is often seen as presenting a symbolic picture of the difficult situation of African Americans. If the storm clouds represent black people, one message of the poem would be that though they are beautiful in their very storminess, they also suffer at the hands of the sun, most likely representing white society, and bleed from being attacked. Adding insult to this injury, they are then fled from by the earth, which may represent society at large.

STYLE

Imagery, Imagism, Cubism

"Storm Ending" contains what may seem a riot of images, too many for at least one critic, Karen Jackson Ford, who in her book *Split-Gut Song: Jean Toomer and the Poetics of Modernity* sees incoherence as a result. There are images of flowers, bells, full-lipped petals being bitten and bleeding, and honey dripping. The profusion of images has led some critics, such as Robert B. Jones in his introduction to *The Collected Poems of Jean Toomer*, to call "Storm Ending" an example of imagism. Imagism was a school of poetry associated with Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell around the time of World War I. Imagist poetry aimed to present concise depictions of natural objects in free verse. The profusion of images has also led at least one pair of critics, Ann Marie Bush and Louis D. Mitchell, in their article on Toomer in *Black American Literature Forum*, to describe the poem as an example of cubism. Cubism was an artistic movement around the same time as imagism, usually associated with painting rather than poetry. Cubist works tended to present fragmented images of objects from varying perspectives.

Metaphor and Simile

Metaphors and similes are types of figurative language in which a literal object is compared to something else. "Storm Ending" is basically a description of thunder or thunderclouds in figurative language. Thunder is compared to blossoms, bells, and flowers with full lips, as if faces. To be more precise, thunder is described as blossoming and thus compared to flowers, and the flowers are then compared to bells and faces, so the poem could be said to contain metaphors within metaphors, or in the case of the bell image, a simile within a metaphor. A simile uses the words "like" or "as," making an overt comparison, as is done in the poem for the bell comparison, whereas a metaphor simply states or implies that something *is* something else, as the poem does by describing the thunder as blossoming.

Personification

Personification is the attribution of human characteristics to inanimate objects. The description of the flowers in the poem having full lips is thus not only a metaphor but a personification, making the flowers or the flowerlike thunderclouds seem like a person with full lips. Similarly, the description of the sun biting the flowers makes the sun seem like a violent person or animal.

Synesthesia

Synesthesia is the perception or description of something discernible by one sense in terms of another sense. Perceiving or describing a sound as being a certain color would be an example. In "Storm Ending" thunder, a sound, is described as blossoming, that is, having the shape of a flower, which is an example of synesthesia (if one takes the speaker to mean thunder and not thunderclouds).

Symbolism

A symbol is a word or phrase that while meaning something on a literal level also evokes a whole other level of meaning. "Storm Ending" has often been seen as working on a symbolic level, being not only a description of a storm but also a depiction of the situation of African Americans. Thus the thunder is not just thunder and the sun is not just the sun; nor is their conflict just a depiction of warring nature, but rather it is a depiction of the charged relationship between black and white in Toomer's time.

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **1920s:** Discrimination against African Americans, in the form of segregation, denial of voting rights, lynchings, and other wrongs and atrocities, is on the rise.

  Today: After the work of the civil rights movement, the introduction of affirmative action programs, and the election of an African American president, some say discrimination is becoming a thing of the past.

- **1920s:** The teachings of spiritual mystics like George Gurdjieff and the Theosophists begin to gain some currency, leading some cultural figures like Toomer to emphasize the need for personal development.

  Today: New Age spirituality, a late-twentieth-century decentralized movement featuring interest in alternative medicine, astrology, and physical practices such as yoga and tai chi, leads to broader cultural emphasis on "holistic" health and development.

- **1920s:** Traditional folk songs and spirituals give way to jazz and blues in the African American community, and these new musical forms gain popularity in the larger society.

  Today: Musical forms such as rap and hip hop, which originated in the African American community, are widely popular.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Harlem Renaissance

Toomer is often described as an important figure in the movement known as the Harlem Renaissance. Darwin T. Turner, in his introduction to *Cane*, says Toomer's book was a "harbinger" of the renaissance and its "literary masterpiece." Originally referred to as the Negro Renaissance, the Harlem Renaissance took its name from an African American section of New York City known in the 1920s for its energy, as in its nightclubs and jazz, and for its black artists, writers, and intellectuals. The renaissance overlapped with the more political New Negro Movement, through which advocates sought to improve the social situation for African Americans, but the Harlem Renaissance is usually seen predominantly as a cultural phenomenon, whose leading figures included the writers Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen.

Jim Crow Laws and the Situation of African Americans

In the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, during Reconstruction, African Americans for a brief period benefited from the political situation and found they had opportunities to hold high political office. Jean Toomer's own grandfather, P. B. S. Pinchback, was able to become acting governor of Louisiana. However, by the end of the nineteenth century the situation was changing dramatically. What were known as Jim Crow laws, introducing racial segregation and discrimination, were passed and ruled constitutional by the Supreme Court. The voting rights of African Americans were eroded, the antiblack Ku Klux Klan was revived, and lynchings of black men became common. In the early twentieth century, a great migration of African Americans from the rural South to the cities of the North led to antiblack riots in Chicago, Washington, D.C. and elsewhere. Toomer wrote an article about the Washington riots for the radical newspaper *New York Call* in which he supported black resistance to the rioters and criticized the injustices suffered by African Americans. In *Cane* itself, Toomer presents many instances of the suffering of African Americans and the violence perpetrated against them.

Modernism

Literary modernism, which took shape after World War I, partly as a result of the psychological effects of the war, is associated with writers

such as T. S. Eliot and James Joyce and with experiments in literary form, with breaking away from traditions and conventions, as for instance in the development of the sort of free verse found in “Storm Ending” and in the other poems in Part Two of *Cane*. In Part One of *Cane*, Toomer included several more conventional poems, adhering to traditional poetic structures. Karen Jackson Ford, in her book *Split-Gut Song*, says this reflects the focus on the past found in Part One, whereas Part Two focuses on current dislocations and the decay of African American traditions, and thus it is natural that the poems in that section are more modernist, less conventional, and less lyric.

Toomer’s bringing together of African American themes and modernism is often seen as innovative. While previous African American writers had used conventional forms in depicting aspects of African American life, Toomer, who associated with avant-garde white writers in New York, mixed the latest experiments in literary technique with themes dealing with the African American experience. He was the only black writer of his time to be compared with such leading modernists as T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

Cane, the book in which “Storm Ending” appeared in 1923, was published to good reviews though small sales. Critics praised it for its depiction of African American life and its lyrical artistry. Darwin T. Turner, in his book *In a Minor Chord: Three Afro-American Writers and Their Search for Identity*, quotes a 1925 commentary by William Stanley Braithwaite, who called *Cane* “a book of gold and bronze, of dusk and flame, of ecstasy and pain.” Toomer was hailed as a promising African American writer, one who wrote of “real negroes,” in the words of John Armstrong, as quoted by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the “Racial” Self*. Robert T. Kerlin, in a 1926 review quoted by Gates, says Toomer’s book is full of “the spirit of poetry” and is “stamped all over with genius.”

None of these early commentators mention “Storm Ending” specifically. After its first brief success, *Cane* as a whole faded from view until the revival of black studies in the late 1960s. In 1969 *Cane* was reprinted for the first time in decades, and in subsequent years it inspired numerous academic studies. Few of these, however, discuss “Storm Ending”; most focus on the stories and sketches in *Cane*. A few deal with the poetry, but mostly with the lyrical poetry of Part One, not the more modernist works like “Storm Ending” that appear in Part Two.

The few critics who do comment on “Storm Ending” seem baffled by it. Even Karen Jackson Ford, who in her book *Split-Gut Song* provides the poem’s most detailed analysis, ends by saying that it “isn’t coherent,” though she perhaps means that it is deliberately incoherent to reflect the incoherence of urban black life at the time. Other commentators are content just to call it an impressionistic work, “exquisite only in the sharpness and suggestiveness of [its] imagery,” as Turner puts it in *In a Minor Chord*. One scholar, Robert B. Jones, in his introduction to *The Collected Poems of Jean Toomer*, perhaps simply seeing what he expected to see given the title, says the poem depicts “the momentous return of sunshine and tranquility” after a storm. Bernard Bell, in an article reprinted in Therman B. O’Daniel’s *Jean Toomer: A Critical Evaluation*, says the poem depicts human beings’ insensitivity to nature, but he does not elaborate. Françoise Clary, in her article in *Jean Toomer and the Harlem Renaissance*, sees an allusion to the crucifixion and the Christian apocalypse in the references to blood and honey, and Nellie McKay, in her book *Jean Toomer, Artist*, sees symbolic representation of suffering African Americans in the poem, along with “the loss of the positive aspects of the rural culture and . . . the rise of urban ugliness.” How these deeper meanings are worked out in the poem is not made clear by these commentators, and even on the surface the critics disagree about whether Toomer is referring to actual flowers or rather to thunderclouds that look like flowers.

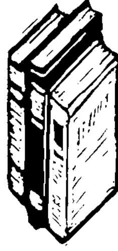
CRITICISM

Sheldon Goldfarb

Goldfarb is a specialist in Victorian literature who has published nonfiction books as well as a novel for young adults set in Victorian times. In this essay, he explores the symbolism in “Storm Ending.”

Conventionally, storms are things of danger, and the ending of a storm is cause for relief. Conventionally, too, the sun is a symbol of life,

WHAT DO I READ NEXT?



- *Cane*, published in 1923, in addition to including "Storm Ending," contains other poems, short stories, and sketches by Toomer dealing with the African American experience.
- *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader* (1994), edited by David Levering Lewis, brings together writings of the major figures of the Harlem Renaissance.
- For a major African American novel of the mid-twentieth century, see Richard Wright's *Native Son*, published in 1940. In this novel about an African American living in poverty, Wright explores the racial injustice of twentieth-century America.
- For another classic African American novel, see Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, published in 1952. In this novel about an idealistic African American student, Ellison explores the loss of naïve idealism and the search for political and philosophical paths to follow.
- For a nonfiction work about segregation and discrimination in the United States in the mid-twentieth century, see *Black Like Me* by John Howard Griffin, published in 1961. Griffin was a white man who dyed his skin black to see what an African American experience would be like.
- For another poem about a storm, see Robert Frost's "Storm Fear," published in 1915. Frost's poem is about a snowstorm that is a threat rather than something to be admired.

and its appearance as a storm ends should be a sign of hope. In the operetta *The Mikado*, by Gilbert and Sullivan, the happy ending is marked by a symbolic song about the passing away of a threatening cloud and the dawning of a sunny day. Perhaps the most famous storm in Western art is in Ludwig von Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony*. Beethoven creates a very realistic sounding thunderstorm in the second-to-last movement of the symphony; it rages frighteningly but eventually passes and is succeeded by a movement Beethoven called a shepherd's song of thankful feelings after the storm.

THE THUNDER DOES NOT ACTUALLY VICTIMIZE THE EARTH; THE EARTH HAS NO NEED TO FLEE; ON THE CONTRARY, THE THUNDER IS THE SOURCE OF ENERGY IN THIS POEM, AND THE EARTH SHOULD NOT TURN ITS BACK ON IT."

It is no wonder, then, that Robert B. Jones, in his introduction to Jean Toomer's collected poems, describes "Storm Ending" as a poem about "the momentous return of sunshine and tranquility following a tempest." That is what one would expect to find in a nature poem: bad storm, good sun. But as Karen Jackson Ford notes in *Split-Gut Song*, "Storm Ending" is not a conventional nature poem. Indeed, she says it is not a nature poem at all but a poem about "vulnerability, power, wounding, and the desire for escape: that is, this is a poem about people."

Much of what Ford says is convincing, and she provides the best available line-by-line explication of "Storm Ending." However, she is committed to seeing "Storm Ending" as one of the "antilyrical" poems of part 2 of *Cane*. In her analysis, part 1 of *Cane*, the part set in the Deep South, evokes African American traditions through the use of lyrical poetry, while part 2 reveals the dislocation of modern urban life for African Americans, doing so by means of dislocated, modernist free verse. She is thus predisposed to finding incoherence in "Storm Ending" and groups it among the poems in which one can see a "miscarriage of hopeful imagery."

It may be true that Toomer uses free verse and nonlyrical forms in part 2 of *Cane* to reflect the dislocation of modern, urban life; it may even be true that there is a "miscarriage" of hope at the end of the poem, if not quite in the way Ford means. Yet it may be possible to find coherence even where Ford says there is none.

Rather than seeing the poem as an expression of hopelessness, it is perhaps more useful to see it as a warning, and rather than seeing the

closing line of the poem as revealing that, as Ford puts it, there is a hierarchy of violence, with the sun victimizing the thunder and the thunder victimizing the earth, so that it is quite understandable that the earth seeks to fly from the thunder even if it is impossible to do so—rather than seeing the poem this way, it may be more helpful to suggest that the earth is simply not justified in fleeing from the thunder. The thunder does not actually victimize the earth; the earth has no need to flee; on the contrary, the thunder is the source of energy in this poem, and the earth should not turn its back on it.

Ford and other critics such as Nellie McKay see "Storm Ending" as a symbolic poem about African Americans. The key line supporting this reading is the one that refers to full lips, full lips being a stereotypical characteristic of African Americans. Also, as Ford notes, elsewhere in *Cane*, full lips are associated with positive images of joyfully singing African Americans, a tradition that African Americans developed in the South and that northern blacks mistakenly abandoned in favor of modernity.

In the poem, the full lips are associated with flowers, but probably not real flowers. The poem begins by comparing the thunder to flowers, and the only reading that really makes sense of the poem sees the metaphorical comparison as continuing throughout. That is, these are not real flowers; these are thunderclouds that look like flowers, thunderclouds that look beautiful and can produce great rumbling sounds that strike the ears of the people below. These are clouds that are alive like flowers and powerful like huge bells. They are also full-lipped, making one think of African Americans. Being thunderclouds, they would also be dark, which might further support the notion that they symbolize black people.

Then the sun bites them, ending the storm that they have produced, or at least initiating the end of the storm, for the storm seems still to be happening even until the very last word of the poem, which is "thunder," and the rain continues to fall, even if it is only dripping. In fact, rain is not mentioned until the sun bites the clouds, so one might even see the sun as important in producing the rain. Now, this rain is bloody but also resembles golden honey; there is something positive in it, thus something positive that could be said to come from the sun, even though in this poem, in contrast to conventional notions, the sun seems villainous.

It may be useful to pause at this portrayal of the sun and to ask, if the dark thunderclouds represent black society, what does the sun represent? To ask the question is almost to answer it. In contrast to the black clouds, the bright sun that bites them must represent white society. The symbols thus suggest not just the suffering of African Americans, as suggested by Ford and McKay, but their suffering at the hands of white society.

And yet the sun does seem to join with the thunder in producing the honeyed rain. Toomer might thus be suggesting that though the sun, or white society, causes suffering, it is also necessary. In a letter he wrote in 1922, quoted by Darwin Turner in his introduction to *Cane*, even while saying that the source of his creative energy lay in "the Negro group," Toomer emphasizes that he always "strived for a spiritual fusion analogous to the fact of racial intermingling"—the sort of racial intermingling that characterized his mixed white and black ancestry. Toomer said he sought to have the elements within himself "live in harmony" and "function as complements."

If the poem is not completely rejecting the sun, then, it would be wrong of the earth to flee from it, but still more would it be wrong for the earth to flee from the thunder, since the thunder is depicted as so beautiful and full of energy—energy, it is true, that could be dangerous, for it does strike at the people below, but again, contrary to convention, this poem seems to celebrate thunder. How odd, then, that the poem ends by having the earth fly away from the thunder. If anything, the earth should flee the biting sun, though even that might be a mistake.

Ford explains the last line by saying that the thunder, like the sun, is a victimizer, but it is hard to see evidence in the poem for that. Ann Marie Bush and Louis D. Mitchell, in their article in *Black American Literature Forum*, see the earth fleeing the thunder as representing both a fleeing by African Americans from their slave heritage and a fleeing by white Americans from "their Black brothers," but it is hard to see how the thunder can represent slavery or how the last line can be representing all these different things at once. Nellie McKay sees the last line as a flight from "urban ugliness," but it is also hard to see how the thunder can represent that.

Perhaps Bush and Mitchell are closest to the mark in their talk of slave heritage. Not that Toomer is celebrating slavery, but he does talk elsewhere of the importance of the African American heritage that he found in the South, and he strongly regrets the passing away of the folksinging heritage, the spirituals and the "folk-spirit," as he calls it in an autobiographical sketch quoted in Turner's introduction to *Cane*. In that sketch, he seems to be resigned to the disappearance of that folk-spirit and its replacement by the modern technology of the day, "victrolas and player-pianos." In "Storm Ending," however, he may be more issuing a warning against abandonment of African American heritage, or he may be resigned there, too; the poem is somewhat ambiguous.

What is less ambiguous is the overall symbolic meaning of the poem. It is not just a poem about nature. It is certainly not a poem about the tranquillity that the sun brings at the end of a storm. If anything, the end of the poem is unsettling, with the thunder still sounding and the earth flying from it. At the same time it surely is not a poem about a multiplicity of symbols, from the Christian resurrection to the heritage of slavery to the ugliness of cities. The poem can be followed in a fairly straightforward, limited way on both its surface and its symbolic levels. On the surface, this is first a celebration of the beauty and power of the storm, followed by a conflict between sun and storm in which the sun is the attacker, initiating the end of the storm, though also helping to produce honey that sweetens the earth; yet the sweetened earth flees.

Symbolically, the poem portrays the beauty and power of African Americans, who, however, are suffering at the hands of white society, though this white society, by interacting with the African Americans it is "biting," helps produce something sweet or positive. And yet the earth, standing perhaps for people generally, flees from this positive interaction, particularly from the African American side of the interaction, from the power and beauty of African Americans, and more particularly from the African American heritage of folk songs and spirituals. The thunder, the beautiful, powerful thunder, represents African Americans, especially the old, traditional ways of African Americans; it is those ways that Toomer generally laments the passing of, within and outside of *Cane*. "Storm Ending" thus reflects one of the major thematic concerns of *Cane*, the loss of the African American heritage, and it does so in a symbolic way, and in a mythic, almost archetypal way, by emphasizing the power of the thunderclouds.

This is a poem in the end that celebrates the dark powers of storms, that reminds readers that they need to draw on such powers and not flee them, or they will risk suffering the fate of the dislocated African Americans of part 2 of *Cane* and of everyone who in Jungian terms neglects their "shadow side." In the literary criticism inspired by the psychological theories of Carl Jung, the shadow represents the passions or instincts, the powerful part of the unconscious mind, which needs to be incorporated into consciousness. In "Storm Ending," Toomer seems to be representing this shadow side of the national consciousness, the repressed African American side that needs to be interacted with rather than fled from or rejected.

The irony of Jean Toomer's life is that, after *Cane*, he rejected not only the old African American heritage of the South but also the very notion that he himself was African American. To write *Cane*, Toomer states in the letter quoted by Turner in his introduction, he had to draw on "a deep part of my nature, a part that I had repressed," the African American part of his nature. After *Cane*, he repressed that part again and never published another book of inspired verse.

Source: Sheldon Goldfarb, Critical Essay on "Storm Ending," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2010.

Robert Jones

In the following excerpt, Jones examines spiritual and religious imagery in Toomer's poems, including "Storm Ending."

I

Jean Toomer's popularity as a writer derives almost exclusively from his lyrical narrative *Cane*. He shows himself there to be a poet, but few are aware of the extensive and impressive corpus of his other poems. His poetic canon may be classified into three categories: the individually published poems, the poems first published in *Cane*, and the mass of over 100 unpublished poems. To date, however, there has been no attempt to assemble a standard edition of Toomer's poetical works, nor has there been

HIS POETIC CANON, THEN, CONSTITUTES A DIRECT DRAMATIZATION OF CONSCIOUSNESS, A VERITABLE PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE SPIRIT.”

any comprehensive study of his poems. Yet it is, perhaps, through the lens of his poetry that we are provided the most revealing commentaries on Toomer as artist and philosopher.

Toomer’s poetry spans more than three decades and evolves in four distinct periods: the Aesthetic Period (1919–August 1921), marked by Imagism, improvisation, and experimentation; the Ancestral Consciousness Period (September 1921–1923), characterized by forms of racial consciousness and Afro-American mysticism; the Objective Consciousness Period (1924–1939), defined by Gurdjieffian idealism and “being consciousness”; and the Religious Period (1940–1955), distinguished by Christian Existentialism, owing to an espousal of Quaker religious philosophy. His poetic canon, then, constitutes a direct dramatization of consciousness, a veritable phenomenology of the spirit.

Toomer’s career as a poet began long before the publication of *Cane*. Between 1919 and 1921 he experimented with several forms of poetry, including haiku, lyrical impressionism, and “sound poetry.” The major influences on his artistic and philosophical development during this period were Orientalism, French and American Symbolism, and Imagism. Orientalism provided the basis for the idealist philosophy evident in all stages of Toomer’s intellectual development. As he describes it, “Buddhist philosophy, the Eastern teachings, occultism, theosophy. . . . These ideas challenged and stimulated me. Despite my literary purpose, I was compelled to know something more about them. So for a long time I turned my back on literature and plunged into this kind of reading. I read far and wide, for more than eight months” (“Outline of an Autobiography” in Turner 119). In a specifically literary context, Orientalism was also the basis for his fascination with Symbolism and Imagism. Of the French Symbolists, his literary mentor was Charles Baudelaire, whose *Les Petits Poèmes en prose* inspired many of the poems written during this period and later provided models for the prose poems and lyrical sketches in *Cane*. To an even greater degree, Toomer was impressed by the poetry and aesthetics of the Imagists: “Their insistence on fresh vision and on the perfect clean economical line was just what I had been looking for. I began feeling that I had in my hands the tools for my own creation” (Turner 120).

The best examples of the Imagist poetry from this period are “And Pass,” “Storm Ending,” “Her Lips Are Copper Wire,” and “Five Vignettes.” A sustained impressionistic portrait of twilight fading into darkness, “And Pass” images a picturesque sea setting in two brief movements, each introduced by “When.” The poem concludes in a moment of visionary awareness, as the poet’s imagination is suddenly arrested by the passing clouds, the fleeting and majestic “proud shadows.” Concomitant with the poet’s sense of exaltation comes a sense of his own loneliness and mortality, as “night envelops/empty seas/and fading dreamships.”

Also richly impressionistic in design, “Storm Ending” unfolds as an implied comparison between two natural phenomena, thunder and flowers, although imagery remains the crucial vehicle of meaning:

> Thunder blossoms gorgeously above our heads,
> Great, hollow, bell-like flowers,
> Ambling in the wind,
> Stretching clappers to strike our ears . . .
> Full-lipped flowers
> Bitten by the sun
> Bleeding rain
> Dripping rain like golden honey—
> And the sweet earth flying from the thunder.

