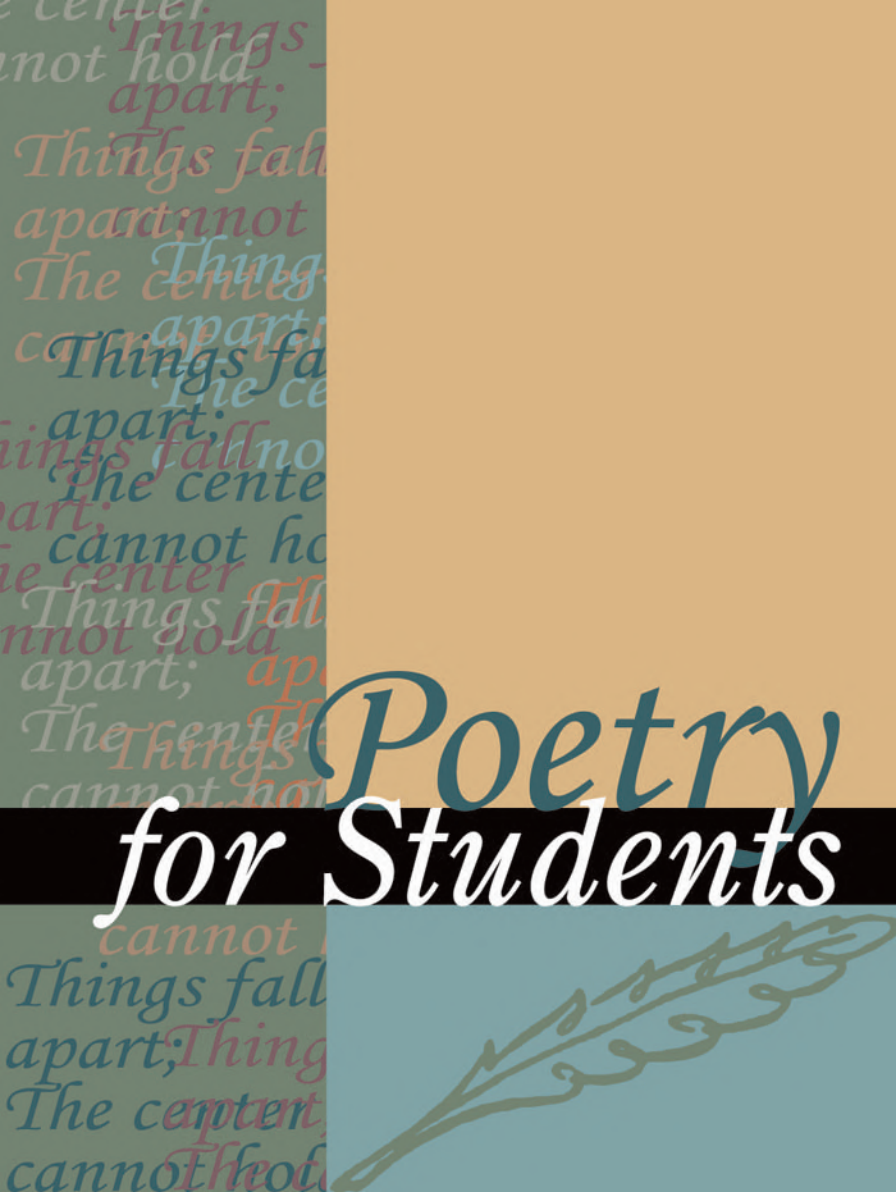
Poetry for Students



Poetry for Students

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Just a Few Lines on a Page

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

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

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

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

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

David J. Kelly
College of Lake County

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the poem itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the poem was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the poem. 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* were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; *Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges*; textbooks on teaching the poem; a College Board survey of poems commonly studied in high schools; and a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of poems commonly studied in high schools.

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

also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women poets. Our advisory board members—educational professionals—helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

- **Introduction:** a brief overview of the poem which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- **Author Biography:** this section includes basic facts about the poet's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the poem in question.
- **Poem Text:** 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 used in compiling the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- **Further Reading:** an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. It 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 and Contrast:** an "at-a-glance" comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century or early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the poem was written, the time or place the poem was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.

- **What Do I Read Next?:** a list of works that might complement the featured poem or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes "Just a Few Lines on a Page," a foreword by David J. Kelly, an adjunct professor of English, College of Lake County, Illinois. This essay provides a straightforward, unpretentious explanation of why poetry should be marveled at and how *Poetry for Students* can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

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

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

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

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

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

Each entry may include illustrations, including a 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.* Eds. Marie Napierkowski and Mary Ruby. Vol. 2. Detroit: Gale, 1997. 5–7.

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.* Eds. Marie Napierkowski and Mary Ruby. Vol. 2. Detroit: Gale, 1997. 8–9.

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

> Luscher, Robert M. "An Emersonian Context of Dickinson's 'The Soul Selects Her Own Society.'" *ESQ: A Journal of American Renaissance* Vol. 30, No. 2 (Second Quarter, 1984), 111–16; excerpted and reprinted in *Poetry for Students,* Vol. 1, eds. Marie Napierkowski and Mary Ruby (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 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,'" in *A Life Distilled: Gwendolyn Brooks, Her Poetry and Fiction*. Edited by Maria K. Mootry and Gary Smith. University of Illinois Press, 1987. 177–80, 191; excerpted and reprinted in *Poetry for Students,* Vol. 2, eds. Marie Napierkowski and Mary Ruby (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 22–24.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor 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@gale.com.* Or write to the editor at:

> Editor, *Poetry for Students*
> The Gale Group
> 27500 Drake Rd.
> Farmington Hills, MI 48331–3535

Literary Chronology

1809: Alfred, Lord Tennyson is born on August 6 in Somersby, Lincolnshire, England.

1812: Robert Browning is born in Camberwell, a suburb of London.

1836: Robert Browning's "Porphyria's Lover" is published.

1842: Alfred, Lord Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott" is published.

1865: William Butler Yeats is born on June 13 in Sandymount, Ireland.

1889: Robert Browning dies in Venice on the day that his final volume of verse, *Asolando,* is published. Browning is buried in Westminster Abbey.

1892: Alfred, Lord Tennyson dies on October 6 and is buried in Poet's Corner of Westminister Abbey.

1893: William Butler Yeats's "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" is published.

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

1923: Wislawa Szymborska is born in Kornik in western Poland on July 2.

1923: William Butler Yeats receives the Nobel prize for literature.

1924: Langston Hughes's "Dream Variations" is published.

1927: William Stanley (W. S.) Merwin is born on September 30 in New York City.

1929: Adrienne Rich is born in Baltimore, Maryland.

1932: Sylvia Plath is born on October 27 in Boston, Massachusetts.

1935: Mary Oliver is born in Cleveland, Ohio.

1939: William Butler Yeats dies on January 29 in Roquebrune, France. In 1948, his remains are re-interred in Drumcliff, Sligo, Ireland (Eire).

1943: Louise Glück is born in New York City.

1943: James Tate is born in Kansas City, Missouri.

1950: Marie Howe is born in Rochester, New York.

1951: Joy Harjo is born in May in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

1952: Rita Frances Dove is born in Akron, Ohio.

1957: Li-Young Lee is born in Jakarta, Indonesia.

1963: Sylvia Plath commits suicide on February 11, a month after her autobiographical novel of a nervous breakdown, *The Bell Jar,* was published.

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

1971: Sylvia Plath's "Blackberrying" is published posthumously.

1971: W. S. Merwin receives the Pulitzer Prize for poetry for *The Carrier of Ladders*.

1972: Wislawa Szymborska's "Astonishment" is published.

1980: Rita Dove's "Geometry" is published.

1982: Sylvia Plath receives the Pulitzer Prize for poetry for *Collected Poems*.

1984: Mary Oliver receives the Pulitzer Prize for poetry for *American Primitive*.

1986: James Tate's "Smart and Final Iris" is published.

1986: Mary Oliver's "Wild Geese" is published.