This scene captures the momentous return of sunshine and tranquility to nature following a tempest, as the sound of thunder fades into the distance.

In “Her Lips Are Copper Wire” desire generated by a kiss is compared to electrical energy conducted between copper wires, here imaged as lips. The evocative and sensuous opening lines, addressed to an imaginary lover, well illustrate Pound’s Doctrine of the Image:

> Whisper of yellow globes
> gleaming on lamp-posts that sway
> like bootleg licker drinkers in the fog
>
> and let your breath be moist against me
> like bright heads on yellow globes . . .

Toomer's "Five Vignettes" is a series of imagistic sketches modeled after Japanese haiku poetry. The first is a seascape portrait of "red-tiled ships" shimmering iridescently upon the water. The ships are "nervous," under the threat of clouds eclipsing their watery reflections:

> The red-tiled ships you see reflected,
> Are nervous,
> And afraid of clouds.

The second vignette images a dynamic tension between stasis and motion:

> There, on the clothes-line
> Still as she pinned them,
> Pieces now the wind may wear.

The third vignette images an old man of ninety, still living courageously, "eating peaches," and unafraid of the "worms" which threaten his very existence. The fourth is reminiscent of an Oriental proverb, especially in its idea that suffering teaches wisdom; and the fifth images a Chinese infant, as well as our common humanity:

> In Y. Den's laundry
> A Chinese baby fell
> And cried as any other.

Vignettes four and five are as "moral" as they are imagistic, each in its own way commenting on the universal human condition. As we shall see, these "message-oriented" lyrics signal a subtle shift in Toomer's pre-*Cane* aesthetic which is more conspicuously apparent in the poems "Banking Coal" and "Gum." The basis for this shift from an imitative toward an affective theory of art is most clearly articulated in Toomer's 1921 review of Richard Aldington's essay on Imagism, "The Art of Poetry."

Several of the poetic sketches recall the linguistic impressionism of Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*, especially "Face" and the quartet "Air," "Earth," "Fire," and "Water." In *Tender Buttons*, Stein attempted to defamiliarize our automatized linguistic perceptions by creating a noun headnote without naming it, as she illustrates in "A Carafe, That Is a Blind Glass":

> A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange
> A single hurt color and an arrangement in a system to pointing
> All this and not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling.
> The difference is spreading. (Stein 461)

This lyrical sketch is reminiscent of a riddle: "What is made of glass (and its 'cousin') but is different from a drinking glass in the way it spreads (bulbously) at the bottom?" The answer would be a carafe. Like Stein, Toomer attempted to register precise nuances of perception and name them with a unique word or phrase. Here he renders an image of the noun headnote "Face":

> Hair—
> silver-gray,
> like streams of stars
> Brows—
> recurved canoes
> quivered by the ripples blown by pain,
> Her eyes—
> mists of tears
> condensing on the flesh below

Toomer's quartet ensemble also demonstrates precisely how linguistic impressionism serves as a poetic medium for communicating both the uniqueness and universality of our common perceptions of the cosmic order, as in "Fire":

> Flickers, flames, burns.
> Burns into a thing—depth, profundity
> "Hot after something,"
> Sparking, flowing, "in a fever"
> Always stewing smoking panting
> Flashy

Yet another form of linguistic impressionism is revealed in "Sound Poem" (I), "Sound Poem" (II), and "Poem in C," all of which represent adaptations of French Symbolist aesthetics. The French Symbolists maintained that the purpose of language is to evoke a reality beyond the senses, rather than to state plainly or to inform. In their attempts to describe the *essence* of an object and not the object itself, they sought to produce the effects of music, thinking of images as having abstract values like musical notes and chords. Sounds and associations, then, perform the act of communication, while meaning is eclipsed, as in "Sound Poem" (I):

> Mon sa me el kirimoor,
> Ve dice kor, korrand ve deer,
> Leet vire or sand vite,
> Re sive tas tor;
> Tu tas tire or re sim bire,
> Rozan dire ras to por tantor,
> Dorozire, soron,
> Bas ber vind can sor, gosham,
> Mon sa me el, a som on oor.

Here Toomer uses sounds and words from several languages, such as French ("mon sa me" ["mon sommeil"], "vite," "tas," "bas"), Latin ("kor" and "soron"), Spanish ("me," "el," "dice," "tu," "por"), and Japanese ("kirimoor"), as well as English, to open poetic avenues to thought, in the tradition of Rimbaud, Baudelaire, and Laforgue. An exercise in formalism and a lesson in the mystical powers of language, this sound poem also employs "-or" end rhymes, "-ire" internal rhymes, repetition ("Mon sa me el"), parallelism ("Leet vire or sand vite" and "Tu tas tire or re sim bire"), and linguistic cognates to create the illusion of meaning, while sounds guide us through the process of poetry.

II

In the months between September of 1921 and December of 1922, Toomer wrote the poems in *Cane*, evocative of an empathetic union between the spirit of the artist and the spirit of Afro-American mysticism. Indeed, in describing the formal design in *Cane*, what he termed "the spiritual entity behind the work," Toomer indicated that he viewed the book, at least retrospectively, as a mandala: "From the point of view of the spiritual entity behind the work, the curve really starts with 'Bona and Paul' (awakening), plunges into 'Kabnis,' emerges in 'Karintha,' etc. swings upward into 'Theater' and 'Box Seat,' and ends (pauses) in 'Harvest Song.'" The mandala, a symbol of integration and transmutation of the self in Buddhist philosophy, is an arrangement of images from the unconscious to form a constellation. Usually a formalized, circular design containing or contained by a figure of five points of emphasis, each representing the chief objects of psychic interest for the maker, a mandala functions to unite the conscious intellectual perceptions of its creator with his or her unconscious psychic drives and intuitions. A mandala, then, is both an instrument of the self's awakening and a chart of its spiritual evolution. In accordance with Toomer's spiritual design, the poems which begin this mandalic cycle—"Reapers," "November Cotton Flower," "Cotton Song," "Song of the Son," "Georgia Dusk," "Nullo," "Conversion," and "Portrait in Georgia"—represent celebrations of ancestral consciousness, whereas the ones which end the cycle—"Beehive," "Prayer," and "Harvest Song"—chronicle the poet's loss of empathetic union with Afro-American consciousness.

The poems which begin the cycle celebrate Afro-American culture and lament its disappearance. Written in iambic pentameter couplets, "Reapers" depicts black workers in a rural field setting. The first half of the poem describes "the sound of steel on stone" as the reapers "start their silent swinging, one by one." The second half contrasts this human activity with the sharp efficiency of a mechanical mower, which kills a field rat with machine-like precision and continues on its way. The contrast between the human and the mechanical emphasizes not only the displacement of black workers by machines, but also the passing of an era. The poem ends with a lament for the destruction of nature by the machine: "I see the blade,/ Blood-stained, continue cutting weeds and shade."

Also written in iambic pentameter couplets, "November Cotton Flower" is a variation of the Italian sonnet. The octave images a late autumn setting, the end of the cotton season. Drought ravages the land as birds seek water in wells a hundred feet below the ground. The sestet describes the blooming of a November cotton flower amid this arid and barren scene, an event perceived to be supernatural by the local inhabitants: "Superstition saw/Something it had never seen before." The concluding couplet reveals the poem to be an extended metaphor, completing the analogy of the flower's mystery and sudden beauty in terms of a beautiful and spontaneous brown-eyed woman: "Brown eyes that loved without a trace of fear/Beauty so sudden for that time of year." Like the November cotton flower, the woman is an anomaly within her depressed and rustic environment.

"Cotton Song" belongs to a subgenre of Afro-American folk songs which captures the agony and essence of slavery. The poet uses music—the work song itself—to symbolize the medium by which slaves transcended the vicissitudes of slavery. Moreover, it is precisely spiritual freedom which engenders thoughts of political freedom:

> Cotton bales are the fleecy way
> Weary sinners bare feet trod,
> Softly, softly to the throne of God,
> We ain't agwine t wait until th Judgement
> Day!

"Song of the Son" and "Georgia Dusk" are swan songs for the passing Afro-American folk spirit. "Song of the Son" develops in two movements, with images of sight, sound, and smell. The first movement invokes images of

smoke and music. Once stately Georgia pines have been reduced to smouldering sawdust piles; smoke spiraling toward heaven is the by-product of their former grandeur. Similarly, the "parting soul" of the Black American folk experience has been reduced to an evening song which, like the smoke, carries throughout the valley of cane. The poet is imaged as the prodigal son, returning "just before an epoch's sun declines" to capture in art the fleeting legacy of a "song-lit race of slaves." The second movement develops as an extended metaphor of slaves as "deep purple ripened plums,/Squeezed, and bursting in the pine-wood air." The imagery recalls the cloying state of fruit as it passes into the oblivion of the post-harvest. Yet the spectatorial poet is able to preserve "one plum" and "one seed" to immortalize both the past and the passing order in art.

In "Georgia Dusk" the sky relents to the setting sun and night, in a "lengthened tournament for flashing gold." In this nocturnal setting, "moon and men and barking hounds" are engaged in "making folk-songs from soul sounds." As in "Song of the Son," wraiths of smoke from a "pyramidal sawdust pile" symbolize the passing of an era supplanted by industry, " . . . only chips and stumps are left to show/The solid proof of former domicile." With the advent of dusk, however, comes a heightened sense of the black man's union with the spiritual world, "with vestiges of pomp,/Race memories of king, and caravan,/High-priests, and ostrich, and a juju man." These mystical moments inspire the people to sing, their voices resonating and passing throughout the piny woods and the valley of cane. The poet concludes with an invocation to the singers: "Give virgin lips to cornfield concubines,/Bring dreams of Christ to dusky cane-lipped throngs." The juxtaposition of secular and religious imagery symbolizes the mystical power of Afro-American folk music to harmonize the earthly (the "cornfield concubines" and "dusky cane-lipped throngs") and the heavenly ("sacred whispers," "virgin lips," and "dreams of Christ").

"Nullo," "Conversion," and "Portrait in Georgia" are Imagist in form and design. "Nullo" captures the fiery, iridescent beauty of golden, sun-drenched pine needles' falling upon a cowpath in a forest at sunset. The poet effectively arrests the stillness and solitude of the moment: "Rabbits knew not of their falling,/ Nor did the forest catch aflame." "Conversion" images the spirit of Afro-American culture—the "African Guardian of souls"—as compromised and debased by Western influences, "drunk with rum,/Feasting on a strange cassava,/yielding to new words and a weak palabra/of a white-faced sardonic god." "Portrait in Georgia" is reminiscent of "Face," in which Toomer attempts to render a vision of the poem's title. This Georgian portrait, however, is one of a lynched and burned black woman. . . .

The sonnet "Beehive" discloses a shift in the poet's consciousness from spiritual identification to spiritual alienation. This lyric develops in two movements as an extended metaphor of the poet as exile in Eden. The first movement depicts the world as a black beehive, buzzing with activity on a moonlit, silvery night. The second movement, however, describes the spectatorial poet's estrangement, when he characterizes himself as an unproductive and exploitative "drone,/Lipping honey,/Getting drunk with silver honey." Although he has tasted the "silver honey" of Afro-American culture, he is nevertheless unable to bridge the gap between himself and his fellow workers, unable to "fly out past the moon/and curl forever in some far-off farmyard flower."

"Prayer" describes a waning of the spirit, and of the creative powers, which results from a dissociation of inner and outer, soul and body: "My body is opaque to the soul./Driven of the spirit, long have I sought to temper it unto the spirit's longing,/But my mind, too, is opaque to the soul." This failure of the spirit, and of its creative powers, is reflected metapoetically in the lines "I am weak with much giving./I am weak with the desire to give more."

Completing the mandalic or spiritual design, "Harvest Song" dramatizes the poet's loss of empathetic union with the essence of Afro-American culture and consciousness. Ironically titled, "Harvest Song" describes an artist's inability to become one with the subjects of his art, as well as his inability to transform the raw materials of his labor into art. Reminiscent of Robert Frost's "After Apple-Picking," "Harvest Song" develops as an extended portrait of the poet as reaper. Although the poet/reaper has successfully cradled the fruits of his labor, when he cracks a grain from the store of his oats, he cannot taste its inner essence. In vain, he attempts to stare through time and space to understand the sources of his inspiration; he also tries to make up the physical distance by straining to hear the calls of other reapers and their songs. But his dust-caked senses preclude any meaningful or helpful

intervention. The "knowledge of hunger" he fears is the failure of consciousness and of the creative impulse. Thus, he is reluctant to call other reapers for fear they will share their truly inspiring grains, grains he is unable to assimilate. "It would be good to hear their songs . . . reapers of the sweet-stalk'd/cane, cutters of the corn . . . even though their throats/cracked and the strangeness of their voices deafened me." Still, he beats his soft, sensitive palms against the stubble of the fields of labor, and his pain is sweeter and more rewarding than the harvest itself. He is then comforted by the pains of his struggles, although they will not bring him knowledge of his hunger.

A major unpublished poem that is also a product of this period is the mystical and evocative "Tell Me," which contains nature imagery evocative of the local-color poems in *Cane*, although it was inspired by the majestic mountains and the scenic Shenandoah River near Harpers Ferry. Written in three four-line stanzas of rhymed iambic pentameter, this poem unfolds with a series of apostrophes to the "dear beauty of the dusk," as the poet implores the spirit of nature to share with him its dark and mysterious essence. . . .

Source: Robert Jones, "Jean Toomer as Poet: A Phenomenology of the Spirit," in *Black American Literature Forum*, Vol. 21, No. 3, Autumn, 1987, pp. 253–73.

TOOMER CUBISTICALLY SMATTERS THE MIND WITH THREE FRAGMENTS, YET THERE EMERGES A COMPLEXITY OF SUPERIMPOSED PLANAR IMAGES THAT PORTRAY ABUNDANT ACTIVITY IN ONE MOMENT'S TIME, THE ENDING OF A STORM. ABSENCE OF SEQUENTIAL NARRATIVE GIVES PROOF THAT WE ARE NOT TO PERCEIVE THE ABUNDANT ACTIVITY CHRONOLOGICALLY, BUT SYNCHRONICALLY."

Ann Marie Bush

In the following excerpt, Bush and co-author Mitchell analyze Toomer's poems "Nullo" and "Storm Ending," aligning them with the cubism movement in art.

Cubists perceive reality through intuitive vision of the mind rather than through reasoned logic of the senses. And cubists understand the reality of an object as the conceptual totality and essence of that object. They portray conceptual reality with techniques of form that manifest cubist concepts of time, space, and motion intertwined with four aesthetic concerns: dissociation of the elements of the object, simultaneity, relationship of the parts to the whole and the whole to its parts, and integrity of the object. What distinguishes cubist writers from cubist painters, sculptors, or composers is simply the particular medium of the art. While the cubist painter and sculptor are limited respectively by texture and color of paint and types of wood, metal, or stone, the cubist composer is limited by melody, rhythm, and harmony, and the cubist writer is limited by words, punctuation, and spacing on the page.

Having failed to recognize that Jean Toomer's works are essentially cubist in nature, critics have traditionally interpreted his work from sociological, psychological, archetypal, impressionist, or imagist points of view. Hopefully the following discussion of "Nullo" and "Storm Ending," poems which offer particularly striking examples of the literary cubism so prominent throughout *Cane*, will permit scholars to begin viewing Toomer's work more clearly.

By compressing many images into one moment in "Nullo" and "Storm Ending," Toomer abandons the conventional beginning-and-end or cause-and-effect scheme in chronological time and adopts the cubist non-sequential movement in synchronic time. Further, Toomer dissociates, or fragments, his subject into many images, each of which is no more or less important than the whole and all of which advance and recede and blend instantaneously and simultaneously. As a consequence, the reader must respond with an intuitive perception of one conceptual compound image, the totality and essence of the subject.

For example, in "Nullo" Toomer flashes the texture of nature across the mind, and we react instantaneously with intuitive perception:

A spray of pine-needles,
Dipped in western horizon gold,
Fell onto a path.
Dry moulds of cow-hoofs.
In the forest.
Rabbits knew not of their falling,
Nor did the forest catch aflame.

All at once within our imaginations we finger the sharpness of a smooth pine needle, the hardness of a caked hoof-print in the grainy earth, and the softness of a rabbit's fur. Simultaneously, we dive into five levels of space in nature: the sun above the earth, the pine needles in mid-air between the tree and the ground, the needles upon the ground, the prints of the cow's hooves that indent the earth, and the rabbits' homes, burrows under ground.

As we experience these varied textures and levels of space, we concurrently taste both chronological and cyclical time through samples of motion. The always-moving earth, gyrating on its axis and whirling about the sun, creates an instant of dusk in our cycle of day and night. But we know that dawn will also come, in time. The downward fall of pine needles marks a seeming moment of finality in nature's cycle of birth and death. But we know that, in time, the fallen needles will decompose, become the soil, and then again the tree. Contrarily, the remnants of hoof-prints focus on the linear movement of a cow's passage from place to place without recurrence. We know the animal has wandered the path and, with its horizontal motion, has recorded the past in the chronology of time.

Through it all, we synchronically experience the essence and the totality of nature at an unconscious level. Unlike the rabbit, we are not blind to the dynamism of light from flaming needles that spark no fire:

> A spray of pine-needles,
> Dipped in western horizon gold,
> . . .
> Rabbits knew not of their falling,
> Nor did the forest catch aflame.

Rather, we are cognizant of the intense light of all time compressed into the brilliant flare of the moment.

As a philosopher, Toomer appropriately entitles the poem "Nullo," because nothing happens, yet everything *is*. As a cubist, he fittingly expresses the heart of *Cane* in "Nullo," for the part is the whole, yet the whole is the part. As a master craftsman, Toomer aesthetically portrays nature by sketching the rabbit, a part of nature, unaware of the dynamism within its environment, and he symbolically portrays the Black American, a son of the soil, unaware of the dynamism within himself.

"Storm Ending" offers additional evidence of a cubist at work. Toomer, like every cubist, strives to imprint the essence and the totality of his subject on the mind of the audience. He endeavors to go beyond the illusion of his subject's mere visual appearance to the reality of its conceptual representation. Recognizing that only deftness of form can accomplish this intent, Toomer displays great finesse as he harnesses the power of form and generates true cubist art in his short lyric "Storm Ending."

Close scrutiny of the structure of "Storm Ending" produces two unique conceptual responses: one in which sound, sun, and rain fall to the earth simultaneously, and another in which only sound and sun concurrently fall. Each is a variation of the other; each helps to create the other; yet both reveal the same lasting symbolic effect: Black Americans reject their slave heritage rooted in the soil of the South, and white Americans reject Black Americans.

Taking note of all punctuation marks, we discover that three fragments comprise the poem. In the first fragment Toomer paints:

> Thunder blossoms gorgeously above our
>   heads,
> Great, hollow, bell-like flowers,
> Rumbling in the wind,
> Stretching clappers to strike our ears.

Here, Toomer hammers the fragment into two visual planes: the horizontal plane of clouds, "thunder blossoms," reverberating in the wind, and the vertical sheet of sound pouring from the clouds and resonating in our minds. Dynamic in its fusion of sound and motion, this fragment ironically concludes with two dots that indicate the need for a gentle pause.

In the second fragment Toomer sketches:

> Full-lipped flowers
> Bitten by the sun
> Bleeding rain
> Dropping rain like golden honey—

Again Toomer flattens the fragment into two definite planes: the horizontal plane of the sun, layers of space above the clouds, and the vertical (or even diagonal) plane of rays "like golden honey" radiating from the sun, rupturing the clouds, and dripping to the earth. The absence of punctuation within the fragment evokes a third plane, that of a vertical slice of rain bleeding from the clouds as does the sheet of sound in the first fragment.

With the falling of rain from the clouds and warm rays from the sun, we intuitively

conceive the importance of both the sun and the clouds in the rich fertilization of the earth, and Toomer generates sensual imagery to support our conception. . . .

Dynamic in its fusion of color, warmth, motion, and sensuality, this second fragment concludes with a dash that indicates a lengthy pause. This pause is necessary, for here, as in all cubist art, the point of view changes. Through the first and second fragments, we stand on earth peering upward into the sun surrounded by clouds. Now, from space, we peer downward at the earth through an opening in those clouds. From no other position could we perceive the third fragment:

> And the sweet earth flying from the thunder.

Only from such a remote distance can we be objective enough to see the flattened plane of earth, in its cyclical motion about the sun, pass across our opening and appear to fly from the thunder of the clouds. . . .

Toomer cubistically smatters the mind with three fragments, yet there emerges a complexity of superimposed planar images that portray abundant activity in one moment's time, the ending of a storm. Absence of sequential narrative gives proof that we are not to perceive the abundant activity chronologically, but synchronically. In fact, as any cubist might do, we can rearrange the lines or the fragments without effectively changing our intuitive perception. For example:

> Full-lipped flowers
> Bleeding rain
> Bitten by the sun
> Dripping rain like golden honey—
> Thunder blossoms gorgeously above our heads,
> Rumbling in the wind,
> Great, hollow, bell-like flowers,
> Stretching clappers to strike our ears.
> And the sweet earth flying from the thunder.

No matter what the order of the images on the page, we still experience, on the literal level, the aesthetic effect described above. And, on the symbolic level, we witness Black slaves, dark clouds pierced by the sun on their backs, as they spill their lifeblood and tears to fertilize the soil of the South. We witness, also, as the sweet earth flies from the thunder, that Black Americans reject their slave heritage and that white Americans reject their Black brothers.

Although one sees and hears and feels clear images in both "Nullo" and "Storm Ending," there is no indication of metaphor. Thus, critics such as Bernard W. Bell and Amritjit Singh, who claim that Toomer embraces imagism, are mistaken, for in an imagist poem the image is metaphor. Witness the image as metaphor in these two imagist poems, "In a Station of the Metro" and "Alba," by Ezra Pound:

> The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
> Petals on a wet, black bough.
> . . .
> As cool as the pale wet leaves of lily-of-the-valley
> She lay beside me in the dawn.

The metaphor in each poem by Pound is obvious. But no such metaphors exist in Toomer's "Nullo" or "Storm Ending," because Toomer's works are cubistic rather than imagistic. Toomer as a cubist goes beyond the imagist. In his work the crystal-clear image is not metaphor; the image is object or subject.

Toomer's use of the image as object rather than metaphor shows that Toomer upholds the integrity of the subject. Beyond that, Toomer adheres to all of the basic cubist aesthetic concerns. He dissociates the elements of his subject and creates images for each fragment of that subject. He abandons sequential movement in chronological time and adopts non-sequential movement in synchronic time by smattering the mind with numerous images—equal in value to each other and to the whole—that must be perceived instantaneously. By compressing so many images into one moment, he forces the reader to perceive the images simultaneously. This forces the reader to respond with intuitive perception of the conceptual compound image of the subject in its totality and in its essence. And while Toomer follows this process, he plays with categories of time, types of motion, and levels of space. Toomer is a master of literary cubism.

Source: Ann Marie Bush and Louis D. Mitchell, "Jean Toomer: A Cubist Poet," in *Black American Literature Forum*, Vol. 17, No. 3, Fall 1983, pp. 106–108.

Michael Krasny

In the following essay, Krasny describes the various arcs in Cane *that contribute to the circular thematic structure of the volume.*

In the fall of 1922 Toomer published the poems "Storm Ending," "Georgia Dusk," "Harvest Song," and "Song of the Son," as well as the

stories of "Fern," "Carma," and "Becky" and the poetic prose pieces "Nora" and "Seventh Street." With the publication of the latter piece, Toomer began to write more about Negroes in the North. These pieces were included in *Cane* in contrast to the poems and prose portraits which resulted from his Georgia experiences. All of the sketches, poems, and stories of *Cane*, as well as the revised version of the culminating dramatic novella "Kabnis," were composed by the end of the year.

To further clarify the conception one merely needs to consider the arcs printed on separate pages in *Cane*, one preceding both "Karintha" and "Seventh Street," and two preceding "Kabnis." The arcs represent the basic design of *Cane*, which like a circle, moves from the simple forms of life in the South to the more complex forms in the North and back to the South in "Kabnis." Thematically, the structure of the book begins with a lyrical response to the beauty and natural impulses of six primitive women who live close to the soil and, to varying degrees, act outside conventional Christian morality. It then moves to a consideration of the Northern Negro, a transplanted Southerner who has become the victim of technology and white mores. Finally, the book deals with Kabnis, an urbanized Northern Black who returns to the ancestral soil in an abortive attempt to discover meaning and acceptance in his heritage.

The discovery and acceptance of heritage is implicit in the first section, embodied in the point of view of the poem "Song of the Son." Though Toomer believed that the folk-spirit and spontaneity of the Southern Negro were dying, he tried to capture vestiges in the portraits of the book's first section. The gallery of Southern women and the poetry of this section bear out the nostalgia the poet feels in "Song of the Son" and emphasize physicality, natural impulse, and the soil. The section moves toward the sexual repression of "Esther"—a result of the infiltration of white morality—and the symbolic murder of Black vitality by white culture in the poem "Portrait in Georgia" and the short story "Blood-Burning Moon."

The next section, or the book's second arc, is concerned with the pervasive effects of white culture upon the Black man of the North. The Northern Negro has undergone a spiritual death not unlike the physical one of Tom Burwell in "Blood-Burning Moon." In counterpoint to the first section of *Cane* there is thus an emphasis upon exclusion from the soil, natural impulses, and the soul. Exclusion is most clear, for example, in the poetic prose piece "Calling Jesus." The second section begins after two pieces of related poetic prose, with "Avey," the portrait of a Northern Black woman who retains, despite the wishes of the story's narrator, the natural and sensual impulses associated with the emotional South. The movement of the section then focuses on the repression of these impulses in the characters of John in "Theater," and of Muriel and the Southern Black man Dan Moore in "Box Seat." In "Bona and Paul" there is an awakening of Paul's consciousness to the natural and racial beauty of the first section, brought about as a result of his need to gather petals and to comprehend why he was unable to hold the sensual though domineering Bona. In this story, which ends the book's second section, or arc, there is a basic counterpoint between Bona, the Southern white woman, and Louisa of "Blood-Burning Moon." Instead of the moon and blood associated with the latter story, there is sunburst and the Crimson Gardens, forces which act in concert with the story's crimson-uniformed Black doorman to activate Paul's consciousness into understanding his confused, i.e., "moony," racial identity.

The two arcs which precede the last section of *Cane*, "Kabnis," represent the neuroticized Black consciousness of the North in quest of its uprooted spirituality and racial identity by means of a return to the moon-filled Southland of "moon-children." "Kabnis" thus incorporates the significance of the previous two arcs: the artistic need for lyrical beauty and the discovery of terror of the first section; the stifled spirit and awakening consciousness of the second. The "Kabnis" section of *Cane* ends, in contrast with the fading past associated with the setting sun in the book's first section, with the sun, a "Gold-glowing child," arising and sending forth "a birth-song," the everlasting song of the "Deep-rooted Cane." The overall design of *Cane* apparently became clear in Toomer's mind by the time he was writing the second section of the book.

Both of the last two sections of *Cane* deal with the effects upon Black people of the fading of the beautiful and ancestrally linked folk culture, symbolically completed by the impending death of Father John in "Kabnis." Aesthetically, however, the consciousness of Kabnis is able to discover the forms which it seeks in the portraits of the book's first section. The arcs unite in a circle, and this form remains fluid by means of the organic unity and metaphor of the artist's

imagination. Like the mystical South of "High-Priests . . . and a jujuman" the book transcends temporal dimensions.

Source: Michael Krasny, "The Aesthetic Structure of Jean Toomer's *Cane*," in *Negro American Literature Forum*, Vol. 9, No. 2, Summer 1975, pp. 42–43.

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This collection of essays examines the history of the Harlem Renaissance and includes analyses of various authors associated with the movement, including Toomer.

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Kazin discusses the various responses writers have had to the natural world in America, from Thomas Jefferson through the twentieth century.

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Originally published in 1955, this classic study of the history of segregation was praised by Martin Luther King, Jr., for its usefulness during the civil rights movement.

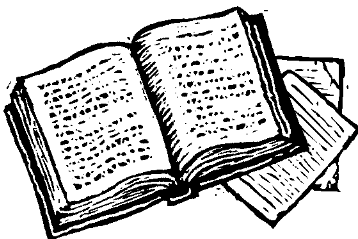
A Tree Telling of Orpheus

DENISE LEVERTOV

1968

Denise Levertov's "A Tree Telling of Orpheus" was first published independently in 1968. It was included in her 1970 collection *Relearning the Alphabet* and also her 2002 *Selected Poems*. The poem deals with an ancient Greek myth according to which the Thracian magician Orpheus was able to enchant trees and make them walk. It is uniquely told as a first-person narrative by one of the trees he enchanted. While the poem features this particular motif, the whole range of Orphic mythology is alluded to.

The publication of "A Tree Telling of Orpheus" came at the height of the protest movement against the Vietnam War and other countervailing elements of the youth culture of the 1960s. Levertov was a leading figure in these movements, and some critics have taken the poem to relate to the sense of awakening inherent in the 1960s counterculture. However, many of the poem's themes look forward to Levertov's later development as a poet primarily interested in religion. This is true not only of the poem's surface material of mythology but also in regard to its many mystical ideas and its use of language derived from the spiritual traditions of Christianity and Judaism to which Levertov's ancestry connected her.



AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Denise Levertov was born on October 24, 1923, in Ilford, in the county of Essex in England. She descended on her father's side from Shneur

Denise Levertov *(AP Images)*

Zalman, the founder of the mystical Chabad sect of Hasidic Judaism, and on her mother's from Angell Jones, a leading figure in the development of modern Welsh literature. Her father, Paul Levertoff, converted to Christianity and took a university degree in Germany before immigrating to England, where he became a priest in the Church of England and a country parson. Her mother, Beatrice Spooner-Jones, was a writer and artist herself and homeschooled Levertov. Levertov would attribute much of her success as an author to her immediate family and her ancestry; she made the precocious announcement at age five that she intended to become a writer, and at age twelve she sent some poems to the Nobel Prize-winning Anglo-American Poet T. S. Eliot, receiving back from him a letter of encouragement. She published her first poem at age seventeen.

During World War II, Levertov worked as a nurse, but she also completed a book of poetry, *The Double Image*, which was published in 1946 to good reviews. The following year she married the American writer Mitchell Goodman and accompanied him back to the United States, where she would live the rest of her life. Once in the United States, she began to read American literature seriously, including classical writers such as Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson but especially more recent poets such as Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams. Levertov held a series of teaching positions at various universities, most notably Stanford (1982–1993). She also became the poetry editor at such prominent magazines as the *Nation* and *Mother Jones*. In the 1950s she was for a time associated with the experimental Black Mountain poets. In 1956 she published *Here and Now*, gaining acknowledgment as an important American poet.

Throughout the 1960s Levertov became politically radicalized and turned her poetry to protest against the Vietnam War. Her husband became an important organizer of the antiwar movement. But in the 1970s she divorced Goodman and her work and life turned increasingly to religious concerns. Having been a secular atheist, she converted to Christianity and, in 1984, to Catholicism. "A Tree Telling of Orpheus" bridges her earlier poetry to the later religious strand of her work. It was published in 1968 as a chapbook (a private edition of three hundred copies) and was included two years later in her collection *Relearning the Alphabet* (1970).

Levertov published over twenty books of poetry, including the posthumous *This Great Unknowing: Last Poems* (1999), and is generally recognized as one of the most important American poets of the latter half of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, her work received little recognition in terms of literary prizes; she won the relatively minor Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize in 1976 for *The Freeing of the Dust*. She died of cancer on December 20, 1997, at her home in Seattle, Washington.

POEM SUMMARY

"A Tree Telling of Orpheus" consists of 161 lines and is divided by Levertov into ten separate sections, although it does not have a standard stanzaic structure. Told from the tree's perspective in its own voice, the poem describes in detail one of the famous miracles of Orpheus from

MEDIA ADAPTATIONS

- The Australian composer David Lumsdaine has arranged "A Tree Telling of Orpheus" for soprano and chamber ensemble. The score was published in 2003, and a commercial recording is scheduled to be released in 2009 or 2010.

Greek mythology, his ability to cause trees to walk by the power of his song.

Section 1

The poem begins with a brief introductory section (lines 1–11). The entire poem is told from the perspective of a first-person narrator (using "I"). It quickly becomes apparent that the narrator is a tree from its references to other trees as its relations and its own possession of branches and twigs. The event described in this section is the tree's first perception of Orpheus's music. The sensation is so subtle that it seems like nothing more than a light breeze at first. It is not clearly stated, but given the ever-increasing transformative power of Orpheus's song throughout the poem, it may be that this first hint of music is what calls the tree into consciousness from a more normal vegetative state. As the feeling intensifies, it seems to the tree as if it is burning—naturally the thing it fears most—but the sensation paradoxically does not create any fear.

Section 2

The second section includes lines 12 to 39. The first theme in this section is the confusion between man and tree. The tree takes on increasingly anthropomorphic, that is, humanlike, characteristics, as when it sees Orpheus. The tree explains Orpheus's physical appearance in terms of a tree or another plant, likening the human body to a tree trunk, the arms to branches, hair to grass, and so on. Next the tree describes Orpheus's lyre (an ancient musical instrument like a small hand-held harp, but strummed with a plectrum or pick, like a zither, rather than plucked). Actually made out of wood, the lyre, too, is explained with reference to the tree's own understanding of living creatures. The tree mistakes the strings, which are made of animal intestines, for vines. The tree realizes that it is with the lyre, as well as with his voice, that Orpheus is creating his music. The tree's next perception, then, is of Orpheus's singing. The tree notes that Orpheus's voice makes a sound of its own, as opposed to the wind, which only speaks through the rustling of leaves. Orpheus's song intensifies as he approaches the tree and eventually stands in its shadow, becoming connected to the tree in this way. Now the tree no longer experiences the song as fire, as before, but seems to feel itself singing as much as Orpheus is, and the music is welling up inside it, reminding it of its sap rising or of drawing up water from the dirt through its roots.

Section 3

In the brief third section (lines 40–43), Orpheus comes into physical contact with the tree, leaning against it. The tree's whole being is shaken with joyous and fearful emotion.

Section 4

The character of Orpheus's song changes in the fourth section (lines 44–62). Until now the music, even the singing, had featured no definite words. But now Orpheus adds lyrics to his song (although the words are never directly quoted by the tree). By the same creative miracle through which the song awakened consciousness in the tree, it now understands the language and meaning of the words. The meaning enters its being as does moisture from dew. The tree then moves on to the content of Orpheus's songs, which in fact correspond to the known categories of Orphic verse from antiquity. The first subject the tree mentions is cosmogony, descriptions of the various parts of the universe, such as the stars and planets, and how they behave and came to be. The next allusion is to a prophecy of Orpheus's journey to the underworld to bring his wife, Eurydice, back to the land of the living. The last topics are war and human emotions, the subjects of epics. These lines refer to Orpheus's role as a crewman of the *Argo* (on the voyage to Colchis, in which the hero, Jason, stole the golden fleece and married the witch Medea), the subject of more than one Greek epic poem.

Section 5

The brief fifth section (lines 63–71), concerns the transformation of the tree by Orpheus's song. The subject of Orpheus's song now turns to fire. Trees are naturally afraid of fire, but the tree speaking the poem takes joy in the fire of language that consumes him. It causes him to take flower out of season. It fills him with the full knowledge of language, so that he now knows the name of Orpheus's instrument, which he could only describe earlier through metaphor. His transformation frees him from the constraints of time, so that he is able not only to directly experience his former existence as a seed but also to "be" his remote evolutionary ancestors hundreds of millions of years ago and at the same time their fossil remains.

Section 6

In the sixth section (lines 72–79), the tree passes beyond merely achieving consciousness. A feeling wells up inside him that seems to be transforming him into a human or divine condition. It creates an internal stillness that the tree surprisingly compares to becoming bored. The tree further describes the sensation in paradoxical terms as a cold flame.

Section 7

In the seventh section (lines 80–92), Orpheus begins to move away from the tree. He steps out of its shadow, breaking whatever connection he had established by entering it. The transformative power of Orpheus's song begins to weaken. What had been a river of music becomes a trickle.

Section 8

The eighth section (lines 93–115) gives the tree's reaction to the withdrawal of Orpheus's music. Without any hesitation, and seemingly without any purposeful willing of the action on its part, the tree pulls its roots out of the ground and begins to walk, following Orpheus as he departs. Orpheus's ability to make trees walk with his song is the traditional miracle of the Orphic tradition that was the original inspiration on which Levertov constructed her poem. The trees on the wooded hillside behind the narrator-tree also begin to walk, following Orpheus. It is far from clear whether the music gives them some specific command to walk, or whether their longing to hear the music is so great that they follow Orpheus to keep listening to it. The tree notes that although its and the other trees' walking makes a sound like thunder, they can still hear the music, suggesting that it is reaching them by some means other than the sense of hearing.

Section 9

The very brief ninth section (lines 116–120) describes in simple terms the trees following after Orpheus. These lines, each printed separately, are all partial lines, much shorter than the average in the poem and consisting of as few as one word. In all the section consists of only a single sentence, but each line nevertheless contains a complete phrase, line 120 even containing two independent clauses. This follows ideas of the Black Mountain school of poetry, which was characterized by the separation of lines by grammatical rather than metrical units. The section perhaps also reflects another Black Mountain idea, that each line should constitute the words spoken with a single breath. In that case, the brevity of the lines can be seen to represent the shortness of breath caused in the anthropomorphic tree by the heavy physical exertion of walking for the first time, as if it is a human being out of breath. The close packing of the two independent clauses in line 120 perhaps then models the rapid rushing of the trees after Orpheus. The only new information in the section is that the trees consciously try to reply to Orpheus's music with the sounds made by shaking their leaves.

Section 10

The tenth and final section of the poem (lines 121–161) completes the episode of the trees walking and gives a brief summary of the other major myths associated with Orpheus. The song of Orpheus has begun at dawn, and Orpheus continues to lead the trees on their migration throughout the day. They do not merely walk, but Orpheus also uses his song to teach the trees to dance in time to the music. Finally Orpheus leads them to a grassy field, and as the trees form a circle around him they create a grove. The trees' dance fills Orpheus with the whole range of human emotion. At sunset, he changes his song so that it leads the trees to take root in their new places. Throughout the night the music again pours over the trees like water, but this time like rain rather than dew, nourishing them in their new configuration. Orpheus leaves, and the trees anxiously await his return. The tree

then reports news of Orpheus that he has somehow learned (at a minimum this suggests that the transformation Orpheus effected in the tree's consciousness is permanent). This portion alludes to the main elements of Orpheus's myth. The tree refers to Orpheus's trip to the underworld to bring back Eurydice, his dead bride, only to lose her a second time; to the poet's dismemberment (which the tree understands through the metaphor of cutting off a tree's limbs for fuel) by frenzied maenad worshippers of the god Dionysus; and to the continued singing of Orpheus's head after it is cast into the ocean. While the tree continues to hope for Orpheus's return, its life has been forever transformed by its experience of hearing Orpheus's song, which continues to inform everything else the tree experiences. In a final paradox, the tree explains its memory of dancing and hearing the music, which transformed its life into one of longing for the music's return, as painful.

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY

- "A Tree Telling of Orpheus" focuses on Orpheus's miracle of moving trees by his song. Read more about Orpheus, and write your own poem describing another of his miracles, such as attracting and taming wild animals by song. Adopt an anthropomorphic first-person perspective for your poem, as Levertov does in her poem.
- Give a presentation to your class interpreting some of the many pieces of literature, films, and paintings that deal with the myth of Orpheus, such as Claudio Monteverdi's opera *L'Orfeo* and Jean Cocteau's *Orphic Trilogy* of films.
- The environmental or green movement was a significant movement of protest in the 1960s. The idea of "A Tree Telling of Orpheus" as told from the viewpoint of a tree would seem an ideal platform to explore this movement. Does Levertov seem to support environmentalism in the poem? Research her stance on environmentalism, along with that of J. R. R. Tolkien in his presentation of the Ents, also walking trees, in his trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*. Prepare a brief paper comparing the views of both authors.
- Illustrate your favorite part of Levertov's poem in a painting or drawing and present it to your class. In your presentation, explain the part of the poem on which your drawing is based and discuss your interpretation of the scene.

THEMES

Myth of Orpheus

In Greek myth, Orpheus was a hero—a being more than an ordinary mortal but less than a god. The ancient Greeks developed a framework to associate events from their mythic past, as enshrined in poetry, with the established chronology of historical events. On this understanding, Orpheus lived during the heroic age described by the poet Hesiod, a generation before the Trojan War, which the Greeks traditionally dated to 1184 BCE. Significantly, Orpheus, coming from Thrace (modern Bulgaria), was seen by the Greeks as an outsider. He nevertheless played two important interrelated roles in Greek culture. He was the shamanic founder of a mystery cult of the god Dionysus devoted to healing and personal salvation, incorporating myths and rituals from Egypt and the Near East. This, probably more important, function of Orpheus remains obscure because of the secrecy involved in its initiations and the loss of the ancient poems used by priests of the cult. However, Orpheus also figured in a series of well-known and popular narrative myths.

These popular myths are what Levertov draws from in "A Tree Telling of Orpheus." The myths of Orpheus include four main themes, which are all characteristic of traditional shamanic ritual practices and are all alluded to by Levertov. *Shamanism* is a term used by modern scholars to refer to a class of practices and beliefs that have been present in the early stages of the development of religions of many peoples throughout the world. Shamans claim the power to work miracles based on their journeys to the other world, that of gods and the dead, and the ability to mediate on behalf of others with the divine world. Among

Tree *(Image copyright Alexander Kalina, 2009. Used under license from Shutterstock.com)*

Orpheus's four mythic themes, first, he is sometimes accounted as the (human) inventor of song and is said to have been able to use song to change the course of rivers, draw trees and rocks to him, and make wild animals come to him in gentle submission. Second, Orpheus was a crew member of the ship *Argo* in the epic story of Jason, and he prevented the Sirens (wicked women of the water) from luring the ship to destruction with their seductive song by outsinging them. Third, when his wife, Eurydice, was killed by the bite of a serpent on their wedding day, Orpheus journeyed to the underworld and used his song to persuade the gods Hades and Persephone to allow him to lead her back to earth and life. In the best-known versions of this story, he fails by anxiously looking back for her at the last moment before reemerging into the living world, only to see her slip back into the world of the dead; in the earliest versions, on the other hand, he seems to have successfully resurrected her. Last, while mourning for Eurydice in the wild forest, Orpheus encounters a group of maenads (frenzied worshippers of Dionysus) who mistake him for an animal and tear him to pieces in a ritual sacrifice, but even after his death, Orpheus's head continues to sing.

The best-known ancient account of Orpheus occurs in the Roman poet Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which features tales of transformations. In the tenth book, Ovid describes Orpheus calling trees to him by song to create a grove, giving a lengthy catalog (lines 86–105) of the different tree species that answer his call. Due to the classical cast of the basic education she received before World War II, Levertov probably had a general familiarity with Orpheus from direct encounters with ancient poetry. However, she also read W. K. C. Guthrie's study of the ancient Orphic tradition, *Orpheus and Greek Religion*, and this book no doubt conditioned her presentation of Orpheus in the poem, for instance in her separation of the esoteric (lines 54–58) and poetic (lines 144–49) traditions about Orpheus.

Katabasis (Descent to the Underworld)

Katabasis (literally, "going downward") is a theme of Greek poetry in which a hero descends to the underworld and returns transformed or

empowered. The prototype occurs in Homer's *Odyssey* when Odysseus journeys to the world of the dead to ask the ghost of the prophet Tiresias about how to return home. Another well-known katabasis is Orpheus's descent to reclaim his dead wife, Eurydice, which Levertov briefly refers to in "A Tree Telling of Orpheus." However, in her poem, Levertov interprets the theme in an entirely new way. The tree's experience in the poem leads it to feel back through history to the mortal remains of its ancestors (coal) and to attain consciousness and enlightenment (as paralleled by a literal walk downhill), suggesting the theme of katabasis. Levertov's invention of the tree being called to consciousness as well as walking to Orpheus seems to be derived from Orpheus's leading Eurydice to life. In particular, the struggle of the tree and the entire forest passing into a new life recalls the katabasis of Dante Alighieri in his fourteenth-century epic poem *Inferno*. In that work, the author begins by wandering through a forest representing sin and ignorance before stumbling into the underworld and eventually receiving enlightenment in heaven.

STYLE

Irregular Form and Meter

"A Tree Telling of Orpheus" is divided into ten unequal sections by the poet's insertions of blank lines, as between stanzas, although Levertov did not use any regular stanza arrangement. The lineation of the poem is quite complex. In traditional poetry, lines of different lengths of lyric meters (rhythmic patterns) might be indicated by indentation of the shorter lines, while in drama a single metrical line might be printed offset over two or three lines when it comprises parts spoken by two or three characters. This kind of offset printing is used extensively by Levertov. The poem does not employ a traditional verse structure, and the division into lines, and particularly into offset lines, seems to follow the logical or even grammatical, rather than the metrical, progression of the poem. One practical consequence of this is a problem in counting lines. It might in some sense be justified to count two lines where the first one ends halfway through the average line length, while the following line continues the same thought and is offset to align with the ending of the first, as if forming a single line of verse (as in drama). For convenience, however, line number references given here count every single printed line as a discrete line, giving a total of 161 lines. Levertov wrote extensively in essays about the importance of line divisions and in this regard was heavily influenced by the Black Mountain poets.