1987: Marie Howe's "What Belongs to Us" is published.

1987: Rita Dove receives the Pulitzer Prize for poetry for *Thomas and Beulah*.

1988: W. S. Merwin's "The Horizons of Rooms" is published.

1990: Li-Young Lee's "For a New Citizen of These United States" is published.

1992: James Tate receives the Pulitzer Prize for poetry for *Selected Poems*.

1993: Louise Glück receives the Pulitzer Prize for poetry for *The Wild Iris*.

1996: Wislawa Szymborska receives the Nobel prize for literature.

1997: Adrienne Rich's "Rusted Legacy" is published.

1999: Louise Glück's "The Mystery" is published.

2000: Joy Harjo's "Anniversary" is published.

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Anniversary

Joy Harjo

2000

Joy Harjo's "Anniversary" is a "creation" poem—that is, it attempts to recount how the world began and when humankind came to be. It is included in the aptly titled collection *Map to the Next World*, but it differs from many other poems in this book in that its themes and language are not as pessimistic and they do not center on human cruelty. Published in 2000, on the brink of a new millennium, and subtitled "Poetry and Tales," *Map to the Next World* takes readers through stories, in both prose and verse, of America's brutal history, the long suffering of Indians, and memories of the poet's own bitter past. However, some of the poems in this collection offer hope for a better future and describe the miracles of human nature instead of its brutality. "Anniversary" is one of these.

The title of this poem is indicative of its celebratory premise, for anniversaries are typically considered happy occasions. Yes, humans also mark the sad dates of the deaths of loved ones or of national tragedies with the same word—the anniversary of the assassination of John Lennon, for instance—but more often an anniversary is a measurement of time for a pleasant event. Harjo, of course, cannot specify exactly which anniversary this is for the human race. That debate has been going on among theologians and scientists for centuries. She treats the number, no matter what it is, as relatively insignificant. The last line of the poem reads simply, "And it's been years." But the rest of the poem—with descriptions of flames and crows, smoke and "a spiral of gods," fish and "waving grass"—makes it

Joy Harjo

very clear that there is nothing insignificant at all about the story the poem tells.

Author Biography

Joy Harjo was born in May 1951 in Tulsa, Oklahoma. She is typically considered a Native American poet, and this is the part of her ancestry with which she identifies most closely. Harjo's birth name, however, was Joy Foster, and between her mother and father, she can claim Creek and Cherokee Indian, African American, Irish, and French heritage. She is an official member of the Muscogee tribe of the Creek Nation, and much of her poetry derives themes from growing up with a mixed ancestry, never feeling that she was fully accepted by any race or ethnicity. Her paternal great-great-grandfather led the Creek Indians in battles against Andrew Jackson's soldiers in the early nineteenth century, but his daughter, Harjo's great-grandmother, married a Baptist minister who was half African. Harjo's paternal grandmother, Naomi Harjo, was of mixed Cherokee and French blood, and this is the woman from whom Joy would take her own surname at the age of nineteen. On her mother's side of the family, Harjo's grandmother was half Cherokee and half Irish, adding another level to an already complicated heritage.

Harjo's childhood was tumultuous, as her father was both physically and emotionally abusive to the family. A full Creek Indian, he worked as a mechanic for a major airline and spent his free time drinking heavily and having extramarital affairs. Harjo recalls episodes when her father beat her mother severely and even brought home his lovers. When her parents finally divorced, however, the nightmare was far from over. Her mother remarried, and the stepfather was even more abusive than her real father had been. When Harjo was sixteen, he threw her out of the house, and she wound up doing odd jobs to stay alive, including touring with an all-Indian dance troupe founded by the Institute of American Indian Arts where she was enrolled. At seventeen, Harjo gave birth to her first child, a result of her romance with a fellow student in the dance troupe, and she eventually returned to Santa Fe where she enrolled at the University of New Mexico. Here, she was exposed to contemporary writers of high caliber, one of whom was Native American poet Simon Ortiz. Harjo and Ortiz became romantically involved, resulting in a second child, but the couple split not long after their daughter's birth. Finally, Harjo received her bachelor's degree from New Mexico and then completed a master of fine arts at the University of Iowa. By that time, she was writing and publishing poetry with some success.

Harjo spent her career teaching at various universities out West before accepting tenure at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. To date, she has published six volumes of poetry, including the recent *Map to the Next World*, which contains the poem "Anniversary." A versatile artist, she also plays saxophone in her band, "Poetic Justice." Harjo now makes her home in Hawaii, but she still travels frequently to the American mainland to spend time with her children, grandchildren, and other relatives, all of whom figure heavily into her poetry.

Poem Summary

Line 1

The first line of "Anniversary" asks a question that the remainder of the poem answers. The last word, "this," refers to what is about to be described. Notice that the speaker—Harjo herself, it is safe to assume—does not imply that she can explain *how* the world began nor *why*, but only what it was like as it developed.

Lines 2–3

These lines contain description that serves both as pure poetics and as an allusion to scientific theory. Harjo describes the origin of the universe as "A little flame illuminating a rough sea." This is not only poetical, but also refers to the big bang theory, which contends that all the matter and energy in the universe today was once condensed in an extremely small, infinitely hot mass. Line 3, which is just as poetic when read as is, is also an allusion to this theory. When the big bang explosion occurred, it sent the condensed matter and energy expanding in all directions, eventually collecting into clouds that began to condense and rotate, forming the forerunners of galaxies. Harjo depicts this agitation of the universe's ingredients as "something fermented." The "question / of attraction" she mentions alludes to the big bang theory's explanation of how stars were formed. According to the big bang theory, changes in pressure within the newly formed galaxies caused gas and dust to form distinct clouds. If there was sufficient mass and adequate force within the clouds, gravitational attraction would have caused some of them to collapse. If the mass of material was sufficiently compressed, a star would form from the resulting nuclear reactions. While "something sweet" may not figure into the scientific explanation of the universe, it does add an optimistic flare for the poetic explanation.

Lines 4–6

Poetic license allows writers to fudge a bit on reality without being held accountable for scientific accuracy. In these lines, Harjo jumps ahead in the evolution of the universe, saying that at this point "a bird or two were added," including "the crow of course to / joke about humanity," and another bird not specifically identified, but that must be one most people would consider "beautiful." The description of the crows is an allusion to the legendary reputation of the black birds—often interchangeable with ravens, in folklore—which portrays them as evil-filled beasts who enjoy the suffering of human beings. In some Native American myths, crows have the supernatural power to predict death, and myth has it that if the shadow of the black bird crosses you while it is in flight, you will soon die. The hapless crow was probably destined for such a dubious distinction in human terms simply because of its caw. The high-pitched cry often sounds like a person's shrill laugh, and when a group of them call out from the branches of trees, the noise resembles a cacophony of mad laughter.

The imagery in line 6 is worth noting. Apparently the beauty of the second type of bird was so great that human sight is indebted to it. Just the songs of these magnificent creatures paved the way for "our eyes [to] be imagined."

Lines 7–8

Line 7 implies that by this time, at least the seeds of what would become the human race were planted in the story of the universe. Simply stated:

Media Adaptations

- Harjo recorded her poetry collection *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky* in 1994. It is available on cassette from audiobooks.com and from www.amazon.com, as of this writing.

"we were then." But originally nothing existed as a free, individual entity, and, so, "there was no separation" between humans and the stars, planets, galaxies, or any matter that spun together in space. Only after the Earth itself came into being, giving birth to marvelous vegetation, oceans and rivers, and mountains and canyons formed from the furious throes of her survival—all together, the "cries of a planet"—could "our becoming" be possible.

Lines 9–10

Line 9 follows from line 6, confirming the creation of human eyes. As the Earth settled down after its chaotic growing pains, "We peered through the smoke" now sporting at least shoulders and lips, or perhaps that is all that was visible as humans "emerged from new terrain."