At the line level, "A Tree Telling of Orpheus" is not written in a traditional meter such as iambic pentameter or any other lyric meter. Poetry that does not use meter or rhyme is generally called free verse, although by 1968 the abandonment of these traditions was nearly universal among critically regarded poets, so it is hardly a distinguishing characteristic of Levertov's work. Levertov uses some metrical effects, however. For instance in lines 115 and 116, when she describes the first awkward steps of the trees uprooting themselves and walking toward Orpheus, Levertov breaks up the natural iambic structure of English prose to suggest their clumsy movements.

Anthropomorphism

The literary device of anthropomorphism refers to an author's treating an animal, or even an inanimate object, as if it were human. The name comes from the ancient Greek words *anthropos*, which means "human being," and *morphe*, which means "form." In "A Tree Telling of Orpheus," the tree that narrates the story takes on various human characteristics, being able to reason, speak (insofar as the narrative is in its voice), and even walk or dance like a person. Indeed, the main subject of the poem is the tree's gaining these very human characteristics. Levertov's unusually vivid usage of anthropomorphism creates a metaphor for the awakening of human consciousness through mystical enlightenment, revolutionary indoctrination, or whatever means.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Black Mountain Poets

Black Mountain College in North Carolina opened in 1933 and closed in 1956. The school was founded in an attempt to sustain an experimental institution that would give a liberal arts education by involving the student directly in artistic creation. The poetry faculty, which included Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, and many other poets who were to become prominent in the 1950s and 1960s, published the *Black*

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **Heroic Age:** In the Heroic Age of Greek myth, miracles of transformation, such as language and song causing trees to move, are commonplace.

  1960s: The youth culture embraced by Levertov believes in the individual's power to transform the self, such as in seeking enlightenment, and in the movement's power to transform society.

  Today: A dominant paradigm within intellectual, academic thought holds that the meaning of language is not fixed but is shifting and fluid, whereby the reader of a text, rather than its author, creates meaning through a process of transformation.

- **Heroic Age:** Orpheus represents a shamanic form of religion in which the religious leader's soul gains power and effects change by journeying outside his body, for example to the underworld.

  1960s: The countervailing youth culture tries to find new meaning in mystical practices such as meditation and in simulated mysticism through the use of hallucinogenic drugs such as LSD.

  Today: The idea of voyage of the soul outside the body is not a central theme in popular culture but is generally limited to small subcultures such as the New Age.

- **Heroic Age:** The classical tradition is in the process of formation, including the creation of a vibrant tradition of poetry.

  1960s: Once an unquestioned underpinning of Western culture, the classical tradition of Greek and Roman art and letters is challenged by the countervailing youth culture. Classical forms of poetry and dependence on classical sources are viewed as decadent and are rejected or put to ends subversive of tradition.

  Today: The classical tradition is waning as an influence on popular culture, and poetry is no longer as popular a form as it once was.

Mountain Review, a journal to which Levertov occasionally contributed. The major influence of this school was to redefine poetic structure from being based on meter to being based simultaneously on ordinary speech (so that one line would equal the number or words that could be spoken between breaths) and on content (so that each line would contain a new idea that would lead to the new idea of the next line). Many poets of this group were interested in the esoteric use of religious and mythic tradition; these forms find expression in Levertov's work. However, Levertov, though closely associated with many of these poets (especially Duncan), never taught at Black Mountain and always denied simple identification with its movement.

Vietnam War Protests

The Vietnam War was a major preoccupation of the youth culture of the 1960s, whose protests against it caused the occasional disruption of university life. Such protests also directly impacted the national political process, as in the case of the riots associated with the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, Illinois. The protest movement certainly contributed to President Richard M. Nixon's decision to work toward a diplomatic solution to the war. Levertov and especially her husband, Mitchell Goodman, were leading voices of antiwar protest. Goodman organized illegal protests that included acts such as the destruction of draft cards, such as in the notorious incident for which other leaders (including the famous pediatrician Dr. Benjamin Spock) were arrested and tried, becoming known as the "Boston Five." Levertov herself frequently spoke and read her antiwar poetry at rallies. Levertov's friend and fellow poet Robert Duncan suggested in a letter

Illustration depicting the myth of Orpheus (© Mary Evans Picture Library / Alamy)

to her that in "A Tree Telling of Orpheus," the awakening of the tree to consciousness serves as a metaphor for the political awakening of the 1960s generation through becoming involved in the antiwar movement. Unfortunately, no immediate reply by Levertov, which might have indicated her agreement or disagreement with the suggestion, survives. The poem seems, however, more to look forward to her later religious poetry, rather than to be closely associated with her protest writing and activity.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

Undoubtedly the earliest criticism of "A Tree Telling of Orpheus" came from Levertov's friend and colleague Robert Duncan, a Black Mountain poet. Levertov sent him the original chapbook publication of the poem, which he in turn read out to his friends in the milieu of the San Francisco Renaissance. In a letter to Levertov of February 26, 1968 (published in the collection of their correspondence, *The Letters of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov*, edited by Robert Bertholf and Albert Gelpi), Duncan praises the structure and lyrical quality of the poem but mainly reads it as an allegory, likening the awakening of the tree to the birth of the 1950s avant-garde movement that culminated in the revolutionary youth culture of the 1960s. He sees the final creation of the glade of trees around Orpheus as analogous to the reformed society that he thinks will emerge from that movement. This interpretation is also followed by Harry Martin in *Understanding Denise Levertov*.

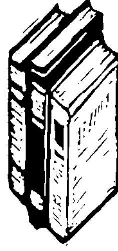
However, more recent criticism of the poem sees it as a break with 1960s radicalism and a move toward the religious themes of the author's later career. James Gallant, in his article in the 1997 volume of the journal *Renascence* devoted to Levertov, says "'A Tree Telling of Orpheus' is perhaps the clearest expression of one of Levertov's most persistent themes, the spiritual journey through forests of doubt in search of deeper faith." In the opinion of Joan F. Hallisey, as expressed in the 1982 issue of *Melus*, the epiphanic sense of the poem—its character as a vision of the divine manifest on earth—is derived from the influence of Hasidic folklore.

CRITICISM

Bradley A. Skeen

Skeen is a classics professor. In this essay, he examines the mythological, religious, and philosophical contexts of "A Tree Telling of Orpheus."

Levertov published "A Tree Telling of Orpheus" in 1968 at the height of her involvement with the youth culture of the 1960s, when she was busy writing poems explicitly directed against the Vietnam War, speaking at rallies, attending sit-ins, and calling for revolution. It is easy to read "A Tree Telling of Orpheus" within the context of the time. The poet Robert Duncan, Levertov's friend, read it in precisely this way. He saw the awakening of the tree to consciousness as symbolic of the awakening to revolutionary consciousness that lay at the heart of the countercultural movement of that era. Levertov never



WHAT DO I READ NEXT?

- Levertov's poem "The Lyre-Tree," originally published in the *American Poetry Review* on January 1, 1993, and reprinted in her 1996 collection *The Sands of the Well*, revisits much of the material treated in "A Tree Telling of Orpheus" but in a much more pessimistic vein.
- *Ritual Texts for the Afterlife: Orpheus and the Bacchic Gold Tablets* (2007), by Fritz Graf and Sarah Iles Johnston, describes in detail the ancient Greek body of poetry devoted to personal salvation that circulated in antiquity under the name of Orpheus.
- *Hearts and Minds: Bodies, Poetry, and Resistance in the Vietnam Era* (1996), by Michael Bibby, begins to assess the role of Levertov as a poet in the popular movement opposed to the Vietnam War.
- Although Levertov kept some distance from the popular culture of the 1960s, despite her involvement with the antiwar movement, an understanding of the background of her times, such as is provided in Scott MacFarlane's *The Hippie Narrative: A Literary Perspective on the Counterculture* (2007), is helpful.

commented on this interpretation; but it is entirely possible to read the poem quite differently. If at the time she wrote it Levertov was perceived as an antiwar poet, she would soon become principally a religious poet seeking meaning particularly within the Christian mystical tradition. "A Tree Telling of Orpheus" can be viewed as the substantial origin of this later trend in Levertov's work.

The initial impression upon reading "A Tree Telling of Orpheus" is of a straightforward retelling of a Greek myth. The story involves Orpheus enchanting trees to make them walk. It is very closely based on classical models such as the myth's best-known surviving version in the tenth book of the Roman poet Ovid's

LEVERTOV WAS DEEPLY EXPOSED TO A VARIETY OF RELIGIOUS INFLUENCES FROM HER CHILDHOOD THROUGH THE 1960S, AND MANY OF THEM BEGAN TO TAKE FORM IN HER VERSE IN 'A TREE TELLING OF ORPHEUS,' WHICH IS FILLED WITH THE LANGUAGE AND SYMBOLS OF RELIGIOUS MYSTICISM."

Metamorphoses. The element of the trees forming themselves into a grove or circle, for instance, comes from this source, although Levertov reinterprets the scene as involving the trees dancing around Orpheus before taking up their new positions. Her chief innovation, however, is to tell the story from the viewpoint of one of the trees. This kind of anthropomorphism, making an inanimate object speak in a human fashion, is rare in ancient literature.

Levertov uses her new perspective on the myth—the tree's perspective—to go far beyond a simple retelling of the traditional story. Levertov was deeply exposed to a variety of religious influences from her childhood through the 1960s, and many of them began to take form in her verse in "A Tree Telling of Orpheus," which is filled with the language and symbols of religious mysticism. Levertov's father was a country parson in the Church of England, but he had a unique background. He was descended from Shneur Zalman, founder of the Chabad sect of Hasidic Judaism in nineteenth-century Russia. Despite his conversion and ordination as an Anglican priest, Levertov's father remained steeped in Hasidic tradition and told his young daughter many of the miraculous tales of the great rabbis that are such an important part of Hasidic culture. Undoubtedly, this influenced Levertov to accept stories of miracles such as Orpheus's as a normal part of literary art. She later studied the Hasidic tales more systematically in the collections and translations of Martin Buber. After moving to America, Levertov read the transcendental philosophy of Ralph Waldo Emerson. She also steeped herself in the works of many medieval Christian mystics. Since

in her early adult life Levertov thought of herself as an atheist, she was able to approach these diverse traditions without the prejudice of feeling that there could only be a single truth among them, and she found them all to be of equal value. As Levertov herself said, in an interview with Michael Andre reprinted in *Conversations with Denise Levertov*, of her unique upbringing, for her, "it was not a contradiction to be both Jewish and Christian." What especially interested her was the commonalities among the various traditions. And indeed, there are pronounced similarities among these spiritualities, since despite radically different approaches and contexts, they all drew part of their inspiration form the seminal works of the ancient Greek philosopher Plato. It is hardly surprising that one of Levertov's first major attempts to deal in poetry with her religious impulses and studies should take the form of a myth of Orpheus, since the Orphic tradition was in turn one of the foundations of Plato's thought.

There are two possible responses to myth. One is to dismiss it as a kind of failed science that does a very poor job of describing the world and contains much nonsense. The other is to treat myth as validation through language of a culture's tradition that also provides a sense of meaning to life. The meaning that myth provides can be viewed as similar to that provided by music, being of an entirely different kind than rational discourse. Despite rejecting Christianity through much of her adult life, Levertov never doubted that myths—all myths, not just Christian traditions—contain meaning. Levertov shared with many schools of anthropology and psychology the belief that the human mind naturally expresses many ideas and perceptions in mythic form, as she affirms in her essay "The Sense of Pilgrimage" (quoted by José Rodríguez Herrera in the 1997 issue of *Renascence* devoted to Levertov):

> Man is the animal that perceives analogies. Even when cut off from tradition, the correspondences that, if he holds open the doors of his understanding, he cannot but perceive, will form images that are myth. The intellect, if not distorted by divorce from the other capacities, it is not obstructive to the experience of the mysterious.

Since, for Levertov, myth is something that arises from the human condition, it is natural that one will find similarities in myth between cultures and religions, yielding more essential human truths.

What interested Levertov especially in "A Tree Telling of Orpheus" is a particular form of mythic and spiritual expression known as mysticism. A mystic changes his consciousness by shifting his perception from its ordinary focus on the senses (such as sight and hearing) to some interior part of the self that is not ordinarily perceived. Jewish mystics, for instance, often describe the mystical experience as a process of going down into oneself, while the Catholic mystic St. Teresa of Ávila described it as a journey through an interior castle. Religious mystics naturally believe that whatever they reach inside themselves is the god defined by their religious belief. This kind of transformational experience is what informs Levertov's tree's awakening to consciousness for the first time. The tree is awakening from his vegetative condition to consciousness, while the mystic awakens from ordinary consciousness to the consciousness of the god within himself. The mystic's altering of consciousness is often accomplished through investing attention in some repetitive act, such as chanting, that serves to suppress awareness of the sensual world and allows the perception of other sources of meaning. While in the original myth Orpheus's song was probably thought to act as a spell to make the trees walk through magic, Levertov's treatment of his song more nearly resembles a kind of mystical chanting that allows the tree to exist with a new awareness of itself and the world. The tree's claim that its experience is a silence presents one of the most common terms used by mystics to describe their new experience. The confusion of this state with being bored relates to a danger of mystical contemplation that all mystics are aware of, namely, that the repetitive technique can result in mere boredom rather than the desired redirection of consciousness. That the tree is perceiving Orpheus's song by some means beyond the sense of hearing is emphasized by the fact that the thunderous noise of the trees uprooting themselves does nothing to disturb their perception of it.

It is very common for mystics, after finding the god within themselves, to see the same mystery revealed in all of nature and come to the conclusion that their god is inherent in the entire universe or even equivalent to the universe. This foundational belief is called pantheism (from the

Greek for "god is everything"). When a religious movement is based on mysticism, this can become a normative belief of the sect, as was the case with the Chabad movement founded by Levertov's great-grandfather. In other cases it can lead to accusations of heresy against the mystic by religious authorities, as with the medieval Christian mystics Julian of Norwich and Meister Eckhart. The experience of Levertov's tree is pantheistic. The tree's consciousness is extended to the entire universe, which stands for god in pantheistic mysticism. The tree experiences the entire range of history without the limitation of time in that it simultaneously experiences its own existence and that of its remote ancestors hundreds of millions of years ago, before the geological coal age. At the same time the tree's consciousness is extended throughout the physical universe so that it encompasses the unseen motions of the sun and moon. Insofar as the tree becomes more and more personified (portrayed in the likeness of a human being) while also perceiving Orpheus as being a tree (with a trunk and limbs), it is approaching identification with its "creator," or at least its awakener. This hints at the union with god experienced by many mystics. The tree's union with Orpheus is intensified when the poet stands in its shadow, and the tree soon cannot tell if Orpheus is singing or it is singing itself. Eventually, once it reaches the point of mystical silence, the tree describes the experience as one of becoming human or even divine.

One thing that mystics agree on is that human language, which is based on ordinary sense perceptions and established concepts, cannot describe the mystical experience. This is one reason why they, like Levertov's tree, refer to their experience as a silence or cessation of language. When they do use words to communicate their new perception, they often speak in paradoxes. The tree does this frequently, talking about cold fire and fiery ice, for example. Another technique is to describe the mystical experience through metaphor. It is often described as a death (based in part on the common religious idea that the mystic experiences during life what everyone will after death), as when the tree likens its experience to being chopped down. In another common metaphor, the transformational experience is described as the burning of a flame, as in this passage from Meister Eckhart's seventh Latin sermon:

> Towards this union with God for which it is created the soul strives perpetually. Fire converts wood into its own likeness, and the stronger the wind blows, the greater grows the fire. Now by the fire understand love, and by the wind the Holy Spirit. The stronger the influence of the Holy Spirit, the brighter grows the fire of love; but not all at once, rather gradually as the soul grows. Light causes flowers and plants to grow and bear fruit; in animals it produces life, but in men blessedness.

As is appropriate for a tree, Levertov's speaker repeatedly describes hearing Orpheus's song as the experience of catching fire, but though the normal reaction of a tree to fire would be fear, it is not afraid and instead paradoxically finds joy in the flames.

In conjunction with the mystical elements, the tree's experience expresses a great deal of what Levertov believed about poetry. In a 1973 interview with Maureen Smith reprinted in *Conversations with Denise Levertov*, the poet remarked,

> I think of poetry as something beyond the poet, of which the poet is a servant, and I think of it as a power, a force beyond oneself. I was brought up, as you can imagine, in quite a religious atmosphere, although not really a conventional one; I think that the amount of religious imagery that comes up in my poems is certainly accounted for largely by my background.... The terminology of religion and myth has always been very natural to me.

Levertov refers to the ancient Greek philosopher Plato's teaching that poetry is inspired, that the poet is merely recording something revealed to her in much the same way that the vision is revealed to the mystic. In this sense, the work of the poet as guided by inspiration is like the dance of the trees to the music of Orpheus. That Levertov speaks of poetic inspiration seriously, and in "A Tree Telling of Orpheus" is moving in the direction of finding the source of inspiration in some god, indeed presents a mythic way of thinking that leads her far away from her contemporary poets and toward the eternity of tradition.

Source: Bradley Skeen, Critical Essay on "A Tree Telling of Orpheus," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2010.

Ed Block, Jr.

In the following excerpt from an interview with Block, Levertov discusses her careers as a poet

I WOULD SAY THAT I DO BELIEVE THAT ANYBODY WHO HAS ANY KIND OF GIFT, AND HAS BEEN GIVEN THAT GIFT, HAS AN OBLIGATION TO USE IT. AND IT'S REALLY HARD TO HAVE A GIFT."

and a teacher, the spiritual aspects of her poetry, and influences on her work.

Q: You see poetry as a calling. How would you distinguish your sense of calling from that of some of the poets you admire? And how does that sense of calling relate to your apprehension of transcendence, your commitment to a spiritual vision?

A: I've always, since I was a young girl, felt some kind of affinity for Keats' feeling that he wanted to be great, he wanted to be numbered among the English poets. He was not ambitious in the here and now. He wasn't a careerist. He really wanted to be a *poet*; not to "have a career." And of course he was hurt when he got those horrible reviews; he was sensitive, and they were so nasty, referring to the Cockney accent and things like that. But it wasn't immediate recognition but posthumous fame that he really sought.

So, my concept of fame: I didn't want to be mediocre. I wanted to try to be, I hoped I could be, first rate. But I never have been a careerist, and I've been a very fortunate person in being sort of discovered by various people, especially when I was so young, and I have had a very lucky publishing career and a lot of success and positive feedback. But I truly have not sought it. I have never gone after a job and never made a move that's supposed to be to my own advantage. These sort of dropped out of a tree into my own hand.

Q: So I take it that you didn't seek a career in teaching?

A: I sort of happened into teaching. I found I was quite good at that. Not first rate, but good. So I can't really picture myself being anything else than a poet. I did want to be a painter, but I didn't have the drive to go on with that. You have to want to paint more than anything. I didn't have that much talent anyway—only a little bit. My mother had a definite talent for art, and my son is a painter. So it's somewhere in the family. But I didn't feel the inner need to pursue it.

I used to draw from time to time, and then when my son went to art school, I stopped entirely, because he also wrote, and I thought it was probably really hard for him to have two parents who were writers. I thought that I didn't want him to feel he was in competition with me in the visual arts; so I stopped and didn't even miss doing it. I wasn't drawing or trying to paint that regularly anyway. But I can't stop writing poetry. I don't write every day, but it's something that my inner being needs to go on doing, and if I haven't written any poems for months, which sometimes happens, I don't feel right. I feel uncomfortable in my skin somehow.

To go back to the other part of your initial question: I'm not sure what an "apprehension of transcendence" means, to tell you the truth. I would say that I do believe that anybody who has any kind of gift, and has been given that gift, has an obligation to use it. And it's really hard to have a gift. When I stopped being an agnostic I perceived it [the calling] as a gift from God. What I thought it was in the interim I don't know, I thought it was a gift anyway, a gift from something somewhere.

Q: I guess by "apprehension of transcendence," I meant that your poetry—even some of the earliest—has a spiritual dimension, a sense of reality, something beyond our own capabilities.

A: Of course, although I was agnostic for years. I did grow up in a quite definitely religious atmosphere. And so that concept, certainly, was imparted to me in my earliest years, and I've always believed in other orders of being. When I was a child, I saw a little man, you know, one of the little people, and the dog saw it too. I was with my sister—I can't remember if she saw it too. Actually, I think she did, she must have. I was sitting on a bench in this old park—I mean "park" in the English sense, not the American sense—in the woods, and there was a bench, and a flat, wide walk, which had an edging to mark where the path was and where the woods were; which was like a wire strung between low uprights. And a little dinky person, less than two feet high, dressed in a one-piece garment and a little peaked cap came out of the woods. He was so small that to get over that wire he had to *climb* over it. He crossed the path without a

glance at us, and clambered over the wire on the other side and into the woods.

Well, I've always believed that this was something that I actually saw. I'm sure that there are other orders of being. I went on believing that even in my agnostic days. How that relates to my calling, presently, I'm not sure.

Q: What poets have influenced you to write from a faith context?

A: I've always loved George Herbert and Gerard Manley Hopkins. Some of George Herbert I've known from childhood, like

I got me flowers to strew Thy way,
I got me boughs off many a tree;
But Thou wast up by break of day,
And brought'st Thy sweets along with Thee.

I was responding to the language, not the meaning. Hopkins I came to a little later.

Q: What about your sense of calling relative to someone like R. M. Rilke?

A: Well, what could Rilke have been but a poet?

Q: Do you see a religious or spiritual dimension in Rilke? Do you have some sense of his apprehension of different orders of being?

A: Well, I'm not sure. The strongest influence for me of Rilke really came from his letters; not so much the *Letters to a Young Poet*, but the later collections of letters. Rilke cannot be co-opted as a Christian poet. I mean, you can, but it's too forced. He had assimilated Christian cultural influence, and he wrote some marvelous poems on Christian subjects; but he didn't consider himself a Christian.

Q: It sounds like what you were saying in class about the poet's work having to sustain the meaning. You can try to find things in what he said, but . . .

A: It's putting an agenda on him which I don't think he held himself.

Q: I know some would interpret him in a Christian fashion. But that's the kind of distinction I like to hear you make. And Hopkins. I've read some of your essays where you talk about inscape *and the importance the concept had for you. Your praise of Herbert, on the other hand, is interesting. But I take it that that's not something you'd say informs your writing now?*

A: I've always loved his work, and of course I like some of the poets of that period, like Traherne; but also *The Centuries of Meditation*. Have you read them? They're a kind of prose. They're highly charged prose. You could almost call them prose poems except no one can really define what that term means. But they are so wonderful in language and imagery.

Q: That sounds like a reason you'd like Julian of Norwich.

A: Yes, it's her images that drew me to her.

Q: Are there any other Christian writers who provide inspiration?

A: Another poet is Henry Vaughan. Also I like Cowley and Crashaw; all those Metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century do appeal to me, and yet the extreme baroque style—it's almost what in Spanish literature is called Gongorism—it's fascinating, but it's not my main cup of tea. Vaughan and Traherne are my favorites; their poems are much less dependent on conceits; their images more concrete.

There's a wonderful image in Vaughan. It's in his poem "Night," and he speaks of "God's silent searching flight." That image absolutely had to have come from observing owls. Talk about Incarnation! That's such a wonderful image if you've ever watched an owl—I mean, a big white owl, a barn owl: "God's silent, searching flight," and a few lines later, "his still, soft call." They fly so searchingly, and also so silently. It's an amazing thing to see these big birds in flight in the moonlight. I know they're predators, but so is every creature, humans included. I'm sure he [Vaughan] wasn't that conscious of that aspect in writing this image. He might have thought it was sort of blasphemous if he had. But I am sure that the image came to him through his direct observation of owls, of which there must have been many more in England in his day.

Q: Did your close acquaintance with owls begin at Stanford, or since you've gotten to Seattle?

A: I became reacquainted with them at Stanford.

Q: Where was the first?

A: Oh, in England.

Q: Were your first twenty or so years in England formative, then?

A: Oh, absolutely. Although culturally I *am* a mishmash, and always was, since my father came from Russia and my mother came from Wales; two religious backgrounds, although, as

I said, I didn't have a lot of Jewish input, but I had some, because it was part of my father's earliest scholarship and of his work as an Anglican priest who tried to educate people about the Jewish roots of Christianity. Although I was not "*English* English," the English countryside was absolutely formative for me, and I miss it to this day. I mean, I will watch reruns of *All Creatures Great and Small* on TV just to see all the English details.

Q: Do you trace your emphasis on attentiveness back to the early years as well?

A: Yes, and especially to the influence of my mother. I have a poem in *Life in the Forest* about how in springtime my mother would go down the garden pathway and say, "Oh, look, the snowdrop has come up" and "Look, there's a crocus!" And I remember recognizing how she had done that the year before and I was bored, because I was too young to pay attention, and now I am a child, not a baby, and I can see what she was talking about.

She was a pointer-outer. She pointed out clouds, and she pointed out flowers. She started one off looking at things. When she was living in Mexico in her last eighteen years or so, the child of the family in which she was a sort of paying guest and an unofficial adopted grandmother, that one child in that family who had spent a lot of time with her in her first years, was the only one who would run in and say, "Oh, you must come and look; there is a beautiful sunset," because my mother had made her look at things.

Q: Would your mother also name things?

A: Yes, she'd name them too.

Q: Some would say that pointing and naming are the poet's primal tasks.

A: Yes. Very few people really see things unless they've had someone in early life who made them look at things. And name them too. But the looking is primary, the focus. I saw the difference in that child. She wasn't more intelligent than the other children in the family. She wasn't personally particularly sensitive. But she had had that experience of my mother's pointing. And there's a curious sort of obliviousness to things that I have noted with students, quite intellectual students. I first noticed it when I was teaching at Vassar, which has a very pretty campus. That was back in 1966. I don't know what it's like now, but it was not yet coed. Students came from good high schools, and so they were rather well prepared. They were much less ignorant than the typical student, even in a supposedly good school, is today.

The Vassar campus has a lake, a pretty little lake, and I discovered that quite a few of these students (a lot of them were senior English majors) had never walked around the lake. They were too book-oriented. I have always been book-oriented too, but they were study- and analytically-oriented. So I made them walk around the lake. A couple of times when it was warm enough, toward the end of the school year, we had class and a picnic there. I've experienced, dozens of times in my life, walking with someone across some campus or park, or just a city street, and interrupting myself in mid-sentence to say, "Oh, look, isn't that gorgeous . . . " And they've kind of blinked and said, "Oh, yes! I pass here every day, and I've never noticed that before." So I think that people need a pointer-outer, and the earlier the better. And my mother gave me that.

Q: You spoke in class about Pound. I do see in your early poetry the emphasis on images and on clear and sharp and accurate imagery. Do you feel compelled to "make it new," or to see it in unusual ways, in order to say, "look, look; see it in a new way"?

A: No, I don't feel compelled to see it in unusual ways, but I think anything that one really sees is new and fresh. I mean, when one really gives one's attention to something, you probably see something in it that you didn't see before. But the Pound book that was most influential for me was not the *Cantos*, nor the early Imagist poetry. Of course I read them and no doubt learned something from them. But it was *The ABC of Reading*. I don't use it to teach so much anymore, but I used to make all of my students read it. Pound failed to see many things; he never dealt with his own unconscious, for instance, and he never really acknowledged it in others; but what he had to say about precision, accuracy, and integrity in craft is very valuable. . . .

Source: Ed Block, Jr., "Interview with Denise Levertov," in *Renascence*, Vol. 50, No. 2–Jan, Fall/Winter 1997/1998 1998, pp. 4–15.

Marilyn Kallet

In the following excerpt from an analysis of "A Tree Telling of Orpheus," Kallet discusses some of

the sources of the poem's significance, including its musicality and use of personification.

The sources of power in Denise Levertov's poem "A Tree Telling of Orpheus" are both ancient and contemporary, obvious and occult. Embodying myth and myth-making, the poem enacts its own genesis. Its rhythm and images continually remind us of beginnings: of the world, of language, and of poetry's birth from dance. Creation myths, according to Jungian scholar Marie-Louise Von Franz, have always had a stronger resonance than other mythic patterns: "Of a different class from other myths . . . they convey a mood which implies that what is said will concern the basic things of existence, something more than is contained in other myths. . . . Creation myths are the deepest and most important of all myths." The telling of creation myths in many traditional societies forms a vital part of teaching the initiatory rituals. Such telling reenacts Creation, allowing the participants to experience renewal. In Levertov's poem, as in oral tradition poetry, language is active, effecting a sense of loss and renewal in the participant/reader. As the title promises, this is an Orphic hymn, sung by an initiate, one who celebrates Orpheus's gentle and powerful songs, who retells the Orphic story of death and rebirth. The mythic pattern of going underground, being buried like Persephone, being torn to pieces like the ancient corn god, and being remembered in ritual and song—this pattern is the vital nervous and circulatory system of the poem.

To revitalize an ancient myth is no small task. It would be impossible to narrate Orpheus's journey in a short poem, much less to evoke his famed music, or the spirit of his quest. But underlying and propelling the narrative, the sustained rhythm of Levertov's long poem permits a bodily and imaginative sense of loss and restoration. In its supple lines and precise rhythms, the poem approximates dance. It asks to be read out loud, and read as scored. In doing so, one has the feeling of inhabiting one's voice and body. There are few poems in contemporary literature which evoke this strong sense of physical and imaginative life on the move and in harmony. Among these are Charles Olson's "For Sappho, Back," and passages from his "As the Dead Prey Upon Us," as well as George Quasha's "Rilke's Third Elegy, Transposed," Robert Duncan's "Variations on Two Dicta of William Blake," and William Carlos Williams's "Rain." It is no coincidence that Olson and Rilke/Quasha also sing of death, dismemberment or tearing up of roots, and rebirth. This shamanic, initiatory theme has a hold on us, challenging our poets to bring to bear their most skilled use of rhythm.

PERSONIFICATION IS THE POET'S OBVIOUS TOOL FOR EVOKING CREATIVE POWER. IRONICALLY, HERE THE TREE PERSONIFIES THE HUMAN FROM ITS PERSPECTIVE, GIVING US A FRESH IMAGE OF OURSELVES."

Levertov's sources for poetry are contemporary as well as traditional and mythic. In the 1960s her work was strongly influenced by the theory and practice of projective verse as well as by the work of other innovative contemporary poets. Robert Duncan, who believed in poetry's magical qualities, and who had the most subtle ear for rhythm of any contemporary American poet, had a profound impact on Levertov's work. In addition, in her own writing on theory she quotes and assimilates Charles Olson's writings on projective verse. Some of Olson's ideas are particularly helpful in considering "A Tree Telling of Orpheus." According to Olson, the contemporary poet works in the "open field," listening for the form that is appropriate to each poem, rather than paying homage to inherited forms. The blank page is a charged field, a source of energy, for the poet who knows how to bring out its rhythmical life, to find the right "musical phrase" (Ezra Pound's term). "Kinetics," dynamism, the poem as "energy-discharge"—Olson's terms place emphasis on rhythm as the primary source of a poem's creative life. Along with Olson's theories, Levertov includes Gerard Manley Hopkins's "sprung rhythm" and "inscape" as having influenced her thinking about the dynamic quality and the sense of wholeness she expects from poetry. In harmony with sound and image, the rhythmical structure of each poem will tell its deepest story, inventing itself formally as the story unfolds. Robert Creeley's principle that "FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION

OF CONTENT," says Olson, gives the poem its life (Selected 16).

Re-visioning Creeley and Olson, Levertov goes one step further by insisting on the magical quality of verse: "Form is never more than a revelation of content" (PW 13). Like Duncan, Levertov believes in the innate and perfect form waiting to be embodied in the poem. Rather than on magic, Olson had focused on the sophisticated mechanics of listening for the poem, involving:

> the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE

and on sleekness and movement (Selected 19). There must be no flab, no waste of energy—on the contrary, "ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO ANOTHER." Levertov tones down Olson's line by presenting it in lower-case letters, but she refers to it as "the law" (PW 13). Olson's pronouncements help to describe Levertov's accomplishment in "A Tree Telling of Orpheus": like a mythic animal, the poem leaps into its dynamic and perfect shape, constantly on the move in the reader's imagination.

This sense of the poem as a living whole, with perfect being in musical language, conveys Levertov's own belief in "organic poetry." Levertov expands on Hopkins's terms "inscape" and "instress" to explain her own views on intrinsic form and on the poet's experience of the sensory, intellectual, and emotional process of perceiving the poem (PW 7). By a deep and careful listening for the "pulse" or beat or "horizon" of the poem, the poet intuits the form of her poem as a whole (PW 12). In her theory and in her great long poem, Levertov integrates Olson's vigorous idea and his belief in the syllable as "king" with Duncan's clairvoyant listening and belief in magic. The poem itself is distinctly Levertov's, resonating beyond theories in its myth and music.

Levertov's journey to this sustained poem called for hard work, risk, and discipline. As a young writer she left England for America to be in the place where creating a new poetics was possible. She apprenticed herself to William Carlos Williams, visited with him and corresponded with him as his health permitted from 1951 until his death in 1963. In his touching and inspiring letters Williams urges her toward strict discipline: "Practice, practice practice! must be the practice of the artist. You have to write ... practically in your sleep and leap out of bed day or night when the inevitable word comes to yourmind: it may never come again." ("Letters" 167). Williams encourages her to write even without inspiration: "At times there's nothing to do but finger exercises. Maybe that's the end. For what dreadful encounter? Nothing may happen, I hope it never does—but if it does, your only chance of doing some arresting writing, something that the world is really waiting for with open arms, is to be ready" ("Letters" 164). The ominous tone of Williams's letter resulted from his own struggles with illness, and with his fear of losing his wife Flossie's love, as well as with political oppression: the communist "witch hunts" of the 1950s had targeted him, and LIFE magazine continued to glorify the testing of the hydrogen bomb with spectacular photographs. In Levertov's eloquent anti-Vietnam war poetry, with its language of "life that/wants to live" (RA 92), we find a fulfillment of Williams's intuition that Levertov too will have a responsibility to deal with the serious crises of their times. The strong feeling evoked in "A Tree Telling of Orpheus" may also be seen as a crisis of being. The poem itself is the dramatization of an inner crisis as well as its temporary resolution. A love poem, and a poem about the Muse, it tells us what the poet did while she was "waiting" for the Muse to come back. She learned to dance in a graceful, strenuous measure that far outstripped anything Williams had predicted for women poets ("Women can rarely do it" "Letters" 165~). . . .

Orpheus, proto-poet, Thracian son of Kalliope, one of the Muses, Orpheus whose name alone is an invocation, consummate musician, the one who awakens things by singing and naming them, the beloved, the one whom creatures follow, Orpheus who sings his way down through the underworld to find Eurydice and then loses her again, the one who is torn apart by the Furies, whose head goes out to sea still singing—Orpheus the hero does not sing his own story for us. His initiate recounts for us the time when Paradise was at hand, when the Muse was close enough to touch. If Orpheus himself did the singing, could we bear the intensity? Humbly, like one of us, the tree begins its story at the beginning.

"White dawn. Stillness. When the rippling began . . . " The poem opens with its song of emergence from silence and nothingness. The mood is charged with the solemnity of genesis

myths. As Native American poet Scott Momaday states the law of creation: "A word has power in itself. It comes from nothing and gives origin to all things." Levertov's music begins gradually with this overture. Through a series of negations, disbelief and rumor are dispelled:

> When the rippling began
> I took it for sea-wind, coming to our valley
>   with rumors
> of salt, of treeless horizons. But the white fog
> didn't stir; the leaves of my brothers remained
>   outstretched,
> unmoving.

By disclaiming literal and easy answers, the tree tells us that this story takes place within, and does not have to do with ordinary weather. Elsewhere Levertov has written about needing a "horizon note" or rhythmical focal point for her poetry, and she equates "horizon" with the underlying "pulse" of the poem (PW 12). In this sense the "treeless horizon" is the "open field" where the poet will begin to invent her form. Each line may be read as one beat, one measure of time elapsed, as Williams might have counted it (Selected 326–27). This predictable but flexible line comprises what Williams termed the "variable foot." Within a fairly steady rhythm, Levertov varies the patterns of stresses and the number of words and syllables per line. In this manner she can slow the pace or quicken it, placing rhythmical and visual emphasis on certain words.

The first line of "A Tree Telling of Orpheus" gives us the poem's rhythmical building blocks, the primary possibilities, with two stresses ("White dawn."), one stress ("Stillness.") and three stresses, ("When the rippling began"). The three-stress passage without punctuation opens up the poem at the line's end, generating a rhythmical sense of possibilities that underscores content. Quoting Lewis Hyde, Robert Hass offers these metaphors as suggestions about rhythm and meanings: "Two is an exchange, three is a circle of energy," and he also quotes a statement on rhythm by Leonard Bernstein: "Two is the rhythm of the body, three is the rhythm of the mind (130, 125). In Levertov's poem the two-stressed phrases steady the rhythm in the first thirty lines, thumping like a heartbeat: white dawn, sea-wind, white fog, short trunk, gold grass, etc. This emphasis shifts to three beats or more as the poem enters the deepest and most stirring sections of the narrative.

The two-line bridge between the first and second clusters of imagery has been set apart spatially, indented deeply. These lines draw our attention: "Yet I was not afraid, only/deeply alert." The shorter line carries rhythmical weight, with its heavy stress on "deep" and its stress on the second syllable of "alert." The stress on "deep" underscores poetry's ability to evoke a hypnotic state. "Alert" reminds us to focus with a clear mind on the text. Here the poet is describing her own state of mind as she composes, her own deep listening for the emerging patterns in the poem.

The narrative has described Orpheus's effect upon the tree. As the "ripple drew nearer" the tree felt scorched by dry heat. We learn to know the singer through the tree's vertical body, and from the outside in, from the bark to the sap. The speaker's knowledge of Orpheus is tactile and immediate: "my own outermost branches began to tingle, almost as if/fire had been lit below them, too close, and their twig-tips/were drying and curling." When the tree describes Orpheus from its non-cerebral perspective, the images are pleasing, allowing the musician/hero to come to life for us as in a fairy tale:

> He was a man, it seemed: the two
> moving stems, the short trunk, the two
> arm-branches, flexible, each with five leafless
> twigs at their ends,
> and the head that's crowned by brown or
>   gold grass,
> bearing a face not like the beaked face of a
>   bird,
> more like a flower's.

Personification is the poet's obvious tool for evoking creative power. Ironically, here the tree personifies the human from its perspective, giving us a fresh image of ourselves. Only when one stops to think how difficult it is to accomplish personification in the twentieth century does the poem's magic become clear. The poet becomes midwife to the poem as she evokes in detail first the tree's body, then the echo, the man's body. The imagery gives us another paradigm for creation by its naming, its palpable evocation of the hero's body, much as oral tradition cultures restore the world by singing the praises of the God's body.

Believable personification, temporarily believable in the beautiful span of this long poem, conveys to us again our own life and the life of another creature. This ability to connect with

other beings is what we have lost in contemporary society. . . .

Source: Marilyn Kallet, "Moistening Our Roots with Music: Creative Power in Denise Levertov's 'A Tree Telling of Orpheus,'" in *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 38, No. 3, Fall 1992, pp. 305–23.

Paul Zweig

In the following excerpt, Zweig argues that many of the poems in Levertov's Relearning the Alphabet *"seem incomplete." He points to "A Tree Telling of Orpheus" as one of the strongest poems in the volume.*

I have always admired Denise Levertov's poetry. Her sparse, sinuous language reminds me of an artist who is able to suggest a face, the entire mystery of a gesture, with a single, uninterrupted pencil stroke. . . .

I feel the need to describe the sort of pleasure Miss Levertov's poetry has given me in the past, because her latest volume *Relearning the Alphabet* is something of a disappointment. So many of the poems in the new book seem incomplete, as if the whole gesture of the hand and arm and body had been replaced by a fingerprint in mid-air. Instead of the poem, we are given some words indicating that a poem passed by that way, but did not stay long enough to leave its mark. Take, for example, this short poem, entitled "The Curve":

> Along the tracks
> counting
> always the right foot awarded
> the tie to step on
> the left stumbling all the time in cinders
> toward where
> an old caboose
> samples of paint were once tried out on
> is weathering in a saltmarsh
> to tints Giotto dreamed.
> 'Shall we
> ever reach it?' 'Look—
> the tracks take a curve.
> We may
> come round to it
> if we keep going.'

Or the concluding lines of another poem, "The Rain."

> The birds are silent,
> No moths at the lit windows, Only a
> swaying rosebush
> pierces the table's reflection, rain-
> drops gazing from it.
> There have been hands laid on my
> shoulders.
> What has been said to me,
> how has my life replied?
> The rain, the rain. . . .

The description rambles; the poems seem to end before they are finished. It is of course possible for a poem to be taken up short in a way that suggests continued movement, reverberations of meaning. That seems to be what Miss Levertov intended here; but the effect is miscalculated. When I read the last words of "The Rain" I realize that I am still waiting for the poem to begin.

Perhaps in many of the poems the trouble lies in part with the subject. Miss Levertov is concerned with the experience of aging, for example, but at the same time she seems to avoid dealing with it explicitly, refusing to enter wholly into it:

> So slowly I am dying
> you wouldn't know it.
> They say birth begins it.
> But for three decades,
> the sky's valves lie open,
> or close to open over again
> a green pearl revealed.
> Slowly, slowly,
> I spin toward the sun.

The poem takes place at a great distance from us. The feeling of weariness, the hope for a creation expressed by the image of the oyster and the pearl, are not elaborated or made human. The close before we reach them, so to speak, and we are left outside.

Another problem of subject matter even more striking. A number of the poems in *Relearning the Alphabet* are political. But aside from the fierce, very beautiful: "Advent 1966," they tend to be rambling, uninventive. "Tenebrae," "Biafra," the long poem, "An Interim," and the even longer "From a Notebook" lapse into a sort of poetic journalese more like prose—bad prose. There is a mood of sad self-righteousness in the poems which make them hard to experience for oneself. I know that Denise Levertov and her husband, Mitchel Goodman, have reasons for their sadness. They have been harassed more than most by the atmosphere of political repressiveness in America. Their involvement in the anti-war movement has been important. But that situation has not encouraged strong, generously conceived poetry, at least not in *Relearning the Alphabet*. One must reread Miss

Levertov's earlier political poems from *Sorrow Dance* ("Life at War,""What Were They Like Like?") to know how powerful her conceptions in the matter can be.

In the past Denise Levertov has been able to create a taut, carefully observed imagery which has reminded me some what of the poetry of William Carlos Williams; at the same time, she never relinquished her English background. The result was a Williams-like directness and concreteness, combined with an ability to modulate into the sort of eloquence one finds in Yeats's language, for example. In the present volume, however, the Englishness intrudes in a new and unfortunate way. The poems tend to become "literary," establishing connections not with experience but with other poems. The connection is worked for, and acknowledged in "A Clock," whose epigraph is taken from Yeats's "A Coat." But what about "Wings of a God," which begins: "The beating of wings. / Unheard," and goes on to suggest "Leda and the Swan"? The shadow of the Yeats poem overpowers Miss Levertov's, as it would any lesser poem which insists, as this one does, on making the comparison.

The most striking example of "literariness" occurs in a section of the book entitled "Four Embroideries." By invoking, in these poems, a distant, purely conventional location (a castle where noblewomen are busy with their needles), Miss Levertov has sacrificed any actual sense of location. They are caught between fairy tale and the real world, and belong to neither. Again, this is the sort of effect which Miss Levertov has managed well on occasion (e.g.: the beautiful poem from *Sorrow Dance*, "Psalms Concerning the Castle"), but which seems out of control in the new volume.

Relearning the Alphabet strikes me, on the whole, as being a hurried book. In the past Miss Levertov has always been extremely productive, publishing a new volume regularly every two or three years. This time I think, her insistence on keeping up the pace has done harm to the poetry. The title itself suggests the poet's desire to reinvent her vocabulary, to learn the skills of a new poetic language. Perhaps that explains some of the difficulties Miss Levertov encountered here; difficulties which might very well have been solved with more patience.

Although I have felt the need to be critical of *Relearning the Alphabet*, I would like nonetheless to call attention to a number of poems in the volume where Miss Levertov's best inspiration [is] still powerfully present: the moving poems: "He-Who-Came-Forth," and "Moon Tiger"; the interesting long poem: "A Tree Telling of Orpheus"; these lines about owls, from "Secret Festival; September Moon":

> They raise
> the roof of the dark; ferocious
> their joy in the extreme silver
> the moon has floated out from itself
> luminous air in which their eyes
> don't hurt or close. . . .

The strength of Miss Levertov's language is impressive in such poems. I am very sorry they must be half-concealed among the lesser poems which, unfortunately, take up so much place in this volume.

Here is the final poem in *Relearning the Alphabet*, which is entitled "Invocation." It is lovely and haunting; meant, one hopes, as a promise for the future:

> Silent, about-to-be-parted-from house.
> Wood creaking, trying to sigh, im-
> patient.
> Clicking of squirrel-teeth in the attic,
> Denuded beds, couches stripped of
> serapes.
> Deep snow shall block all entrances
> and oppress the roof and darken
> the windows. O Lares,
> don't leave.
> The house yawns like a bear.
> Guard its profound dreams for us,
> that it return to us when we return.