Lines 11–13

Here the poem becomes more philosophical than descriptive. This stanza returns to the notion of "attraction," but now it comments on the ongoing, unanswerable questions of creation that, when asked, only lead to more questions instead of solutions. Lines 12 and 13 contain the first mention of a deity's presence in the origins of the universe, but note that Harjo does not refer to "God" but to "gods." This is in keeping with the belief system of many Native American tribes (as well as other ethnic groups) that there are different gods for different things. When the human mind ponders too long the mysteries of the universe and human life, it can become confused or turn into "a spiral," going round and round with the debate between creation and evolution. Perhaps the agitated intellect travels "toward the invention of sky" because that is where many deities, including the fundamental Christian God, is thought to live.

Lines 14–15

These two lines are probably the most ambiguous, if not unexplainable, in the poem. Just who it is that is supposed to "Move over" is not identified, but perhaps it is the aforementioned gods who, presumably, already know the answers to the questions that humans continue to wrestle with. Then again, perhaps the speaker is telling the fretful humans to give it a rest, so to speak—to allow the rest of "us" to wait until "the dust settles" before taking on worries that cannot be resolved anyway. Whatever the interpretation here, the sentiment seems to support a more relaxed approach to deep questions, as opposed to heated arguments and fruitless speculation.

Lines 16–19

Harjo, of course, recognizes that relaxation seldom goes hand in hand with such a controversial subject, and line 16 testifies to it. Here she admits that whatever was next in line for creation "is open to speculation or awe." Alluding to the argument that every animal, including man, derived from aquatic creatures that ventured from the sea to dry land, the poet describes a "shy fish who had known only water" before leaving the ocean to evolve into earth-dwelling mammals. Line 19 intentionally downplays the millions of years actually necessary for such evolutionary transformations to take place. Perhaps to emphasize the human inability to comprehend such vast amounts of time, Harjo infers that the fish's sprouting legs, learning to walk, and essentially growing into every subsequent being known today happened "just like that."

Lines 20–21

These two lines refer to the familiar food chain of living beings. As evolution developed, so developed one species's dependence upon another. Here, frogs dream of eating flying insects and the insects dream of mounds of dirt in which to build nests and create more insects.

Lines 22–23

Lines 22 and 23 draw a connection between the primitive food chain and human life. As frogs and insects grew in number and in intelligence, relatively speaking, they paved the way for human intelligence, which would eventually provide a network of human inventions, such as houses. Note that the network here, or the "web," is "tangled," an allusion to the saying, "Oh what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive!" from Sir Walter Scott's *Marmion,* canto vi, stanza 17.

Lines 24–25

"Anniversary" ends on a purely poetic note, summing up the "manner" in which "we became" the human race. One may not usually think of fire as elegant, but here it suggests that the explosive beginnings of the universe resulted in the remarkable creation of humankind. On a gentler note, "we" also derived from "the waving grass"—perhaps only a soft metaphor to portray the human connection to all living things, including plants as well as planets. Line 25 seems somewhat anticlimactic after a poem full of scientific, historic, and poetic description, but actually the understatement is quite effective. Sometimes when the *real* amount of something is too vast to be comprehensible—whether it is the number of years since the universe began or the distance of its expansion—one is left only with a humble admission of the greatness. "And it's been years" acknowledges the human inability to understand, but to appreciate nonetheless.

Themes

Remembrance and Transcendence

As a poet who identifies herself most significantly with her Native American heritage, Harjo's themes often reflect the essence of Indian mythology and beliefs in the human connection to the entire world of matter. Much of her work is based on the premise that even as an individual person living in the present day, she is still a part of the history of the human race, the history of animals and vegetation, even the history of planets and stars. Only by realizing and accepting this philosophy of interconnectedness can one both salute the past simply by remembering it and, at the same time, allow the mind to transcend the natural world without dispelling its beauty and importance.

In "Anniversary," one may view the entire piece as a work of remembrance. From the very first phrase—"When the world was created"—to the poem's final line—"And it's been years"—Harjo takes the reader on a fanciful trip through time. Mixing scientific allusions with intriguing metaphors, she celebrates the creation of the world from a positive perspective, with only one little cynical remark thrown in about the purpose of crows: "to / joke about humanity." The poem is consistent throughout with descriptions of how the natural world developed, from stars and galaxies to birds and fish to, finally, humankind. But nature does not exist in a vacuum here. Rather, the human mind developed an ability to go beyond the physical world—to imagine, to dream, to *think*—and, so, the act of transcendence is also celebrated in the poem.

While there is a hint of speculation in nearly every depiction of the universe's unfolding, the most obvious display of the human mind transcending nature is in the fourth stanza. Here, the poet asserts that "The question mark of creation attracts more questions / until the mind is a spiral of gods strung out way over / our heads." In the next stanza, she acknowledges that humankind may not yet fully understand the makings of the world but there is at least a chance that "we can figure this thing out." Note that there is no apparent stress or frustration in the mind's search for answers, and there is no friction between the intellectual transcendence beyond nature and nature itself. Instead, they work in harmony, confirming the notion that the human being is always a part of everything that has ever existed and that everything that has ever existed is a part of the human being.

The World in Motion

Another theme common in Harjo's poetry and prose is the idea of a world that is constantly in motion. The universe is always moving outward, stars and planets continue to spin, oceans come and go with the tide, rivers never stop flowing, vegetation sprouts up and grows all over the earth, animals stay mobile to survive, and humans have created a world for themselves that frowns upon idle time and stopping to smell the roses, so to speak. "Anniversary" reflects this world-in-flux notion as the settings and subjects shift throughout, sometimes subtly, sometimes abruptly, but always exhibiting movement.

Between the first and second stanzas, the scene shifts from the initial explosion of "A little flame illuminating a rough sea" beginning the universe to the presence of birds in the world. Just as quickly, the third stanza reverts to the "cries of a planet" and then jumps to the formation of human shoulders and lips. As the poem moves into and out of its more philosophical mid-section, it emerges into "The shy fish who had known only water" which, in turn, emerges from the ocean onto dry land "just like that, to another life." From the first sea creature that sprouted legs and became earth-dwelling, the poem moves to a close as frogs and insects populate the world alongside humans and all their possessions, including "houses on the tangled web."

Topics for Further Study

- Write an essay defending your idea of how the universe began. Tell how you arrived at your conclusion and how you feel about the "other side."
- Are there any popular legends or myths associated with your culture, ethnic group, or religion? Describe one in an essay and tell how you think it originated and why it has lasted over the years.
- Choose another Native American poet, male or female, and compare his or her work to Harjo's. Are there similar themes or subjects? How are the styles alike and how do they differ? If you have a preference for one over the other, tell why and give examples from the poems.
- Joy Harjo has sometimes called the English language her "enemy." What do you think she means by this and how do you think it affects the poetry she writes, if at all?

Just as remembrance and transcendence work harmoniously together, so do all the wheels spinning continuously throughout the physical universe and within human minds. Harjo seems not to see a need to *stop* the motion of the world, but to recognize it, celebrate it, and move on.

Style

Free Verse

Harjo's "Anniversary" is written in a very relaxed, contemporary style of free verse. There is no intentional rhyme or set meter, and there is very little alliteration (like-sounding consonants and vowels placed close together to create a rhythmic sound). One may expect the simplicity of the language to conflict with the complexity of the subject matter, and, yet, just the opposite is true. An attempt to record the creation of the universe and humankind in a twenty-five-line poem seems daunting anyway, but should it not at least require profound descriptions and even esoteric wording to complement the issue? Not necessarily. The simple, direct language actually enhances the idea that this is a celebration poem, not a scientific treatise on the formation of matter and energy. Harjo's story is uncluttered and natural, innocent in its presentation. She does not avoid the almost childlike depictions of "A little flame," "something sweet," "a bird or two," "The shy fish," "meals of flying things," and the final, anticlimactic line, "And it's been years." The guileless, unpretentious language discloses the poet's take on something as huge, complex, and mind-boggling as the origin of life: it can be pondered, appreciated, and enjoyed by everyone on earth, not just astronomers, physicists, and geniuses.

The most visible aspect of the poem's construction, of course, is the extra spacing between lines, giving it a loose, open feel and perhaps reflecting the unconstrained meandering of the subject. On the other hand, the skipped lines may emulate the poem's constant shift from one time period to another, one world to another, even one consciousness to another. Whatever Harjo had in mind with its presentation on the page, "Anniversary" *looks* as clean, clear, and unhindered as the language it contains.

Historical Context

Throughout the documented history of mankind, human beings have handed down creation stories from generation to generation, from the writings of what would become major religions to the lesser-known mythologies and legends passed through small sects of ethnic groups and tribes of native peoples. How much the story of the universe told in "Anniversary" was influenced by Harjo's Creek Indian heritage is not readily apparent, but it is likely that the Native American connection to nature and to the past, as well as the present and future, play a key role in the poem's composition.

Creek Indians belong to any of nineteen tribal groups that once occupied what are now Alabama and Georgia. Today, there are around 20,000 Creeks, most of whom live in Oklahoma, where Harjo was born. Like other Indian tribes in the early days of American history, the Creeks wound up in a region different from the one in which they had settled because of force, not choice. Since at least the mid-1500s, they had been successful farmers, dividing their land and members into

about fifty settlements in the deep south, called Creek Towns. Eventually, a Creek Confederacy was formed, and it began to grow in power as Indian tribes that had been chased from their homelands by Europeans joined the Creeks. During the early 1800s, the Creeks battled Andrew Jackson's troops but were outnumbered and worn down over the years. In the 1830s, the government forced the Creeks to move to Indian territory in what is now Oklahoma. There, they faced poverty and starvation as they struggled to develop crops and farming methods that agreed with their new land and climate. It was a struggle that many of their descendants still live with today.

The population of Native Americans in the United States has increased by more than 40 percent in the past twenty years, although this group still comprises less than 1 percent of the total U.S. population. More than half all of Native Americans live in major cities, particularly New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, but most reside in the poor sections of those towns. Traditionally, many Native Americans travel back to their reservations each year and some return permanently. All too often, they find the natural environment of the reservation disrupted by industrialization. From oil well drilling and natural gas extraction to coal mines and hydroelectric plants, once sacred grounds now bear the resource burdens of energy-seeking consumers and corporations.

Despite the intrusion of industry onto Indian reservations, recent years have seen an increase in sympathy for Native American causes from both the general population and the government. In the late 1970s, the American Indian Policy Review Commission campaigned for greater Native American sovereignty in the United States and for the past two decades that sovereignty has been growing. The number of federally recognized tribes reached 547 by the mid 1990s and more than 100 other tribes were petitioning for recognition.

Although the increase in self-governance and a greater support for Indian issues have been beneficial to this population in general, Native Americans are still the poorest ethnic group in America. In the early 1990s, 31 percent lived at the poverty level, and, on reservations, the typical yearly income for a household was $13,000, with unemployment sometimes reaching as high as 80 percent. The establishment of gambling casinos on many reservations has helped bring capital to the participating tribes, and there are now more than seventy Indian nations running casinos on their land. Today, the Native American gaming industry is worth some six billion dollars. It is a mistake, however, to think that gambling is the only form of economic enterprise occurring on Indian reservations. Other endeavors include building and selling mobile homes, growing cotton, assembling parts for automobiles, and maintaining resorts, to name just a few.

While many Indian students attend high schools and colleges among the general population, there are now more than twenty-five Native-American-run colleges and junior colleges, most in the northern Great Plains states. Over 13,000 students attend these tribal colleges where the emphasis is on Indian traditions and values, as well as training for jobs in today's world of technology, industry, and communications. Of course, a young Indian does not have to attend classes to learn about or to appreciate his or her own heritage, for respecting one's origins is a built-in part of Native American culture. Harjo was schooled at both the Institute of American Indian Arts and at public universities, but her work consistently reflects the values of Native-American culture. The origins she addresses in "Anniversary" are not personal, but universal—an issue that has likely caused greater upheaval in non-Indian populations than within tribes whose belief systems can account for spirituality and naturalism without turmoil and controversy.

The old rift between creationists and evolutionists has closed slightly in recent years. Many proponents on each side have begun to accept that the two seemingly polar-opposite ideologies may not be so far apart after all. Often called "scientific creationists," these folks in the middle of the road tend to agree that there is a supreme being responsible for the very beginning of energy, matter, and life, and they also agree on two points concerning evolution: 1) there has been "change through time" in certain lines of organisms, and 2) organisms do undergo changes during their lifetimes. But there is disagreement among scientific creationists concerning major groups of organisms giving rise to other groups, known as "macroevolution." Some claim that macroevolution violates the Biblical notion of "kinds," which has been loosely interpreted as "species."

Questions regarding the origins of the universe and life itself will likely remain unresolved, but that does not mean the human mind will stop pondering them. For even though "The question mark of creation attracts more questions," it seems inevitable that human beings were made—by whatever means—to keep asking.

Critical Overview

Harjo's poetry has been warmly received by both scholars and general readers alike. Most praise her ability to convey rich traditions of Native American culture and history—the horrible alongside the beautiful—in such honest, yet elegant, language. Her themes of nature, of interconnectedness, and of movement may not be considered original, but how she deals with them in poetic form is always admirable. In the introduction to Harjo's collection of interviews called *The Spiral of Memory*, fellow Native American poet Laura Coltelli writes that in Harjo's poetry

> the sense of the perennial movement from one place to the other . . . is not the senseless wandering of the uprooted, but instead traces an itinerary that bears a deep identification with the land, a geography of the remembered earth.

In her brief biography of the poet simply titled *Joy Harjo*, Rhonda Pettit describes Harjo's frequent and well-done use of mysticism in some of her poems: "Characteristics of Native American spirituality and orature feed this mysticism—boundaries between the physical and spiritual world dissolve; animate and inanimate objects are interconnected and sacred; time ceases to be linear." Although this comment was published two years before Harjo's book containing "Anniversary," it is easy to see how well Pettit's description applies to this poem as well.

Further testament to Harjo's acceptance into both Native American and mainstream literary circles is the number of awards and honors she has received over the past twenty-five years. Appropriately, just over twenty-five, including an Academy of American Poetry Award and a first-place poetry award from the University of New Mexico, both in 1976; an American Indian Distinguished Achievement Award in 1990; an American Book Award in 1991; and a presidential appointment to the National Council on the Arts in 1998.

Criticism

Pamela Steed Hill

Hill is the author of a poetry collection, has published widely in literary journals, and is an editor for a university publications department. In the following essay, Hill suggests that Harjo's poem stops short of describing a totally pantheistic view of the universe, leaving room for theism and even atheism.

Not everyone who claims to follow the tenets of *pantheism* would describe the principles of this "religion" in the same way. Not all of them would even call it a religion. In general, however, pantheism holds that the universe is the ultimate reality and the ultimate object of reverence, as opposed to the belief in a personal God found in most traditional theistic religions. As such, the universe represents a unity of all things—a *totality* of which everything in nature is an inseparable part, including human beings. Most pantheists do not consider themselves either theists or atheists. Theism not only acknowledges a personal God who is separate from the natural world, but also contends that God is similar to a human being but with supernatural powers and an omniscient presence. Pantheists do not believe in a deity that is in any way like a person, but they are still not atheists because the godlike principles they attribute to the universe contradict a belief in no God, or gods, at all. Today, however, a new faction of pantheism has cropped up called "scientific" or "natural" pantheism. In this modern form, followers still revere the universe and nature but they do not attribute deistic powers to it.

So how does all this figure into Joy Harjo's "Anniversary" poem, which seems very simple, even sweet, in its subject matter and presentation? Because her background is Native American and because many Indian principles and beliefs center around a tremendous respect for nature and a human connection to all natural things, some readers may be tempted to tag the poem pantheistic and let it go at that. Truly, Harjo employs many of the facets of pantheism in "Anniversary," but she leaves open the door to other religions, or nonreligions, denying the poem any single category of philosophical thought.