Source: Paul Zweig, "Magistral Strokes and First Steps," in *Nation*, Vol. 212, No. 25, June 21 1971, p. 794—95.

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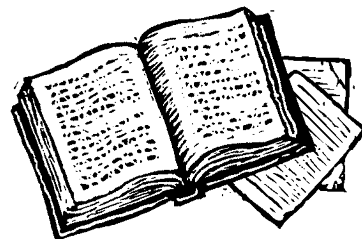
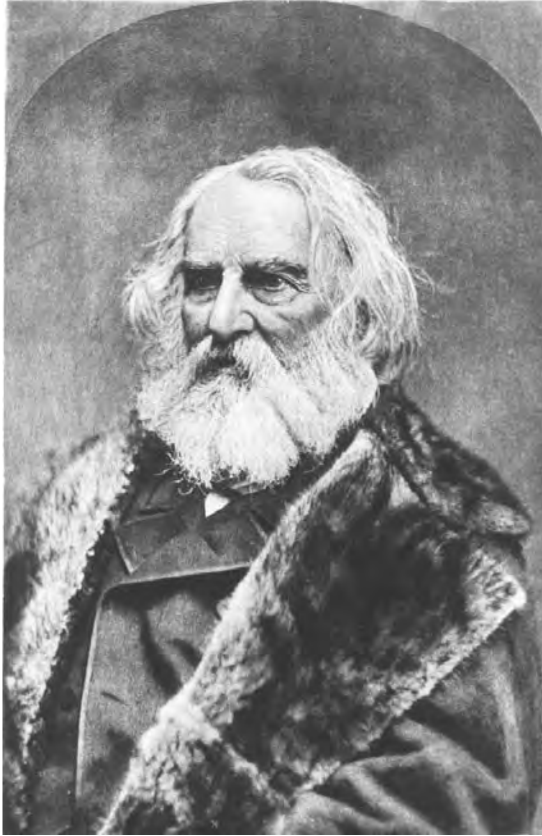
The Wreck of the Hesperus

HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW

1841

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "The Wreck of the Hesperus" recounts the story of the shipwreck of a schooner Longfellow calls Hesperus in a severe hurricane off the coast of New England. Although nature is portrayed as unrelenting and brutal in some of its manifestations, the force of "The Wreck of the Hesperus" comes from Longfellow's portrayal of the human traits of pride and stubbornness in the face of nature's fierceness. The storm does not constitute the tragic aspect of the tale Longfellow tells; the captain's hubris does. *Hubris* is the term used to describe the pride that characterizes the heroes of Greek tragedy, the kind of pride that blinds people to their limitations and allows them to pit their will against the will or power of supernatural elements, like the gods or fate in Greek tragedy, or great natural forces, like the hurricane in "The Wreck of the Hesperus." Hubris is clearly at work in the captain's proud and foolish refusal to heed the old sailor's warning. So is sacrifice, for when the captain realizes the danger, once the storm has struck and the schooner has foundered, he gives up his chance for survival, wrapping his daughter in his greatcoat and tying her to the ship's mast with the hope that she will survive instead. Although she does not, it is the combination of the captain's pride and his self-transcendence in his sacrifice that makes him a tragic hero and not just a victim of his own ill-considered decisions and stubborn response to circumstances.





Henry Wadsworth Longfellow *(The Library of Congress)*

A major source of the poem's charm is the ballad form in which it is written. The four-line stanzas, the rhymed second and fourth lines, and the slightly archaic language that characterize the ballad form give the events described a framework that transforms them from recreated experience into art. The poem becomes a kind of cameo within which the events are inscribed and made accessible so as to inspire a reader's aesthetic response of terror at the event and pity for human suffering. "The Wreck of the Hesperus" is available in *Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: Poems and Other Writings*, published in 2000.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Longfellow was born in Portland, Maine, on February 27, 1807, the second of eight children. His mother, Zilpah, was a pacifist. His father, Stephen, was a lawyer, a member of Congress from Maine, and a trustee of Bowdoin College. After graduating from Portland Academy, Longfellow attended Bowdoin beginning in 1821. He joined the Bowdoin faculty as a professor of modern languages soon after receiving his degree in 1825. Upon taking this position, Longfellow spent three years living in France, Spain, Italy, and Germany studying the countries' languages, literatures, and cultures. He began teaching at Bowdoin in 1829. For the next several years, Longfellow neglected poetry, which he had been writing as an undergraduate, and focused on scholarship, translating or editing a number of modern language texts as well as writing scholarly essays on European literature. In 1834, Longfellow published a prose account of his European travels, *Outre-Mer: A Pilgrimage Beyond the Sea*. In 1831 he married Mary Storer Potter, and in 1834 he accepted a position teaching modern languages at Harvard College. Together with Mary, Longfellow went back to Europe for a year in April 1835, mastering Dutch, Danish, Icelandic, and Swedish during the visit. Sadly, in November 1835, while they were in Holland, Mary died of a miscarriage; Longfellow was disconsolate. In July 1836, while in Switzerland, Longfellow met Frances Appleton, and after a long courtship, they married in 1843. Their marriage was a happy one, but Fanny died on July 10, 1861, after her clothes caught on fire, perhaps when a lighted candle tipped over and fell onto her skirts. Longfellow was again inconsolable. He was distressed at the time also because of the Civil War, being both a pacifist and an opponent of slavery.

In 1839, Longfellow published his first collection of poetry, *Voices of the Night*. *Ballads and Other Poems*, which includes "The Wreck of the Hesperus," was published in 1841. A verse drama, *The Spanish Student*, was published in 1843. From 1843 until the death of his second wife in 1861, Longfellow wrote and published some of his most popular poetry, including *Evangeline: A Tale of Acadie* (1847), *The Song of Hiawatha* (1855), *The Courtship of Miles Standish* (1858), and "Paul Revere's Ride" (1861). In 1854, the success of his poetry allowed Longfellow to resign his position at Harvard. After Frances's death, Longfellow devoted much of his attention to working on *Christus: A Mystery*, a three-part dramatic epic that he began in 1849 and published in 1872. In 1868, Longfellow traveled again to Europe, where he was repeatedly honored as a great contributor to American letters and culture. Longfellow died of

peritonitis, an abdominal disease, on March 24, 1882, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He was buried beside both his wives in the Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge.

POEM TEXT

It was the schooner Hesperus,
That sailed the wintery sea;
And the skipper had taken his little daughtèr,
To bear him company.

Blue were her eyes as the fairy-flax, 5
Her cheeks like the dawn of day,
And her bosom white as the hawthorn buds,
That ope in the month of May.

The skipper he stood beside the helm,
His pipe was in his mouth, 10
And he watched how the veering flaw did blow
The smoke now West, now South.

Then up and spake an old Sailòr,
Had sailed to the Spanish Main,
"I pray thee, put into yonder port, 15
For I fear a hurricane.

"Last night, the moon had a golden ring,
And to-night no moon we see!"
The skipper, he blew a whiff from his pipe,
And a scornful laugh laughed he. 20

Colder and louder blew the wind,
A gale from the Northeast,
The snow fell hissing in the brine,
And the billows frothed like yeast.

Down came the storm, and smote amain 25
The vessel in its strength;
She shuddered and paused, like a frighted steed,
Then leaped her cable's length.

"Come hither! come hither! my little daughtèr,
And do not tremble so; 30
For I can weather the roughest gale
That ever wind did blow."

He wrapped her warm in his seaman's coat
Against the stinging blast;
He cut a rope from a broken spar, 35
And bound her to the mast.

"O father! I hear the church-bells ring,
Oh say, what may it be?"
"'T is a fog-bell on a rock-bound coast!"—
And he steered for the open sea. 40

"O father! I hear the sound of guns,
Oh say, what may it be?"
"Some ship in distress, that cannot live
In such an angry sea!"

"O father! I see a gleaming light, 45
Oh say, what may it be?"
But the father answered never a word,
A frozen corpse was he.

Lashed to the helm, all stiff and stark,
With his face turned to the skies, 50
The lantern gleamed through the gleaming snow
On his fixed and glassy eyes.

Then the maiden clasped her hands and prayed
That savèd she might be;
And she thought of Christ, who stilled the wave, 55
On the Lake of Galilee.

And fast through the midnight dark and drear,
Through the whistling sleet and snow,
Like a sheeted ghost, the vessel swept
Tow'rds the reef of Norman's Woe. 60

And ever the fitful gusts between
A sound came from the land;
It was the sound of the trampling surf
On the rocks and hard sea-sand.

The breakers were right beneath her bows, 65
She drifted a dreary wreck,
And a whooping billow swept the crew
Like icicles from her deck.

She struck where the white and fleecy waves
Looked soft as carded wool, 70
But the cruel rocks, they gored her side
Like the horns of an angry bull.

Her rattling shrouds, all sheathed in ice,
With the masts went by the board;
Like a vessel of glass, she stove and sank, 75
Ho! ho! the breakers roared!

At daybreak, on the bleak sea-beach,
A fisherman stood aghast,
To see the form of a maiden fair,
Lashed close to a drifting mast. 80

The salt sea was frozen on her breast,
The salt tears in her eyes;
And he saw her hair, like the brown sea-weed,
On the billows fall and rise.

Such was the wreck of the Hesperus, 85
In the midnight and the snow!
Christ save us all from a death like this,
On the reef of Norman's Woe!

POEM SUMMARY

Stanza 1

Written in four-line stanzas, the poem begins with a simple declarative sentence, identifying a vessel by its name and noting the season. The boat was a schooner named Hesperus; the season was winter. That foundation laid, the principal actors of the ballad are introduced, a captain and his young daughter with whom he sailed.

MEDIA ADAPTATIONS

- There have been numerous musical arrangements of "The Wreck of the Hesperus." Among them is a composition for voice and piano by John Liptrot Hatton (1809–1886), written around 1850. A complete list of settings is available online at the Lied and Art Song Texts Page (http://www.recmusic.org/lieder/get_text.html?TextId = 38961).

Stanza 2
The daughter is idealized in Longfellow's description. She has blue eyes, which the poet evokes by comparing them to a summer flower of soft blue called fairy flax. They suggest warmth and gentleness not to be found on a winter sea. Her cheeks are similarly compared to the peaceable morning, when day is beginning. To complete the description emphasizing her brightness and delicacy, Longfellow compares her to the buds of the hawthorn, a lovely white flower, in the month of May, just when it is beginning to bloom.

Stanza 3
Longfellow turns in the third stanza to the girl's father, presenting the captain standing by the wheel to steer the ship smoking his pipe. He reads the direction of the wind by noting the direction in which his pipe smoke is blown as he exhales. That the smoke is blown to the west and south indicates that the wind is blowing from the east and north, the direction from which the severest storm winds blow.

Stanza 4
An experienced member of the crew, one who had sailed in the regions of Florida and Mexico, advises the captain to bring the schooner into a nearby port because it looks like a hurricane is on its way.

Stanza 5
Continuing, the old sailor predicts a hurricane by relying on his interpretation of celestial events. The night before, he tells the captain, there was a gold ring around the moon; tonight, he notes, there is no moon to be seen. The captain exhales a pipeful of smoke and dismisses the sailor's warning with a laugh.

Stanza 6
The storm increases in ferocity. Cold winds blow; heavy snow falls. The sea rages and bubbles up.

Stanza 7
The ship is hit by the storm and rears in the water like a horse in a panic.

Stanza 8
The captain calls his daughter to him, telling her not to be afraid and boasting of his power to outlast the storm and come through safely.

Stanza 9
The captain puts his greatcoat around his daughter and ties her to the mast.

Stanza 10
The girl tells her father that she hears church bells, but he tells her it is the bell of a lighthouse on a rocky part of the coast, and he guides the ship into the open sea rather than to any port.

Stanza 11
The girl says she hears gunshots. Her father says that they are signals from a distressed ship that cannot manage in the fury of the storm. The reader may suspect that these are calls for help coming from the Hesperus itself.

Stanza 12
The girl's next question about a light she sees goes unanswered because her father has frozen to death.

Stanza 13
The corpse of the captain is described, tied to the helm, frozen, his eyes glassy in the lantern light through the snowstorm.

Stanza 14
The girl prays for deliverance through her faith in Christ, who, in the biblical story, calmed the water of the Sea of Galilee in a storm.

Stanza 15

Unguided now and ghostly, the ship is drawn swiftly by the storm through the sea in the dark of the night to a rocky reef off the Massachusetts coast called Norman's Woe.

Stanza 16

Between the sounds of the gusting wind, the noise of waves breaking against rocks comes from the shore.

Stanza 17

The wrecked ship drifts through the sea, the waves breaking beneath it. A strong, noisy gust blows the frozen bodies of the crew off the deck.

Stanza 18

The schooner crashes against the rocks that lie beneath the foam of breaking waves on the shore. The rocks gore the body of the schooner the way the horns of a bull gore a person.

Stanza 19

The ship is coated in ice and takes on the appearance of a glass boat. It sinks. The noise of the breaking waves is like laughter.

Stanza 20

At dawn a fisherman on the beach finds the wrecked schooner and the girl tied to its mast drifting in the water.

Stanza 21

The frozen girl floats on the water, and her hair, looking like seaweed, bobbles on the waves.

Stanza 22

The poet concludes his tale of the ship's destruction in the storm with a prayer that no one meet a death like the ones brought about by the wreck.

THEMES

Blinding Pride

The overriding and lethal trait embodied in the captain of the schooner is blind pride, or stubbornness. He is stubborn in his pride to the point of what the Greeks called hubris, an overweening sense of confidence in one's own powers that blinds one to the powers of nature or to supernatural forces. When he sees the storm coming on, and after he is warned of its ferocity by an experienced sailor, who insists that there is no besting the storm and that he should take the schooner back to the nearest port, the captain scornfully ignores the seasoned advice with a laugh and braves the storm. Had he been disposed to heed the advice of the knowledgeable sailor, the captain might have gotten the ship to a port in time and saved the vessel, its crew, and his daughter.

Innocence

Although nature will be shown in the poem as a force of great and indiscriminate power and a force that mankind may disregard or defy at its own peril, Longfellow begins "The Wreck of The Hesperus" with images from nature that suggest not its power but its innocence and gentleness. That innocence is embodied in the daughter. The captain's stubborn refusal to heed the power of nature is dramatized as an assault upon and a betrayal of his daughter's innocence. Although in the first stanza Longfellow describes the sea as hibernal, the images in the second stanza, all used in his description of the captain's daughter, are derived from nature not as a powerful, unrelenting and cruel force but as an emblem of gentle innocence. To suggest the girl's innocence, Longfellow gathers images of springtime flowers and of morning. Once the captain has betrayed the trust of his daughter by braving the storm, her innocence is represented by her dependence first upon her father and then, after his death, upon her heavenly father. She implores her father, asking him the meaning of what she hears and sees, and she supplicates the deity for her salvation. In both cases, her faith is betrayed, and the girl becomes the familiar and melodramatic emblem of tormented innocence. The last image in the poem, of the girl's hair metamorphosed into seaweed, is once again an image of innocence and calmness, the spirit the girl has represented throughout the poem. As such, the girl is placed as a counterweight to her father. His strength and experience are of value only if they are tempered by a reverence for the innocence she represents.

Nature's Power

The stubborn will and the maritime skill that are combined in the captain of the schooner are no match for the power of nature when it is tempestuous. The force of nature is shown in the poem to be furious and arbitrary. Mankind cannot rely on its own prowess or even on supernatural

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY

- Choose an event from the news or recent history and tell its story in the form of a ballad.
- The admonition that pride precedes a fall is commonplace and often accurate. In "The Wreck of the Hesperus," pride is the cause of a disaster. Drawing on your own experience, write a story in which the protagonist is hamstrung by pride and painful consequences follow.
- "The Wreck of the Hesperus" is based on an actual shipwreck. Research the subject of maritime disasters in the first half of the nineteenth century in the vicinity of the New England coast. Consider questions like these: Were there many? What, if anything, did they have in common? What were the social and economic effects of shipwrecks? Did they contribute to advances in shipbuilding? Prepare a written report and an oral report to be delivered in front of your class. Supplement the oral report with pictures, paintings, or drawings of shipwrecks from that era.
- Once the inevitability of shipwreck is clear, the captain wraps his daughter in his greatcoat before he lashes her to the mast in the hope of saving her. Although his sacrifice comes to naught and is necessitated by his own error in judgment, it does show his stature. Prepare a questionnaire and interview half a dozen people regarding their experience of sacrifice, addressing whether the sacrifices were ones that they made or which were made for them and discussing the results that followed from those sacrifices.
- From the epics of Homer through contemporary literature and film, shipwrecks have served as significant matter for literature and painting. In a substantial essay, survey the use of shipwreck as a theme or device in literature and art, or choose a particular writer or artist, like Homer, William Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, or Joseph Mallord William Turner, for example, and show how shipwreck figures in his or her work.

intervention when faced with natural fury. In contrast with the image from the Gospels of Christ calming the waters of the Sea of Galilee, which the girl invokes in the midst of the hurricane, she perishes in the hurricane. Even after her death, the raw power of nature seems to triumph a second time. The fisherman who sees the wreck from the beach sees the girl's hair rising and falling in the motion of the rolling waves, looking like seaweed, as if there had been a transformation of the girl from the human to the vegetable realm.

Sacrifice

Two aspects of sacrifice are shown in the poem, one the result of the captain's stubborn pride. Because he refuses to heed the advice of the old sailor and because he is defiant in the face of an overpowering hurricane, the captain actually sacrifices his daughter and his crew to his pride. But once he is caught in the grip of catastrophe, he sacrifices himself for his daughter by giving her his greatcoat. It is, however, in vain, even if the captain gives her his coat still foolishly boasting of his own power to withstand the storm.

STYLE

Archaic Language

Although Longfellow is understood to be writing about an event that occurred only a year or so before the composition of the poem—the shipwreck of the schooner *Favorite* on the reef called Norman's Woe near Gloucester, Massachusetts—he writes his fictionalized account of the event

Shipwreck *(© Mary Evans Picture Library / Alamy)*

using archaic constructions. He often inverts subject and verb order, as in the first lines of the second, sixth, and seventh stanzas. He uses double subjects, as in the first line of the third stanza. He employs conventional tropes like the old sailor's intervention in the fourth stanza and the image of the moon in the fifth. Rather than locating the poem in the past, however, the archaic language lifts the poem out of the temporal realm and places it inside the literary tradition of ballads, generally accounts of extraordinary or supernatural phenomena.

Assonance and Consonance

Longfellow skillfully employs assonance, the repetition and variation of a particular vowel sound, and consonance, the repetition of particular consonants, throughout "The Wreck of the Hesperus" in order to achieve a variety of descriptive effects. In the first stanza, for example, the predominance of words with the letter *s* conveys the sense of a schooner skimming across the surface of the sea. In the second stanza, the emphasis on the labial consonants *b*, *f*, *w*, and *m* conveys the bursting freshness of springtime and the captain's vernal daughter.

Repetition

The repetition of words, phrases, patterns, rhymes, and rhythms stands out in Longfellow's poem. The poem derives power through repetition because of the linguistic force of the device and because all the forms of repetition in the poem produce a mirroring effect for, and become analogous to, the relentlessness of the storm the poem chronicles. Throughout the poem, the second and fourth lines of each four-line stanza are made to rhyme, while the first and third lines are left unrhymed. Each of the twenty-two stanzas of the poem is itself a closed unit, as the last line of every stanza ends with a period or exclamation point. The grammar of the poem thus never permits the narrative to flow from stanza to stanza. The effect of the grammatically closed representational form is a recapitulation of the claustrophobic quality of the storm that locks the persons of the poem inside their tragic fate. The rhythm of the verse, in turn, has a sort of breathlessness,

the kind that comes when someone is telling a frightening story and engaging the listener's attention through alternations of quietness and drama. Longfellow alternates stressed and unstressed syllables according to the mood and action in lines that usually have either eight or six beats.

The word "and," a conjunction signifying both continuation and repetition, is repeated in the poem, which is 585 words long, twenty-six times. Twice, in the fifteenth and sixteenth stanzas, "And" is the first word of the stanza. It appears as the first word of the third line in the first three stanzas and in three other stanzas; in the fourth, fifth, ninth, and tenth stanzas, "And" occupies the first place in the fourth line; and in stanzas five and eight the word introduces the second line. The other appearances of the word occur within lines. This is a relentless piling up of one word, and this polysyndeton—the repetition of a conjunction—has a propulsive and gripping effect, pulling the reader along. In stanzas eleven and twelve, "and" does not appear, but in its place comes the repetition of the vocative phrase that the girl uses calling her father, in the first lines of stanzas ten through twelve, and a similar repetition in the second lines of those stanzas, when she repeats the same question regarding what she hears and sees. The only other stanza in which "and" does not occur is the twentieth, for good reason: it is the only stanza that describes events on dry land. A fisherman sees the wreck from the beach. The sequence of terrible events, by the time he witnesses the wreckage, has ended.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

English and Scottish Popular Ballads

Although there is no precise record, scholars believe the ballad form, as utilized by Longfellow in "The Wreck of the Hesperus," goes back as far as the eleventh century. For the ample collection of historical ballads that exists today, readers are indebted to Francis James Child (1825–1896), a Boston native and Harvard professor who devoted himself to collecting ballads. His first edition of works of the genre, *English and Scottish Ballads*, was published in 1857 and 1858. His compendious final collection, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, was published between 1882 and 1898. A reader can find examples of typical ballad patterns and phrasing in ballads like "Sir Patrick Spens," which also contains original models for some of Longfellow's lines, as with, for example, the first lines of the fourth and fifth stanzas of "The Wreck of the Hesperus."

Typically, the ballad form is a rhyming narrative of an extraordinary adventure in which the hero's life, honor, and fortune are endangered. The narrative does not always result in the death of the hero. In ballads like "Sir Patrick Spens," in which a sailor is sent on a perilous mission, death does result, as it does in "Lord Randall," the story a dying man tells his mother about how his beloved lady has poisoned him, and in "The Erlking," a spooky German ballad in which a boy being carried home through a haunted landscape is stolen from his father by the seductive figure of death. In Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," death is not the outcome of an encounter with sin that profoundly changes the hero and compels him to recount his transformative adventure to everyone he meets.

Old as it is, the ballad form has continued to remain popular, and its use by poets and musicians continues. The African American ballad of a railroad construction worker named John Henry who stands up to his boss by working himself to death has been rendered by singers like Josh White and Harry Belafonte. The musician Bob Dylan has often used the form, as he did in "John Brown," the story of a severely injured boy returning from war to a mother who had been proud to see him go; in "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll," the true story of the murder of a black maid by a rich white man whose social position allowed him to escape punishment; and in "The Ballad of a Thin Man," a psychedelic rendering of an encounter with the bizarre.