First, consider the descriptions that seem most pantheistic in nature. After opening with a metaphor reflecting evolution theory, the big bang in particular, the poem shifts quickly to the origins of humankind. But even though the seeds of humanity are present ("we were then"), the interconnectedness of all living matter is so strong that "there was no separation" between the stuff of galaxies and stars and the stuff of human beings. As a gradual detachment begins to take place, people, or people-like creatures, emerge "from new terrain," but the transformation into distinct living beings—whether birds, fish, flowers, insects, or humans—does not imply that a complete split ever occurs. Instead, the connection is still very vibrant, and the sense of sacredness that pantheists feel for

nature and the universe derives from the inseparable bond among all living matter.

In its entirety, "Anniversary" could be viewed as primarily pantheistic. But one must be careful when attempting to categorize something that is not wholly in keeping with a specific doctrine or belief system. The notion of "a spiral of gods strung out way over / our heads" could simply be a metaphor for stars, planets, galaxies, and so forth that reside high above the Earth and that have godlike qualities for the pantheist. But, considering that this phrase directly follows the acknowledgement that "The question mark of creation attracts more questions," one may also view it as an acceptance that the "gods" are separate from the universe as well as from humankind. There is a clear admission that neither the poet nor anyone else has the answers to the questions of creation, and, so, pantheism is not necessarily the end-all belief in this poem. Perhaps the most telling words here are "way over / our heads," for, figuratively speaking, that may be the best way to explain the inability of the human mind to comprehend the world's beginnings.

Another example of the ambivalence of religious theory in "Anniversary" is the admission in the fifth stanza that the human race is still trying to "figure this thing out." This makes it clear that confusion continues and that there are still questions that need to be answered. This, in turn, means that no one belief system has yet satisfied the storyteller in the poem. Indeed, the "story" is still just that—a tale of possibilities, sometimes following the tenets of pantheism and sometimes contradicting it.

Probably the most revealing line in this poem regarding its religious, and non-religious, nature is at the beginning of the sixth stanza: "What was created next is open to speculation or awe." If one *speculates* or reflects on a topic, it is the human mind that is at work—pondering, questioning, reasoning, and so on. No religious thought is necessary to think rationally about something and to reach a conclusion, even one based on inconclusive evidence. Therefore, one part of this line seems to be saying that the evolutionary transformation of water creatures into land creatures is just an idea that anyone may consider—theists, pantheists, or atheists. But when the word "awe" comes into the picture, so does the notion of God or gods. In its literal sense, "awe" means a feeling of reverence and wonder, even fear, inspired by something mighty and authoritative or extremely beautiful and gifted. For theists, God is awesome; for pantheists, the universe is awesome. So this part of the line

"This, in turn, means that no one belief system has yet satisfied the storyteller in the poem. Indeed, the 'story' is still just that—a tale of possibilities, sometimes following the tenets of pantheism and sometimes contradicting it."

suggests that the transformations that took place in the beginnings of life had a connection to some supernatural power, regardless of whether that power is separate from or an intrinsic part of the universe. In short, Harjo leaves open the door for all kinds of thought: religious fundamentalist, religious pantheist, and non-religious or atheist.

While strict adherents to any one of these belief systems have argued their cases fervently over countless years, even to the point of violence, the poem "Anniversary" is neither argumentative nor provocative. Its tone is one of soft conciliation to the beauty of nature and the wonders of its creation. It is likely a work that can be appreciated by readers tied to any philosophy because it is easy to *read into it* whatever one wants to see there. This does not mean that Harjo's poem is frivolous or vulnerable to misinterpretation. Rather, it seems to welcome *all* into the celebration of life—a joy that can be shared regardless of where anyone believes humans came from.

Source: Pamela Steed Hill, Critical Essay on "Anniversary," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Judi Ketteler

Ketteler has taught literature and composition. In this essay, Ketteler discusses the way in which Joy Harjo departs from a Western way of thinking about the beginning of time and human thought and writes out of a developing Native American tradition.

The poem "Anniversary" by Joy Harjo is a creation story, and an alternative way of thinking

'Anniversary' is very much about a journey toward a renewal of life, one that celebrates the past, the road already traveled."

about the beginning of time and human existence. It is "alternative" in that it takes a non-Western approach in its world view. As a Native American writer, and more specifically, a member of the Creek tribe, Joy Harjo writes from a marginalized place in American society, and her voice fills in a gap in American history. But she is not alone: Harjo is working out of a rich Native American literary tradition. She taps into the common thread of memory, which is central to the survival of Creek culture. "Anniversary" tells the story of the beginning of time, including the creation of all species, animal and human. This poem also theorizes about the human mind itself—how the human mind conceives of memory, and how human beings and their memories are rooted in the natural world. In an interview with literary scholar Laura Coltelli, Harjo speaks about memory: "I also see memory as not just associated with past history, past events, past stories, but nonlinear, as in future and ongoing history, events, and stories. And it changes."

Storytelling is very important in Native American cultures, and the oral tradition has kept the stories, myths, and poems of native peoples vibrant. In the essay, "An Art of Saying: Joy Harjo's Poetry and the Survival of Storytelling," literary critic Mary Leen remarks: "In oral cultures, storytelling maintains and preserves traditions. It takes listeners on a journey toward a renewal of life, a common survival theme in Native rituals and ceremonies." "Anniversary" is very much about a journey toward a renewal of life, one that celebrates the past, the road already traveled.

"Anniversary" is one of Harjo's more recent poems, from the book *A Map to the Next World*, published in 2000. This collection of poems and essays is very much concerned with ancestry, history, and creating a bridge between the past and the present. The poem "Anniversary" takes up this theme as well: it is the story of the past, as it revisits itself upon the future. The title "Anniversary" suggests a celebration, and this celebration is habitual, not a day long ago in history forgotten, but a living memory to be celebrated. The story is still alive.

The notion that the past recurs is a main tenet of most Native-American philosophy. Many Native American cultures organize themselves in a circular way, rather than a linear one. Instead of envisioning a straight line with the past at one end and the future at the other—which is how the Western world operates—many non-Western cultures view history as a circle: the past is revisited on the present, and the spirits of ancestors are ever-present. Each time a story is told, the memory is recreated. Mary Leen explains:

> Sacred stories were considered factual, and the idea of history, of past and present and future for indigenous people before contact, was quite different from the linear, chronological way events are organized in the Western world.

"Before contact" is generally defined as pre-Columbus and pre-colonization. Before Western influence forced itself on indigenous people, there were hundreds, possibly thousands, of different cultural traditions. While these cultures were varied, each highly valued their ancestors, and believed the past to be alive in the present.

The very first line of the poem acts as a sort of "topic sentence" for the rest of the poem. The speaker begins with a rhetorical question: "When the world was created, wasn't it like this?" The reader can imagine a storyteller, telling this story in a communal atmosphere. The tone is very matter-of-fact, almost understated: "A little flame illuminating a rough sea, a question / of attraction, something fermented, something sweet?" The question mark suggests the speaker's inflection is one of slight uncertainty, as if she wants a response or an affirmation from her group. The main actor in this creation drama is nature; the speaker uses images from the natural world: flame, sea, and earth—the basic elements. "Fermented" suggests a long process of preparation and waiting to make until the perfect moment, the way grapes ferment to make wine. "Ferment" is also somewhat harsh—the taste of fermented yeast is harsh to the tongue. "Something sweet" is thrown in to offset this. The beginning of the world is not a rushed process; it is all of the elements working together to bring life into being at precisely the right moment.

The story continues with the next stanza. More actors are introduced into the drama. "And then a bird or two were added, the crow of course to / joke

about humanity." Another characteristic of Native American literature is anthropomorphism—or animals taking on human characteristics. Animals often have special powers and human characteristics in Native American literature. Richard Erdoes and Alfonso Ortiz speak about this in their book, *American Indian Myths and Legends*: "Animals are a swarming, talkative presence in the folklore of every Indian tribe. The number of tales in which they figure should not be surprising, given their major role in Indian mythology and religion." Different animals hold different significance—the coyote, for example, is often a trickster figure. It's no surprise that animals appear in Harjo's creation story. Erdoes and Ortiz explain: "We have seen a number of animals depicted as the creators of the universe and of the human race, and they freely move in and out of stories now as tricksters, now as cultural bringers." Clearly, animals are on the level with humans; the crow "jokes" about humanity, suggesting not only that humans are imperfect, but that animals have as much right to inhabit the earth as humans and have an important role to play in keeping humans balanced.

The first line of the third stanza solidifies this relationship: "And it was, we were then—and there was no separation." This suggests a level of spirituality and connection to the earth and to all living creatures. People are not masters of the universe, they are simply part of it. Feminist critic and historian Paula Gunn Allen discusses the reccurrence of connectedness in Native American literature in her book, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*. Allen says: "The sense of connectedness of all things, of the spiritness of all things, of the intelligent consciousness of all things, is the identifying characteristic of American Indian tribal poetry." It is as if all of the species of the earth—plants, animals, and humans—are in partnership with one another. The Earth itself, and the seas and elements are all crucial participants in the partnership as well. This creation story is different from the Christian creation story as told in Genesis. There is no main actor, no one single hand who sets the world into motion, as God does in Genesis. Rather, all of the life forces come together to create the world.

Harjo also uses images of the Earth as mother in the third stanza of "Anniversary": "The cries of a planet formed our becoming. / We peered through the smoke as our shoulders, lips, / emerged from new terrain." The reader can imagine a birth taking place: a baby pushing itself out of its mother, crying as it enters the world, taking its first breaths. So

What Do I Read Next?

- Joy Harjo's 1990 collection *In Mad Love and War* won both the Delmore Schwartz Memorial Award and the Mountains and Plains Booksellers Award. Some of these poems first appeared in the *Anthology of Contemporary Arizona Indian Literature*, and they are some of her most "musical" lyrics, while the subjects are some of her darkest.
- *American Indian Myths and Legends*, edited by Richard Erdoes and Alfonso Ortiz, first appeared in 1984 and is still one of the most enjoyable, easily read collections of Native American folklore. It is divided into chapters covering topics from the origins of the planet and people, through social structure, love, war, and, finally, death and the afterlife. (The legends have not been edited and some contain sexually explicit material.)
- Internationally respected cosmologist John D. Barrow's recent publication *The Book of Nothing: Vacuums, Voids, and the Latest Ideas about the Origins of the Universe* (2001) is a must for anyone interested in keeping current with ideas in physics and astronomy. In it, Barrow explores the idea that there is no such thing as "nothing." A strong science background is helpful in reading this book.
- *From Sand Creek*, published in 2000, is the latest poetry and prose collection by Simon Ortiz, Native American writer and the father of Joy Harjo's daughter. His subjects include the violent history of Native Americans as well as personal tragedies combined with hope for a better life. Throughout the book, Ortiz pairs poems on one page with historical vignettes, personal notes, and political comments on the facing page, making for a very interesting presentation as well as a good reading.

it is that humans are born out of the Earth, their flesh and bone made up of all of the elements. In the interview with Coltelli, Harjo speaks about the physical and spiritual connection she feels with the Earth, and the way in which the Earth is perceived in feminine terms, as a mother force. An Oklahoma native, she relates this feeling to her home state. She says: "I always see Oklahoma as my mother, my motherland. I am connected psychically; there is a birth cord that connects me." While she is speaking of a specific place—in this case, her homeland of Oklahoma—this statement can be extended to the land in general—the land that each tribe holds sacred. The roots of the tribe are located both physically and spiritually on that land. Harjo also addresses the idea of roots in her interview with Coltelli: "When I speak of roots, I often mean more than what's usually conjectured. I consider the place we all came from, since the very beginning."

The fourth stanza shifts in tone somewhat. Each tribe, each culture has its own creation story—its own system of belief that it uses to explain how the world began and humanity's relationship to the world. Harjo recognizes this, and calls attention to human curiosity: "The question mark of creation attracts more questions / until the mind is a spiral of gods strung out way over / our heads, traveling toward the invention of sky." It's as if the speaker is suggesting that to tackle the creation story, to understand cognitively and rationally, is more than the human mind is capable of. It "spirals" out of control because we cannot come to any firm conclusion if we try to think scientifically. Yet we are drawn to think in such a manner, to dissect and theorize and test. This is not a bad thing. It just requires energy, as the fifth stanza suggests: "Move over and let us sleep until the dust settles, / until we can figure this thing out." Understanding how the world came into being isn't an overnight thing. People need time to develop their belief systems. "Why rush?" is the implied rhetorical question. Harjo again uses the same patient, matter-of-fact tone she began the poem with.

The reader is brought back into storytelling mode with the sixth stanza. The world is not yet complete; there is still more wonder to behold, and also an uncertainty: "What was created next is open to speculation or awe." The reader gets the sense that this story is not set in stone. It evolves with each telling. Throughout "Anniversary," many transformations are described: humans are transformed from dust out of the earth into creatures; the earth and seas are transformed as well. Animals—who often take on human characteristics—also undergo transformations. "The shy fish" suddenly becomes a creature of the land. He walks "out of the ocean onto dry land, / just like that, to another life." Life is changeable, malleable. The animals in the seventh stanza are much the same: "Frog imagined meals of flying things and creatures in flight imagined hills." It's as if the species are still figuring out their places. Animals, humans, and plants all seem to be testing out different identities until they find the one that suits them best. But no one single species seems elevated above the others: all are free to create and recreate themselves. Creation is all part of the "tangled web"—the powerful image that sits at the end of the seventh stanza.

"Anniversary" concludes in a very simple, almost nonchalant way: "And in that manner we became—elegance of fire, the waving of grass. / And it's been years." The poem is very much following the circular narrative style described earlier. Instead of following the traditional pattern of storytelling, with a conflict and a resolution, "Anniversary" circles around itself, not prioritizing the end over the beginning, or vice versa. Events happen as they happen. Paula Gunn Allen says:

> American Indian literature does not rely on conflict, crisis and resolution for organization . . . Rather, its significance is determined by its relation to creative empowerment, its reflection of tribal understanding, and its relation to the unitary nature of reality.

For Harjo, reality is determined by the past, by the stories her culture has preserved. In this poem, people were not put on the earth to dominate and categorize the species. There is no one main event that leads up to the moment of creation. Rather, things happen in relation to one another: there is a sense of connectedness and interdependence. People are not at the center of the story, and are not positioned at the center of the world. As such, Native American cultures have a different relationship to the Earth: the Earth is alive, and in many cases, it is thought of as female (as is the case in this poem with the childbirth imagery in the third stanza). In writing "Anniversary," Harjo is working within an established literary tradition that values oral storytelling, the preservation of memories, and a living relationship with the Earth.

Source: Judi Ketteler, Critical Essay on "Anniversary," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

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Further Reading

Bruchac, Joseph, and Janet Witalec, eds., *Smoke Rising: The Native North American Literary Companion*, Visible Ink Press, 1995.

This collection of poetry and prose by and about Native Americans is a comprehensive resource for anyone interested in Indian culture. It runs over 400 pages and includes four of Joy Harjo's poems.

Harjo, Joy, *She Had Some Horses*, Thunder's Mouth Press, 1983.

This early poetry collection by Harjo is one of her most popular. The title poem is often anthologized, and the book as a whole is a good introduction to the Native American themes that run throughout subsequent collections.

———, *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky*, W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1996.

The title of this collection refers to the Iroquoian creation myth about a goddess who falls from the sky. In Harjo's poem, however, the goddess becomes a "strange beauty in heels" who drops through a plate glass grocery window. It is interesting to compare this creation story to the one she tells in "Anniversary."

Harjo, Joy, and Gloria Bird, eds., *Reinventing the Enemy's Language: Contemporary Native American Women's Writings of North America*, W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1997.