Norman's Woe

Norman's Woe is an actual rocky reef that lies beyond the harbor at Gloucester, Massachusetts. It is notorious for the many ships that have been wrecked there. Two serious shipwrecks occurred there in the years preceding the publication of Longfellow's poem. One was the wreck of the *Rebecca Ann* in a snowstorm in March 1823, when all but one of those on board perished. In December 1839, predating "The Wreck of the Hesperus" by just two years, the

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **1840s:** Longfellow and a group of his New England contemporaries, among them the poets John Greenleaf Whittier and James Russell Lowell, enjoy a popularity that is newfound for American poetry, rivaling the English poets of their day with their accessible domestic narratives.

  Today: Through the technologies of mass dissemination, young poets using such forms as slam, rock, and rap attain national and even worldwide prominence, often rivaling the popularity of more established and more "literary" poets, particularly because of their general accessibility and musical appeal.

- **1840s:** For nearly a century, since the publication of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* in 1764, literature that emphasizes horror, the supernatural, the endangered, and the pathetic has been popular, with works themed as such by Edgar Allan Poe, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, and Mary Shelley, among many others.

  Today: Authors like Stephen King and a wide range of movies and television programs continue the tradition of creating entertainment centered around horror and pathos.

- **1840s:** Steam is replacing mechanical and human means in the powering of sea vessels.

  Today: While sailing and rowing are enjoyed as nautical sports, seagoing vessels are motor driven, some even by nuclear power.

Favorite, sailing from Wiscasset, Maine, foundered upon Norman's Woe. Twenty bodies were found on shore, with one, an older woman, tied to one of the ship's masts, like the captain's daughter in "The Wreck of the Hesperus."

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

Writing for *Graham's* magazine in 1842, Edgar Allan Poe complains that, in general, Longfellow's poetry is harmed by his tendency to use it didactically—to instill moral lessons in it—and by his neglect of what Poe considers to be the primary function of poetry, "the creation of novel moods of beauty, in form, in color, in sound, in sentiment." "The Wreck of the Hesperus" is one of the few of Longfellow's poems for which Poe offers qualified praise:

> In 'The Wreck of the Hesperus,' we have the *beauty* of child-like confidence and innocence, with that of the father's stern courage and affection. But, with slight exception, those particulars of the storm here detailed are not poetic subjects. Their thrilling *horror* belongs to prose, in which it could be far more effectively discussed, as Professor Longfellow may assure himself at any moment by experiment.

C. C. Felton, writing in the *North American Review* in July 1842, is more impressed, stating of Longfellow's ballads in general, "Nothing can exceed the exquisite finish of some of his smaller pieces, while they also abound in that richness of expression and imagery. . . . The melody of his versification is very remarkable; some of his stanzas sound with the richest and sweetest music of which language is capable." George Saintsbury, a noted scholar of prosody, gives judicious praise to "The Wreck of the Hesperus," writing in *Prefaces and Essays* of that poem and another,

> I shall never shirk declaring admiration. If not the strongest of meat, they are dishes of milk very well crumbled with bread for poetical babes; and the said babes, when they grow up, will be very lucky if they find no worse food even then, and may come back to them with relish from the strong meat itself.

Newton Arvin, in *Longfellow: His Life and Work*, concedes the poem's charm while denigrating its quality. He remarks, "Hackneyed as it is, 'The Wreck of the Hesperus' could hardly be surpassed as a literary imitation of the border ballad—for if the subject is native, the style is a perfect pastiche of the English or Scottish popular ballad, of 'Sir Patrick Spens.'" Arvin concludes, "It is a poem for the young . . . without any more under-feeling than the subject itself carries with it, but on its youthful level, it has in it the authentic terror of the sea." Cecil B. Williams, in *Henry Wadsworth Longfellow* (1964), calls "The Wreck of the Hesperus" "prolix, sentimental, unconvincing."

This kind of ambivalence has defined responses to Longfellow's verse from the start of his career. Upon Longfellow's death in 1882, the great American poet Walt Whitman, in so many ways unlike Longfellow, offered an appraisal in the *Critic*:

> Longfellow in his voluminous works seems to me not only to be eminent in the style and forms of poetical expression that mark the present age (an idiocrasy, almost a sickness, of verbal melody), but to bring what is always dearest as poetry to the general human heart and taste. . . . He is certainly the sort of bard and counteractant most needed for our materialistic, self-assertive, money-worshipping, Anglo-Saxon races, and especially for the present age in America—an age tyrannically regulated with reference to the manufacturer, the merchant, the financier, the politician and the day workman—for whom and among whom he comes as the poet of melody, courtesy, deference—poet of the mellow twilight of the past in Italy, Germany, Spain, and in Northern Europe—poet of all sympathetic gentleness—and universal poet of women and young people. I should have to think long if I were asked to name the man who has done more, and in more valuable directions, for America.

Nearly a hundred years later, Virginia Jackson paid a similar tribute to Longfellow in *Modern Language Quarterly*:

> He did write the nineteenth century's best-selling poems, made to be read as if they were pictures, as if reading were self-evident, as if their elaborate classical meters were really a transparent language. What Longfellow imprinted was perhaps not a national literary tradition but the much more historically persistent fantasy that a nation might become a literature.

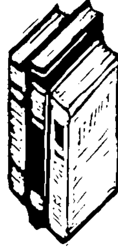
CRITICISM

Neil Heims

Heims is a freelance writer and the author or editor of over two dozen books on literary subjects. In this essay, he argues that the underlying catastrophe in "The Wreck of the Hesperus" is not the storm but the captain's stubborn pride.

James H. Justus, writing in *Nineteenth-Century American Poetry* in 1985, characterizes "The Wreck of the Hesperus" and another Longfellow ballad as "tales of death with lessons on the necessity of bearing up." But if there is a lesson to "The Wreck of the Hesperus" (and for most readers the reward the poem offers is not a lesson but the kinetic thrill of horror at Longfellow's knack for rendering verbal pictures of raging nature), it seems much more clearly to be this: pay attention to what actually is and do not be guided by pride or some unreasonable idea of your own powers. "The Wreck of the Hesperus" is a kind of sermon, and like a sermon, first it secures the attention of its auditors or readers with its compelling narrative drive, and then it suggests a wrong and a right way of behaving. It ends with a prayer, which appears in the final lines of its last stanza—the poet's prayer that we all may be spared a disaster like the one he has just recounted. What that disaster is seems apparent: the kind of end the schooner and its crew met. But the poem is a reflection upon a deeper, prior disaster. The consequences of the tempest, the destruction of the *Hesperus*, and the death of its complement, follow from the proud intractability of the captain. As is implicit in Longfellow's closing prayer, the reader may detect a suggestion, gleaned from the circumstances recounted in the ballad, that the poet is referring to a catastrophe of character rather than of nature.

"The Wreck of the Hesperus" begins as if it were a fairy tale or a winter's tale, a chilling narrative enjoyed around a warm fire, an evocative account drawn from a dark memory of a terrible event. Its first stanza commences with words that have the formal introductory quality of the phrase that spinners of tales have traditionally used to begin, "Once upon a time." The actual words, the pronoun "it" and the past tense of the verb *to be*, "was," echo and vary the first words of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's supernatural sermon of the sea concerning guilt and redemption, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"



WHAT DO I READ NEXT?

- *A Night to Remember* (1955), by Walter Lord, is a factual novelistic account of the sinking of the ocean liner RMS *Titanic* in 1912 after hitting an iceberg.
- "The Ballad of Sir Patrick Spens," an anonymous Scottish ballad dating from the Middle Ages (found in Francis James Child's *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, first published 1883–98), is of particular interest to readers of "The Wreck of the Hesperus" because Longfellow used some of the same language and language patterns in his poem as appear in "Sir Patrick Spens."
- *The Caine Mutiny* (1951), a Pulitzer Prize-winning novel by Herman Wouk, traces the career of a ship and its erratically authoritarian captain.
- "Der Erlkönig"—in English, "The Erlking"—is a ballad written in 1782 by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe about a father's harrowing journey through a death-haunted night with his child. It was set several times to music, most notably by Franz Schubert in 1815.
- "Master and Man" (1895), by Leo Tolstoy, is a story of a wealthy man and his servant and how their encounter with a blizzard when traveling together affects their relationship and their sense of life's meaning and purpose.
- "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (1798), by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, is a ballad concerning the misadventures of a sailor and his expiation of guilt.
- "To Build a Fire" (1908), a short story by Jack London, tells of a man's unsuccessful fight with the forces of nature in the Yukon.
- "The Wreck of the Deutschland," a thirty-five stanza poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins, written in 1875 and 1876 and first published in 1918, is a meditation on faith generated by the 1875 shipwreck of the *Deutschland*, a ship on which five Franciscan nuns were among those who perished.

AS IS IMPLICIT IN LONGFELLOW'S CLOSING PRAYER, THE READER MAY DETECT A SUGGESTION, GLEANED FROM THE CIRCUMSTANCES RECOUNTED IN THE BALLAD, THAT THE POET IS REFERRING TO A CATASTROPHE OF CHARACTER RATHER THAN OF NATURE."

(1798). (Coleridge keeps the verb in the present tense because his story focuses on penitence rather than on an irrevocable catastrophe.) Longfellow's opening stanza presents a concise depiction of the situation the poem will address. Longfellow begins his narrative with a keenness of pictorial representation and a telltale dramatic tension that characterize his method throughout "The Wreck of the Hesperus" and give the poem its energy, pathos, and immediacy. To begin, he uses what may be seen as a cinematic long shot of the sailing ship upon the ocean in winter. Quickly the imaginary camera moves in, passing the captain and coming to rest on his daughter. She is the subject of the second stanza, which is devoted in its entirety to presenting a picture of her, through metaphor and simile, comparing her to several flowers and to the bright morning, as a figure of the glory of springtime within the hibernal context of the poem.

Turning from one idealized portrait to another, from the description of the daughter, the poet moves in the third stanza to a picture of her father. Longfellow limns him as a model of a New England seaman, standing beside the ship's helm, smoking his pipe, watching the wind blow away his puffs of smoke. The third and fourth stanzas set this tableau vivant of lovely child and steadfast father in motion with the introduction of an old crew member. These stanzas offer the crucial, dramatic encounter between the crewman and the captain, serving to define the captain for the reader and establishing the cause of the wreck as a force ulterior to the storm. The old mariner brings a sage warning of an approaching hurricane. His advice is to return the ship to port. The captain is more than steadfast, however; he is bullheaded. In his pride, he scorns the

advice and refuses to heed the sailor, despite the fact that just from the way the wind blows the smoke from his pipe, he ought to see that a storm is brewing. Here is the moment of the lesson. The captain's pride, manifest in his refusal to consider the sailor's advice, not the storm itself, is the cause of the catastrophe. The captain is set on braving the storm, asserting his power above nature's. Even when the storm is howling, in the eighth stanza, he is unwilling to recognize his error. Along with the greatcoat he gives to his daughter, he boasts of his ability to outlast whatever storm may blow. The implication is clear: that the captain's flaw, his proud overconfidence, is more significant than his strength, the seacraft of which he boasts. His failing, because of pride, to respect good advice and to regard sound judgment thus compels him to that spartan exercise of character inherent in bearing up when there is, in fact, no other choice. The hopeless situation is not, initially, the storm but his own intransigence.

The scene of confrontation between the captain and the crewman gives way in the sixth stanza to frozen portraiture again. Longfellow elicits a picture of a turbulent seascape in the sixth and seventh stanzas, of howling wind, beating snow, and seething waves. In the eighth, what Justus takes as the captain's heroism is presented. In the face of the storm, he calls his daughter to him and offers her solace with words, telling her not to tremble and assuring her of his prowess. In the ninth stanza, he wraps her in his greatcoat and ties her to the ship's mast in the hope that, despite the calamity, he may effect her survival. In the tenth stanza, the focus of the narrative fully shifts from the captain to his daughter, and from the strains of heroism that characterize the captain's sacrifice for his daughter to the strains of pathos that surround her. Her pathetic laments of the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth stanzas go unanswered by her father. He is shown dead, garishly frozen, at the end of the twelfth and in the thirteenth stanza.

The first instance of prayer as a part of the ballad occurs now in the fourteenth stanza. Lashed to the ship's mast and alive in the storm after her father and the crew are dead, the captain's daughter prays to the Christian savior that he might save her. His power, according to the Gospels, was so great that he was able to calm the storm-tossed Sea of Galilee. The daughter's prayer increases the quality of pathos represented in the ballad through her presence because of the utter hopelessness of her situation. The impotence of her prayer indicates the degree to which she is bereft. In the midst of that hopelessness, Longfellow, despite the formality and artifice of the ballad meter he is using to tell the story, keeps his narrative entirely true to a naturalistic vision of experience. Nothing supernatural happens. Despite the invocation of the Gospel story of Christ's stilling the water of Galilee, to which the maiden refers in her prayer, there is no miraculous intervention. Instead, Longfellow goes forward headlong with his account of the wreck, beginning the fifteenth stanza with "And," indicating the propulsive inevitability of the storm and its consequences. Implicitly, this "and" is actually a "but." Despite the legend of the miracle, there is no answer for the girl's prayer. The reality seems to contradict faith. Christ does not intervene, and the storm force is the agency, in this case the divinity, that guides the ship not toward a safe haven but toward the rocky reef of Norman's Woe. Longfellow's description of the wreck, the smashing of the storm-driven ship against the rocks, is the climax of the ballad. He moves the reader from pathos to horror. The horror is, moreover, at this point of the narrative, entirely the result of the violent forces of nature. Longfellow describes the destruction of the ship by comparing the rocks as the ship smashes against them to the horns of a bull as it is goring, and he ascribes an attitude of cruelty to the rocks. The waves that are pummeling the vessel, in turn, are characterized as roaring with laughter as they pound the ship. Their laughter suggests the superior power of coldly vanquishing natural forces over the captain's misplaced self-confidence.

With the fury calmed, in the morning, in the twentieth stanza, a fisherman on the beach sees the work of the storm in the wreckage. Then the focus of the ballad shifts again, away from the storm and away from the fisherman on the shore to what the fisherman sees. The focus is not the ship but the girl, tied to the mast and floating on the sea, her hair like seaweed bobbling in the water. There is no Ovidian metamorphosis; the girl is not transformed into something else, as so many human creatures are transformed into plants, animals, or minerals in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Rather, Longfellow's account of the fisherman's last sighting of her, in which her hair is seen as seaweed, asserts through its image the commonality of human beings with nature and, hence, the vulnerability of humans. The girl has

not been transformed into living vegetation by any divine force. She is simply, irrevocably dead.

With this vulnerability in mind, Longfellow ends the ballad with a prayer of his own, given not by any of the characters in the ballad but by himself as narrator. He begs Christ to spare "us" from such a death. "Us" may refer to the poet himself, using a polite plural, or it may be an actual plural meant to include the reader and, thus, all humanity. In either case, a problem is that the poet seems to have shown the inefficacy of appeals to Christ at the heart of the storm. Either the narrator's invocation of Christ, in the aftermath of Christ's nonintervention when the girl prayed, is a terrible, nearly blasphemous irony or there is some other meaning buried within it, something implied but not directly—something that can perhaps best be represented by the popular assertion that God helps those who help themselves. What is Christ, after all, beside a divinity if not *the* emblem of humility? And it is precisely the captain's lack of humility, his smug and careless pride, that is the actual cause of the shipwreck. The storm is only the agency of the tragedy.

What, then, is the poet praying for when he prays for our safety? What is the danger he has in mind? What the girl wants in praying is clear: she wants Christ to intervene and stop the storm. But Longfellow is not echoing her prayer in his. He is not praying for miraculous deliverance at the heart of a shipwreck, nor for the end of tempests, nor even that we have the luck never to meet such a tempest on a sea voyage. Such a prayer, the ballad shows, is useless. Additionally, it lacks the universality that can give a prayer gravity and cause it to resonate with the majority. Such a prayer as the doomed daughter offers is not a prayer about people in general. It is not a prayer in which submission is professed but one that begs Christ to perform a miracle, the suspension of nature's operations in her interest. What the poet utters when he asks Christ to protect us from such a death is a prayer for the kind of humility that permits good judgment. *The Wreck of the Hesperus* is not about bearing up but about submitting, realizing our weaknesses and, consequently, acting prudently. The proud but false assertion of mastery uninformed by the principle of meekness embodied in Christ must lead to disaster.

Source: Neil Heims, Critical Essay on "The Wreck of the Hesperus," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2010.

Agnieszka Salska

In the following excerpt, Salska discusses Longfellow's status as both a nationalist poet, a reputation established through such poems as "The Wreck of the Hesperus," and a cosmopolitan, international poet.

. . . The career of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, certainly the most visible American author of the nineteenth century and still the most popular American poet ever, provides an illustrative, though infrequently discussed example of the ebbing energy of the nationalist impulse accompanied by a growing tendency to literary cosmopolitism. Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, Longfellow remained a symbolic cultural presence, a popular embodiment of American literary achievement, cultural openness, and civilized sophistication. It was in him rather than in Walt Whitman that the public saw the long awaited incarnation of the native bard who at last gave America the sense and measure of her literary potential and glory. Moreover, the incredible sales figures for most of his volumes following *Voices of the Night* and the fact that by 1854 he felt financially secure enough to resign his professorship at Harvard make Longfellow the first American writer to demonstrate that a poetic career in America could be materially rewarding. Also today, the inevitable revaluation of his work notwithstanding, critics continue to recognize the centrality of Longfellow's contribution to the birth of American cultural self-sufficiency. For example, introducing a selection of Longfellow's poems in the *Atlantic Monthly* of 14 October 2000, David Barber writes:

> If Walt Whitman, his younger contemporary by a dozen years, is enshrined as the founding father of modern American poetry, Longfellow deserves no less than to be remembered as the native bard who gave mythic dimension to the country's historical imagination, a national poet of epic sweep and solemn feeling who came along right at the moment when the emerging nation had the most need for one. The forest primeval, the village smithy under the spreading chestnut tree, the midnight ride of Paul Revere, the Indian princeling Hiawatha in his birch canoe—such were the iconic images Longfellow forged out of the American collective consciousness in volume after lionized volume.

In January 1840, having completed "The Wreck of the Hesperus," Longfellow revealed

IT WAS IN HIM RATHER THAN IN WALT WHITMAN THAT THE PUBLIC SAW THE LONG AWAITED INCARNATION OF THE NATIVE BARD WHO AT LAST GAVE AMERICA THE SENSE AND MEASURE OF HER LITERARY POTENTIAL AND GLORY."

his plans in a letter to George W. Greene, a future member of The Dante Club:

> I have broken ground in a new field; namely, ballads; beginning with the "Wreck of the Schooner Hesperus" on the reef of Norman's Woe, in the great storm of a fortnight ago. I shall send it to some newspaper. I think I shall write more. The *national ballad* is a virgin soil here in New England; and there are great materials. Besides, I have a great notion of working upon the *people's* feelings. I am going to have it printed on a sheet, with a coarse picture on it. I desire a new sensation and a new set of critics. (Samuel Longfellow I: 353–54)

Although his works were never published broadside style, Longfellow's unprecedented popularity was firmly bound with his consistent realization of the intention to reach the widest possible audience. Thus, the modest revival of critical interest in the poet over the past decade or so has centered on his nation-building role, on his ability to imagine "poetry as a language that everyone could understand without knowing how to read" (Jackson 495). . . .

To the December 1864 issue of The *Atlantic Monthly*, the beloved national bard contributed two sonnets that had nothing to do with American issues of the time, no matter how burning they had become. The poems were written while Longfellow was working on the translation of *Divina Commedia*, a project he embarked upon early in 1862.

. . . Ever since his first journey to Europe, Longfellow had loved Dante, including a sonnet entitled "Dante" in *The Belfry of Bruges and Other Poems* (1845). The postgraduate European journey also left him with an interest in Roman Catholicism, its ritual, its mystery, and its ecclesiastical architecture. In 1827, writing to his sister Elizabeth, he described the church at El Escorial in a manner that is hard not to compare with his later vision of *Divina Commedia* as a cathedral:

> The church is magnificently grand. I could not help lingering among its gloomy arches, indulging in that pleasant kind of melancholy which such scenes are apt to inspire. I heard Mass said in the twilight of its aisles; and as the chant of the priests reached my ear at intervals, with the peal of the organ echoing amid the arches and dying away in indistinct murmurs along the roof, the effect was most powerful. (Samuel Longfellow I: 115)

But, most importantly, he had early identified poetry with spiritual aspiration and Dante's great poem perfectly fitted the conception, especially when his experience of it was intensified by personal tragedy. The American *Inferno* appeared in print with the two sonnets from the December 1864 issue of *The Atlantic* placed on the volume's flyleaves. Later, they opened a sequence of six sonnets entitled "Divina Commedia" published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1866 and, in the same year, in *Flower-de-Luce*. When the completed translation of *Divine Comedy* appeared in 1867, each of the poem's three parts was preceded by two successive sonnets from the sequence.

The cycle, however, is not "on the subject of Dante, but rather 'On Translating Dante'—on Longfellow's own process" (Pearl xiii) in which, one may add, the American poet communes with the ideal:

> I enter, and I see thee in the gloom
> Of the long aisles, O poet saturnine!
> And strive to make my steps keep pace with thine.
> The air is filled with some unknown perfume;
> The congregation of the dead make room
> For thee to pass; the votive tapers shine;
> Like rooks that haunt Ravenna's groves of pine
> The hovering echoes fly from tomb to tomb.
> From the confessionals I hear arise
> Rehearsals of forgotten tragedies,
> And lamentations from the crypts below;
> And then a voice celestial that begins
> With the pathetic words, "Although your sins
> As scarlet be," and ends with "as the snow."

Since the directly personal "Mezzo Camin" and "The Cross of Snow" were never printed in the poet's lifetime, the "Divina Commedia" sonnets appear as Longfellow's most intimate published verse. Dante—a suffering, homeless

pilgrim-poet making his way from hell to paradise and in the process building the impressive cathedral-like structure of the poem—becomes Longfellow's mentor and guide in his time of need, just as Virgil is Dante's guide in Hell. The Italian poem functions as a kind of objective correlative for an experience too difficult and too private for its New England translator to treat directly; the tight sonnet form provides discipline and harnesses emotion. Longfellow's cycle belongs, in my opinion, to the best sonnets in the English language precisely because their formal polish brings into vivid relief the intensity of the underlying struggle to raise an intricately ordered language structure over the foundation of wordless pain. However, I also read *Divina Commedia* as a programmatic statement that continues the poet's life-long reflection on poetry and its function and on the poet's relation to community and to literary tradition.