This is an anthology of work of over eighty Native American women writers who have recorded their experiences in poetry, fiction, prayer, and memoir. It is considered one of the most important contributions to Native American women's literature and historical documentation.

Astonishment

Wislawa Szymborska

1972

Wislawa Szymborska's "Astonishment," also translated as "Wonderment," is a simple, sixteen-line poem in which the poet asks a series of questions about why she exists in this world in the form that she does. The deeply philosophical poem poses ten questions about the human self, a person's place in the world, and the nature of existence, but it offers no answers to these puzzles. Rather, there is some suggestion that these metaphysical questions cannot be answered at all, and that the best response to the complex and inscrutable world is one of astonishment because the act of asking questions does not get one closer to unraveling the mysteries of existence.

Szymborska published the poem in 1972 in *Wszelki wypadek* (*Could Have*), a collection in which the poet tackles philosophical issues as they relate to everyday life. Like other pieces in that volume, "Astonishment" is a deceptively simple work that elicits more questions than it explicitly poses and makes readers aware of the richness, sadness, mystery, and dark joy of being human. The straightforward language, commonplace images, and clean form of the poem work together to create a sense of an accessible, ordinary world that is nevertheless enormously complex and difficult to understand. As with most of Szymborska's poetry, little has been written about "Astonishment," but the work is of particular interest because it echoes many of the remarks made by the poet in her 1996 Nobel lecture. In that speech, the poet talks about the reaction of astonishment to the unfathomable

nature of the world. Thus, the poem tackles a subject that is central to the poet's work, introducing concerns about what can be known, the nature of existence, and the status of human beings that figure prominently in her other writings.

Author Biography

Szymborska was born in Kornik in western Poland on July 2, 1923. In 1931, her family moved to Krakow. During World War II, when Germany occupied Poland, Szymborska attended school illegally. In March 1945, she published her first poem, "Szukam slowa" ("I am Looking for a Word") in the daily *Dziennik Polski*. Later that year, she began a course of study in Polish literature and sociology at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, which she completed in 1948. She also finished her first collection of poetry that year, but the book was not published because the ruling Communist party in Poland found the work too complex and bourgeois. She revised the work to make it more political, and it was published in 1952 as *Dlatego zyjemy* (*That's What We Live For*). Szymborska was later to disavow the political position she took in this and other early socialist-realist verse. From 1953 to 1981, Szymborska worked on the Krakow literary weekly *Zycie Literacia* (*Literary Life*) as poetry editor and wrote a weekly column. Her columns were later collected in several volumes under the title *Lektury nadobowiazkowe* (*Optional Readings*).

While she worked at *Zycie Literacia*, Szymborska's reputation in Poland grew steadily, although she remained an intensely private person. She published poetry, won national and international prizes, and traveled abroad to read and discuss her work. She published several slim volumes of verse during this time, including the 1972 work *Wszelki wypadek* (*Could Have*) in which "Astonishment" first appeared. The collection of twenty-seven poems explores the diversity, plenitude, and richness of everyday life, which for the poet is a source of astonishment and inspires metaphysical questions. Like most of her mature work, the poems in the volume are not political and philosophically skeptical in tone.

In 1981, Szymborska resigned from *Zycie Literacia* and joined the editorial staff of the monthly magazine *Pismo*. She continued to write poetry and essays, translated French poetry, and gained influence in Poland's literary circle as well as its underground press. In 1991, Szymborska won the Goethe Prize and in 1995, she was awarded the Herder Prize and received an honorary doctor of letters degree from Poznan University. In 1996, she received the Nobel Prize for literature. The Nobel Committee called her work "poetry that with ironic precision allows the historical and biological context to come to light in fragments of human reality." Szymborska has written that winning the Nobel Prize at age seventy-three came as a shock to her. A shy and self-effacing person, she was uncomfortable at being suddenly thrust into the limelight and besieged by reporters. Although she continues to publish and remains a force in Polish literary circles, Szymborska shies away from interviews and media attention and lives a quiet life in Krakow.

Wislawa Szymborska

Poem Summary

Title

"Astonishment" was written in 1972, but the main ideas of the poem are echoed in much of Szymborska's earlier and later work as well. The notion of "astonishment" or wonderment at the complexity of the universe is seen in much of her poetry as the poet looks with curiosity, awe, sadness, and even joy

Media Adaptations

- The Nobel Prize Committee maintains a Szymborska web page at http://www.nobel.se/literature/laureates/1996/index.html (last accessed January, 2002) with links to other interesting sites.

at the contingency of human existence and the place humans occupy in the universe. In her 1996 Nobel lecture, Szymborska talks about inspiration, which she says is "born from a continuous 'I don't know.' " Poets are not the only ones whom inspiration visits, she says—inspiration comes to doctors, teachers, and gardeners as well—but genuine poets must keep repeating the phrase "I don't know," and each poem marks an effort to try to know, which the poet inevitably finds cannot be satisfactorily done. The poet looks around at the world, she says, and ultimately does not know what to think or make of it. The world is incredible in its vastness, and human beings, as all animals, are but specks in this "measureless theater." Human life is laughably short and bounded by two arbitrary dates of life and death. But, Szymborska says, whatever else humans might think, know, or not know about this world, "it is astonishing." And what is interesting is that the world is not astonishing because it deviates from some norm humans know, but it is simply astonishing per se, even though there is nothing to compare it with. There is nothing usual or normal about the world, she says. It is extraordinary, and poets especially cannot cease to be amazed by it. The fact that they do not know adds to this amazement and sense of incredulousness. In "Astonishment," Szymborska looks closely at the sense of astonishment she feels as a person and a poet who "does not know" as she surveys the seemingly ordinary world and its unfathomable mysteries.

Lines 1–4

The poem takes the form of a series of ten questions. That there are exactly ten questions gives the work a sense of formality and order, which is undercut by the fact that the questions are essentially unanswerable. From the beginning, as the questions are posed, the poet refers to herself, but she only makes this explicit a few times in the course of the poem. In the first four lines, she asks a series of "why" questions. She begins by asking why it is that she is the particular being she is and not one or all of the others that she could be or could have been in the universe. Why, she asks in line 2, is she this specific self? She goes on to wonder why she is a human being who lives in a house as opposed to, say, a bird in a nest. And why is this self she occupies "sewn up" in the skin of a human being rather than the scales of a fish? Why is her self in a body topped off with a face and not a tree topped off by a leaf instead?

As the poet asks these questions, however, she does not refer specifically to herself, humans, birds, fish, or trees. Rather, she refers to the external dwellings of the creatures she describes. She asks why her self is in a house rather than a nest, only suggesting and not stating explicitly that she is referring to birds and humans. She does not refer to fish but to "scales," and talks about a "leaf" but not a tree. By referring only to the external trappings of humans and animals, the poet suggests that the "self" in each of them is in fact not so different. Each of these creatures is a living being, an existent entity that finds itself in a particular situation, trapped as it were in a particular body. But there seems to be no reason—at least that the poet can decipher—why each of them is confined to or assigned the external body it has received. The poet does not understand why it has come about that, of all the possible places it could have been, her self happens to be housed in the particular human body she has, or why she is this particular self at all.

Lines 5–9

In the next five lines, the poet asks another series of "why" questions. She moves now from queries about the specific self she is to questions about time and place. Why, she asks, is she here at this very moment? She even specifies the day she is asking these questions—Tuesday—and wonders why she is here on this of all days. And not only that, why is she even on *Earth* at all? Why is she "pinned down" by this star's pin? That is, why is she bound to this particular planet of all those out there? The references to the present and a specific day suddenly personalizes the questions and makes it clear that it is a particular person posing them. The poet also for the first time refers to herself explicitly, as she asks why she is on Earth now "In spite of years of my not being here?" She suggests

that it seems to be some sort of accident that she is here. For years she was not, so why is she now? The universe has gone on for a long time without her. It is a vast "sea" of time and different fates of different living things, from cells to heavenly bodies to sea creatures. All these things, with their different forms of existence, were here before, but she was not. And so, she wonders, why is she now? Why is she here despite the fact that the universe has gone on in all its complexity for such a long time without her?