Longfellow was barely eighteen when he joined the national debate on the prospects of developing in the United States a literature commensurate with the political and geographical distinctiveness of the country. As demonstrated by Robert E. Spiller and Benjamin T. Spencer, exhortations and controversies of the campaign for national literature engaged the best American minds since before the country won political independence. On the verge of his graduation, the brilliant Bowdoin student, who already published regularly in the *United States Literary Gazette*, spoke his mind in the magazine's "Lay Monastery" column. Assuming, as so many of his contemporaries did, the primacy of nature as the chief resource of national imagination, the young author made the following reservation:

> But if the natural scenery of our country, where nature exhibits such various beauty and sublimity, can give strength and vigor to intellect, and with them unite poetic feeling, the lapse of another century will give us those rich associations, which it is said are now wanting, and will make America in some degree a classical land. ("Literary Spirit" 27)

He also pointed out "the want of exclusive cultivation, which so noble a branch of literature (i.e. poetry) would seem to require" and suggested that the defect could be remedied by "the honorable hand of patronage alone" (27). Yet, the somewhat aristocratic tying of national creativity to prior cultivation of both nature and society is practically negated earlier in the essay, when the author thinks the writer most sure of his contributing to "revolutions in letters," however slow in coming they may be, not when "influenced by individual caprice," but when moving "with the motion of the popular mind." On the one hand, young Longfellow has a clear sense of the need for a cultivated elite as a *sine qua non* of both artistic patronage and creativity: "Whilst there are but few great minds wholly devoted to letters, the exertions of genius will be far more conspicuous and effectual, than when a larger multitude has gathered around our literary altars" (25). On the other hand, "the motion of the popular mind" is held to be the poet's surest guide. The latter assumption sounds even more democratic than Whitman's claim to be able to lead his audience to wisdom and knowledge more effectively than they can travel by themselves.

At the start of his career we thus see Longfellow balancing between his consciousness of the poet's intellectual exclusiveness and the special status of his vocation on the one hand and, on the other, a radically democratic, even populist view of the writer as someone who does not lead nor even represents but follows "the popular mind." The two concepts have a common base in the conviction that poetic creativity is culturally rather than personally determined. Poems are products of the artists' elite intellectual status offered out of their elitist sense of obligation to respond to the needs of "the popular mind." Consequently, as Matthew Gartner observes, "Longfellow mastered the art of encoding a patrician subtext within populist poetry" (72), and his "success with many different strata of American society was intimately connected to the complex ways in which he managed to inhabit his own work as a public figure who represented both the elites and the masses" (62).

"Our Native Writers," his graduation address, condenses the argument of the earlier essay to a plea for social recognition and remuneration of the man of letters and, on the positive side, to the affirmation of faith in the future of American literature shaped by and emerging from American writers' intimacy with American land and democratic institutions. The reservation about the necessity of cultivation before achievement, however, remains valid. Both texts are really juvenilia and cannot serve as a fair measure of Longfellow's mature conception of poetry or the poet's vocation. For example, in contrast with Professor Longfellow, Longfellow as a student at Bowdoin

sees, like so many Americans of his time, English literature as the only model available for American writers. Although "The Literary Spirit of Our Country" and "Our Native Writers" only mark his starting point, the impersonal, carefully crafted, and made-to-fill-the-cultural-need character of his verse remained the hallmark of Longfellow's most popular works. And from the very beginning, he sees the development of American literature as proceeding along the patterns established by older cultures: "Every rock shall become a chronicle of storied allusions: and the tomb of the Indian prophet be as hallowed as the sepulchers of ancient kings, or the damp vault and perpetual lamp of the Saracen monarch" (Ruland 238). To help him achieve the goal, he had, beside literary erudition, "a strain of the genuine folk poet in his make-up," and some of his poems "were written with as little effort as a folksinger puts into a new ballad on an old and familiar kind of subject" (Arvin 69). Throughout his life, too, he patiently accepted his iconic role as national poet, even when its rituals became quite irksome so that practically all Longfellow's biographers relate anecdotes of his civility to unexpected visitors and his patience with countless requests for autographs. . . .

Longfellow wrote his defense of poetry in 1832, having returned from Europe where he prepared himself for the professorship of modern languages at his alma mater. In Europe and while teaching at Bowdoin, he practically stopped writing original poetry, submitting his talent to the regime of "schooling himself" in Romance and German literatures and then to the quite severe regime of teaching. Critics often regret those years as wasted since at the age most prolific for many romantic poets, he let his talent lie buried. Yet faced, after his experience of European cultural wealth, with the dearth of cultural resources at Bowdoin, the young professor must have felt that cultivation, in which he always believed, became his urgent basic job. He taught himself and he taught his students, expending an astonishing amount of energy in the effort. And, as Dana Gioia notices in his fine essay in *The Columbia History of American Poetry*, Longfellow's training program resembled Ezra Pound's though Pound did not do much teaching. Like Pound, Longfellow trained his pen by writing prose; and like Pound, he lectured on Romance literatures. Confronted with a similar challenge to create American poetry for their respective times, American poetry that would unapologetically claim its place among and even rival contemporary European achievements, both poets began with an intensive program of schooling themselves for the task through extensive translation work. Both, too, tended to confront their own situation via identification with the authors translated. Pound, however, practically gave up both the hope and the work of educating the American reading public. Longfellow made that task the work of his life.

In 1837, reviewing *Twice Told Tales*, Longfellow, already Professor of Modern Languages at Harvard and a successful author of *Outre-Mer*, praised his Bowdoin classmate's book for demonstrating that native history provided ample material for native imagination, and then he focused on the accessibility of Nathaniel Hawthorne's style:

> Some writers of the present day have introduced a kind of Gothic architecture into their style. All is fantastic, vast, and wondrous in the outward form. And within is mysterious twilight, and the swelling sound of an organ, and a voice chanting hymns in Latin, which need a translation for many of the crowd. To this I do not object. Let the priest chant in what language he will, so long as he understands his own Mass-book. But if he wishes the world to listen and be edified, he will do well to choose a language that is generally understood. (*Prose* 366–67)

From the beginning of his career there were thus two sides to Longfellow's poetic identity. His erudition and scholarship made him admire excellence regardless of nationality; he also aspired and belonged to the international literary elite of his times and admired Goethe; and he became a friend of Charles Dickens and Ferdinand Freiligrath. He felt at home in the multilingual European literary tradition, but he was also deeply rooted in the American soil, never considered expatriation, and attentively listened to the American "popular mind" since he was eager for the American people "to listen and be edified." . . .

Source: Agnieszka Salska, "From National to Supranational Conception of Literature: The Case of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow," in *American Transcendental Quarterly*, Vol. 20, No. 4, December 2006, pp. 611–28.

Donald A. Sears

In the following essay, Sears examines the roots of Longfellow's ballads, including "The Wreck of the Hesperus."

SINCE THE BOYHOOD READING OF ANY MAN IS APT TO REMAIN WITH HIM LONGER AND DEEPER THAN ANY SUBSEQUENT READING, WE CAN EXPECT THE IMAGES AND IDEAS AN AUTHOR MET IN YOUTH TO REAPPEAR, OFTEN METAMORPHOSED, IN LATER YEARS."

When Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807–1882) was growing up in Portland, Maine, there existed a lively tradition of broadside balladry and folk poetry that could not fail to meet his eye and strike his ear. In very real ways this poetry—itself of a very low sort indeed—contributed to the themes, metrics, and tone of the poet's later work. A search for this fugitive verse, therefore, has import on a reading of Longfellow.

In the days of sailing vessels, Portland was one of the important ports of America; for behind it stood the magnificent mast pines, famous since colonial days; and before it was the shortest sea route to Europe. Furthermore, the road through Crawford Notch in the White Mountains emptied the produce of New Hampshire and Vermont into the town. The road after 1830 was supplemented by the Oxford Canal, an inland waterway from Portland nearly to the New Hampshire border. The town bustled with trade, making Longfellow's "sailors with bearded lips" everyday sights. Inevitably ballads and songs were a part of Portland life, and local ballads, picked up by the sailors on shore, were carried around the world. Richard H. Dana, Jr., on his famous voyage before the mast (1834–1836), for example, heard the popular Portland ditty about salt beef:

> Old horse! old horse! what brought you here?
> "From Sacarap [Westbrook] to Portland Pier
> I've carted stone this many year;
> Till, killed by blows and sore abuse,
> They salted me down for sailors' use.
> The sailors they do me despise:
> They turn me over and damn my eyes:
> Cut off my meat, and scrape my bones,
> And pitch me over to Davy Jones."

Dana's ditty was anonymous, but many of the Portland ballads can be traced to Thomas Shaw, farmer-miller of Standish, Maine. Shaw (1753–1838) came of a seafaring family of Exeter, New Hampshire, and retained a lively interest in the sea terrors that had determined his father to move inland and take up farming. Young Thomas grew up on the frontier where no schooling was available, yet somehow he learned to read and write. When the Revolutionary War commenced, he joined Washington's army in Cambridge and served through the campaigns of Boston, Fort Ticonderoga, and Fort George before his enlistment ran out in 1777. His first "poetic" attempt had been made when he was convalescing on an army cot from a bout with smallpox, and was a dreary account of his trip to Cambridge in 1775. Back in Standish for the rest of his life, Shaw wrote enough hymns and ballads to fill a small trunk (now owned by the Maine Historical Society). A number of these were printed, often in Portland, and were hawked about Maine as far inland as Augusta. Apparently the first to be printed was an account of the fall and death of Dr. Nathaniel Bowman from the roof of the Gorham church in June, 1797. No copy of this ambiguously titled broadside ("On the Fall of the Gorham Meetinghouse . . . ") has been located.

Rhymes came easily to Shaw throughout his life; he was, in fact, given to impromptu speeches in verse on public occasions at church or town hall. When during the depression of 1787 he had to refuse his friends free grain from his mill, his announcement was couched in verse; and when he objected violently to the proposed introduction of instrumental music into the town church he walked out of the meeting to stamp home and compose a ballad against the using for sacred service what the devil had invented.

None of these early verses of Shaw traveled far from Standish until his lugubrious pen produced "A Mournful Song on the death of the Wife and Child of Mr. Nathaniel Knights [*sic*] . . . Feb. 22, 1807." Recounting the tragedy of a double drowning beneath the ice of the Presumpscot river, this ballad found wide popularity. Shaw first read the ballad in church meeting at Portland, and when copies were requested, saw his opportunity. Printed as a folio with black borders and two coffins, one large and one small, at the head, the broadside pointed the moral necessity of being ever prepared to meet one's maker. The

meter consisted of galloping tetrameter arranged in quatrains rhyming *aabb*. Within the year it ran through three editions and 4,500 copies; at six and a quarter cents a piece Shaw's profit was such that he was ready to turn off another ballad as soon as a fitting event should occur.

In the summer of the same year, 1807, Shaw was riding to Portland to attend the funeral of some of the "sixteen souls" lost by shipwreck on Richmond's Island, just south of Portland Harbor. Here was the event he needed, and as he rode along he composed in his head a ballad about the tragedy, writing the verses down and completing them upon arrival. His diary account sheds light on the methods of preparation and distribution of broadsides in the period:

> July 14, 1807. . . . I carried my song to the press, and then returned home. . . . The next Saturday I rode to Portland and seed [*sic*] to the fixing of the type for printing the shipwreck song. . . . On Monday I took my songs and spread them about, which met with great approval, and returned home at night. The next day I spread them in this town and in the afternoon I went to Windham, then to Portland and stayed two nights, and then took a circuit round to Saco and Buxton, and came home on Saturday night. This week I had 4500 copies printed off, and disposed of nigh 3000.

The next week took Shaw to Bowdoin College, where the ballad sold well, but where he had some trouble with the students. He writes that when the "college boys beset me devil-like . . . , I told them if they did not mend their ways the devil would have them." Shaw was in the throes of religion at this time and in 1808 became a professed Methodist. Both in its text and format (sixteen black coffins adorn the top), the ballad under discussion reveals his preoccupation with *memento mori* and the preparations for death. Besides the appeal of religious fervor and morbid interest in tragedy, there was a special reason for the popularity of this particular ballad; Elezer Alley Jenks, a young and enterprising Portland printer, had been lost in this wreck of the schooner *Charles*. It was probably Jenks's partner, Arthur Shirley, who issued Shaw's broadside.

The same wreck of the *Charles*, which had produced Shaw's rhymes, was treated by another ballad writer, Ebenezer Robbins, in sixty-four six-line stanzas. Robbins' poem was set to the tune of the "Indian Philosopher," the music of which was printed at the top. The poem itself, with its references to Neptune, Hymen, and nymphs, is more sophisticated than Shaw's, but no better. Alternating with scenes of the dying struggles of the lost occur passages of theological speculation. Of particular interest is a long passage setting forth the writer's view of infant salvation. He cannot believe that the unbaptized children who were drowned will be damned. His reasoning starts with the beginning of things and the fall of the rebel angels; then by recapitulating *Paradise Lost* Robbins is able first to place the blame for original sin on the devils and secondly to quote Christ's "love of infant babes." About a third of the poem is employed in establishing these liberal, anti-Calvinist views, and one suspects that the unknown Robbins was equally anxious with Shaw to spread the "word" as he saw it.

In 1808 Shaw was again moved to publish a ballad. With his son he attended the public hanging of the murderer Joseph Drew in Portland, and found the subject melancholy enough to move him to write and the public interested enough to buy what he was writing. Needless to say, the end of Drew was made religiously edifying. After this, Shaw was content to continue filling his trunk with hymns and personal ejaculations in verse until the public events of 1815 again took him to Portland. There, amidst the celebrations over the ending of the War of 1812, he brought out a broadside in two parts. Thirty-two stanzas deal with the history of the country through the defense of New Orleans, while the second part treats the ratification of peace and draws moral conclusions. Several stanzas attack party bias and chastise printers for their bickering, advising them to leave off lying and strife and to unite for the sake of the country.

In the same year the schooner *Armistice*, Baltimore-bound out of Portland, grounded on Cohasset rocks, when five people perished. Shaw got out his woodcuts of coffins and produced an appropriate "Mournful Song." This was printed in pamphlet form, together with an anonymous ballad about the eruption of a "volcano of Albay." Altogether the eleven pages were designed to appeal to the sailors of Portland, to whom events in Albay and Cohasset were equally important and interesting.

Only twice more was Shaw to peddle his ballads about southern Maine, once in 1819 when Mr. and Mrs. Tarbox froze to death at Raymond Cape in a severe snowstorm, and once in 1824 for the festivities welcoming General Lafayette. As a revolutionary pensioner himself, Shaw was given some deference on this last public

appearance of his, and as Maine's most famous minstrel, Shaw had, for his last broadside ballad, a suitable subject, and incidentally a subject that under the circumstances could not help but sell.

If Shaw's ballads were in any way unique—the peculiar and solitary creation of an eccentric—their intrinsic value would be so slight that we could happily ignore them. But Shaw's poetic hack-work was not a single phenomenon. It was symptomatic of the popularity of the ballad form in the early United States, and although the ballad at this level is not high poetry, it reveals the existence of an audience ready to pay for the right kind of poetry. By tapping this ballad audience a few years later, such a poet as Longfellow was able to earn a comfortable living. In the earlier period, with which we are concerned, Shaw's ballads supplemented the press and catered, on a popular level, to the taste that demanded in literature the gothic thrills of violence, and the religious sop of moralizing.

Apart from its lugubrious appeal to the thrill seekers, the ballad was also employed as a means of propaganda or satire. Shaw himself made use of this satiric power of the ballad when he attacked church music, but more violent examples of this kind of broadside verse can be found in Portland proper. About 1812 the Reverend Edward Payson had organized a group "for the suppression of vice and immorality." Its first action was to enforce dead-letter laws concerning the Sabbath: no boy was allowed on the street except on the way to service, and all barber shops and drinking places were closed. When the group turned more and more to temperance work, feeling in the town ran high. The "Tythingmen" of Mr. Payson were sixty-nine in number and soon were dubbed the "Sixty-Nine Society." Anti-Sixty-Nine leagues were formed, processions held, and ballads written. Rumor attributed some of the latter to Nathaniel Deering, and in places they seem to bear the stamp of his wit. The first ballad attack was against the closing of the barber shops:

Ye Tythingmen of Portland,
Ye pious Sixty-nine,
Ah, why compel th'inhabitants
To look like dirty swine!
With rumpled wig, like guinea pig,
Our whiskers out of trim,

O! we go
Thro' the snow
To the Old Jerusalem [1st Parish Church]
Uncomb'd, unpowder'd and uncurl'd
To the Old Jerusalem.

This was followed by a ballad discussion of the hypocrisy of the Sixty-Niners when it came to matters of liquor. They were quoted as saying,

Thus the bottle we'll visit at noon in a trice
And only just call it "Suppression of Vice,"
Then drive out the tipplers tho' dry as a pine,
To yield to the pious, the brave Sixty-Nine.
Derry Down.

Finally the ballad counterattack descended to the level of personal abuse not worth the quoting. These ballads were written to popular tunes and were sung in torchlight parades. In 1815 the anti-Sixty-Nine faction, made up largely of retailers and merchants, met on July 4 for a bibulous dinner, and among the many toasts was one to the

> Destruction of the offspring of Babylon, the Pope, the Cardinal, the Inquisition and the 69.

Pleasanter ballads than either satires or "mournful songs" were also current. The ballad tradition was behind a long advertising jingle by the town barber, Johnson; and Portland peddlers less literary than Johnson nonetheless developed street cries in rhyme. On Tuesdays and Fridays one could hear old Joe Skinner, retired whaler, pushing a barrow of fish and calling

Good morning, ladies all!
You have got money,
And I've got none
Come buy my fish,
And I'll go home.

I'll tell you a story,
That is true—
My fish they came
From the ocean blue.
If you want a fish for dinner
Come and buy of old Joe Skinner.

Or you might hear Stephen Cash, "professional clamist," who often used, with the appropriate substitution of clams for fish, the same cry as Skinner's first one quoted above but who had also developed a couplet of his own:

My clams are good physic, the season all through—
A bushel come buy, and bid doctors adieu.

With verse of Skinner and Cash we are probably dealing both with traditional street cries and original embellishments upon them.

Later in the period ballads reached the literary level; Seba Smith in 1830 wrote a ballad about the exploits of Sam Patch in leaping over the highest falls. This first appeared on January

19, 1830, in the *Family Reader*, which Smith was editing; three years later when he was collecting his Jack Downing letters for publication in book form, Smith found a way to salvage his "Biography of Sam Patch." It was possible to draw a parallel between the career of Sam, who rose to fame by jumping small falls and gradually rising to the conquest of Niagara, and the political office-jumping of Jack. With this connection, Smith attributed the ballad to Jack Downing and inserted it in his *Life and Writings*.

Even citizens of Portland not usually moved to verse might on special occasions turn off a ballad. When Joshua Leavitt lost his ten-year-old son in 1828, he gave his grief outlet in a fifteen-stanza broadside which was distributed with copies of the religious journal, the *Christian Intelligencer*. This link between grief, religion, and the ballad has been noted before in the work of Thomas Shaw and Ebenezer Robbins, and it would be possible to trace the connections between the writing of ballads and the writing of hymns. With varying degrees of literary merit both forms are aimed at a popular audience and both often used the same meters.

A collection of such ballad-like hymns was published in Portland in 1817 by one T. Wolcott. His *Selection of Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, issued as a sixteen-page pamphlet from the press of A. and J. Shirley, may have come under the eye of young Henry Longfellow. We know from an article by Lawrance Thompson that the poet-to-be was interested in ballad literature, drawing, indeed, the idea for his first published poem from an existing ballad of Lovell's pond. This "original sin of imitation" was not Longfellow's last; his eclectic poetry is filled with reminiscences of his reading. Since the boyhood reading of any man is apt to remain with him longer and deeper than any subsequent reading, we can expect the images and ideas an author met in youth to reappear, often metamorphosed, in later years. I suggest that Longfellow, whose art ballads have become a part of American folklore, unconsciously learned much of his craft from the ballads and hymns of his Portland days. Certainly "The Wreck of the Hesperus" belongs squarely in the tradition of shipwreck ballads; and in an even more concrete way, ballad techniques and images contributed to Longfellow's later verse. There is more than accidental similarity between the opening of Wolcott's hymn "Experience," with its

> Young people all I pray draw near
> Listen a while and you shall hear . . .

and Longfellow's

> Listen, my children, and you shall hear . . .

And the germ of the idea for the famous conclusion to "The Building of the Ship," with its comparison of the Union to a ship, may well have first been planted by Wolcott's hymn commencing

> Like a ship see the church thro' the ocean she rolls
> Well ballast with grace and man'd out with live souls,
> 'Midst whirlwinds and tempests she sails thro' the world,
> While storms of temptations against her are hurl'd.

It is true, of course, that ship-imagery came naturally to any New England writer of the Republic, but the two Wolcott passages taken together make the conjecture more certain that Longfellow owed a deep and basic debt to ballads and hymns encountered in his youth. His later, more literary, borrowings of ideas, themes, phrases are of greater importance, but underlying them is the ballad heritage. Both his power and popularity are grounded in the ballad, for it is as a storyteller in verse, a minstrel with a song to sing and a tale to tell, that he first gained a wide audience and that he is remembered and read today.

When this connection is understood, the study of local ballads ceases to be mere antiquarianism and assumes a rightful, if minor, place in the process of understanding the poets of America's renaissance of the 1840's and 1850's. In themselves the early ballads of Portland are seldom interesting, but as a folk-root of culture they are important. Their twofold influence—inwardly upon the budding poets and outwardly upon the general mass of readers—can hardly be exaggerated.

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Published in the same year that Longfellow published "The Wreck of the Hesperus," Emerson's "Self-Reliance" considers the profound forces, like love, heroism, friendship, prudence, intellect, and art, that define the human character and govern the human condition.

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Melville's famous novel is a complex meditation on a number of psychological and spiritual issues that confront mankind. At the center of the novel is the proud and disturbed figure of Ahab, the captain of the *Pequod*, a whaling vessel. Ahab's obsession with asserting his power over the force of nature embodied in the whale Moby Dick draws him and his crew on to catastrophe.

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This work of fiction, a murder mystery set in the 1850s around Harvard College, features Longfellow as one of the principal characters and sleuths.

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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of love's austere and lonely offices? (Those Winter Sundays) V1:300
of peaches (The Weight of Sweetness) V11:230
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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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Práise him. (Pied Beauty) V26:161
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R

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Ride me. (Witness) V26:285
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S

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T

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Than from everything else life promised that you could do? (Paradiso) V20:190–191
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Till Love and Fame to nothingness do sink (When I Have Fears that I May Cease to Be) V2:295
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to its owner or what horror has befallen the other shoe (A Piéd) V3:16
To live with thee and be thy love. (The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd) V14:241
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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 are at a party. (Social Life) V19:251
When you have both (Toads) V4:244
Where deep in the night I hear a voice (Butcher Shop) V7:43
Where ignorant armies clash by night (Dover Beach) V2:52
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
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Will hear of as a god." (How we Heard the Name) V10:167
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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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