Lines 10–13

The poet then moves from asking questions about "why" to questions about "what." Here she seems to be looking for an explanation of some source (perhaps God or other maker, or some more general creative principle) that made things as they are. As in the rest of the poem, even as she asks questions, the poet also reveals to the reader something about what she herself thinks. She asks what it is that made her appear "neither an inch nor half a globe too far, / neither a minute nor aeons too early?" Here she suggests that the fact that she exists is the result of conditions being exactly perfect for that to happen. The fact that she is herself is due to her coming into existence precisely where she did and when she did. The question, then, is what made this so? That is, what made it happen that she became *her* in exactly the way she did? Even as the poet asks "what" made her "fill" herself "so squarely," she does not point particularly to God or some other specific entity, but leaves the possibilities completely open. It is, she implies, a complete mystery to her.

Lines 14–16

In the last lines of the poem, the poet reinforces the fact that her various questions have yielded no answers. She simply does not know. She does not even know why she is "staring now into the dark" and saying the words she is. The image of staring into the dark emphasizes the poet's ignorance as she throws out her various questions with apparently no hope of a response. The image of someone sitting in the dark "now" asking questions also again reminds readers that the questions are being posed by a real person with real concerns. The questions the poet asks are not from the past, are not "philosophical" in some abstract sense, but are very real, concrete, and immediate, tackling as they do real puzzles about daily existence as humans experience them. But the poet says she does not know why she stares into the dark and mutters this "unending monologue." It is unending, of course, because there is an infinite number of questions about the world and her place in it that she could ask. It is a monologue because she does not expect any response from anyone, or to get any answers at all to her questions. While she has suggested that the questions are important and constant and pressing, the poet at the end indicates that they perhaps mean very little. She compares herself muttering to the "growling thing we call a dog." Again, it could be that what she is saying is that her questions ultimately are as meaningless as the growling sounds of a dog. It could also mean that the dog too has similar types of concerns that she does as he goes about his daily existence. The poet has compared herself to animals in the beginning of the poem, so it is likely she does not think of other animals as being somehow less involved in or part of the complexity of the world. She seems to imply in the last line that she thinks the articulation of the kinds of questions she has posed are really no more meaningful than the sounds made by a dog. The question remains as to whether she thinks the growling of the dog is also an attempt to understand some of the mysteries of the world. The growling might indicate fear of the unknown or a sense of unease, and maybe she is not so different from the "rest" she refers to in line 1 as she expresses her wonderment about the nature of the world.

Themes

The Inscrutable Mysteries of the World

Szymborska touches on a number of themes in her sixteen-line poem, but they all center around the idea of the unfathomable nature of the world in which humans—and indeed all beings—find themselves. The title of the poem itself, indicating that a possible reaction to the world when one takes a moment to think about it is "astonishment," underscores that it is a place of amazement and wonder. The fact that the poet asks questions that are not answered (or can even *be* answered, perhaps), emphasizes too that the world's mysteries simply cannot be penetrated. The poet asks why she is the creature she is, why she is here now and in this place, why she suddenly came into existence when the universe had gone on for such a long time without her, what made the conditions exactly so that she would come into being, and what made her the very person she is. After she asks all these questions, she recognizes that there are no answers

Topics for Further Study

- To what extent do you think the questions the poet poses in "Astonishment" are unanswerable? Do you think that all such "metaphysical" questions cannot be answered? What might some answers be to these questions?
- What are some of the questions you have about the nature of the world and human existence? How are they different from or similar to Szymborska's questions?
- Do you think that human beings are ultimately not so very different from other animals? Why or why not?
- Research some of the answers that philosophers, political thinkers, or religious figures throughout the ages have considered in response to Szymborska's questions about the nature of existence.
- Is Szymborska right in saying that poets must take an attitude that they "don't know"? What do you see as potential problems with taking such a position?

forthcoming, that she is posing these questions into the darkness. She is not in dialogue with the universe, but simply muttering a monologue to herself.

While the poet asks unanswerable questions and there is a sense that the mysteries of existence will always be mysteries, the way the questions are posed make them seem immediate and important to everyday human experience. Although the questions are philosophical, they are framed in such a way that they are not abstract but related to ordinary human life. By using concrete images at the beginning of the poem—of a house, nest, scales, skin, a leaf, a face—the poet points out that it is the most basic, material aspects of life that are a source of astonishment. By referring to the very real present ("Tuesday"), the reader is drawn to the here and now and made to recognize that these questions are relevant for all people, including oneself in this particular moment. Toward the end of the poem, the poet also looks at the world from a more distant point of view, surveying the "star" that is the Earth and considering the grand sweep of time in which the world has existed. She wonders in lines 10–13 what made her appear in this world "neither an inch nor half a globe too far, / neither a minute nor aeons too early?" Here she compares vast spaces and times with tiny ones and in doing so implies that they are both equally mysterious. Thus, the grand complexity of the world and the way it appears to humans in "normal" life are similarly inscrutable.

The Contingency of Human Existence

"Astonishment" opens with the poet asking why she has taken on this particular self and not some other. Throughout the poem, she wants to know why she has taken on this specific existence out of the huge number of possibilities of what she could have been. She talks about the various beings that populate the world, from birds to trees, from cells to heavenly bodies and sea creatures. Of course, she receives no answer to this question. But the fact that she continues to marvel at the fact of her existence suggests perhaps that what she—a human in a particular body existing at a particular time—is merely some accident or chance event. It did not *have* to happen that she was filled with herself so squarely. It just so happens that this is the turn of events that have taken place. She could just as easily have been a bird or fish or tree, but as it turned out she is a woman, a poet, saying particular words on a particular Tuesday. Human existence, indeed all existence, then, is something that merely happens without a plan or reason. Perhaps it is contingent or accidental that things have turned out as they have. However, since the poet never actually receives a response to her many questions, it is not clear that human existence *is* in fact contingent in this way. It could be that there is a reason the poet is who she is. There could be a "what," as she suggests, that made her appear in exactly the time and place that she does. With her questions, then, the poet suggests both that maybe all existence is arbitrary, following no set plan, and also that there might be an explanation for things being as they are—it is just that she does not know what the explanations are since her questions are not being answered.

The Status of the Human Animal

Throughout the poem, the poet compares herself to other living creatures. She wonders why she

is not a bird, a fish, or a tree but a human being. At the end of the poem, she likens herself asking questions to a dog growling. By doing this, she creates a sense that humans are not so different from the other beings that make up the world. Humans are different from other creatures in some ways, but perhaps they arrogantly assume that they are more different than they actually are. Humans are said to stand apart from other living creatures because of their ability to reason. Even this the poet undercuts at the end of the poem by implying that the questioning or philosophizing she has been engaged in (using her rational faculties) is not so different from what a dog is doing as he growls. Both are responses to one's external environment and an attempt to make sense of it. There is a strong suggestion in the poem that human beings are not so different or special in the scheme of things, that they are simply one aspect of and part of this strange and fascinating world.

Skepticism and Ignorance

By posing a series of questions that are not answered, the poet stresses that she simply does not know. She asks the most basic questions about human life: why she is here, why she is what she is, what made her appear here at this very moment. But she then makes no attempt to provide answers. The poet portrays herself as ignorant, as she stares "into the dark" muttering these questions to herself. But she is not merely ignorant of the answers. There is a very real sense that there are no answers available at all. The poet is thus not simply ignorant, but she is skeptical that the kinds of questions she poses can be satisfactorily answered. Even the way she asks the questions, she finds to be problematic. She has bared herself and asked profound questions about the nature of herself and the world, but she feels at the end of the poem that the questions are simply mutterings. It could be that the nature of the world and existence is such that even the way humans (or other beings) ask questions about it do not come anywhere close to unraveling its mysteries.

Style

Form

Because "Astonishment" was originally written in Polish, it is difficult to comment on the subtleties of the poem's style since some of the techniques in the translation may in fact not apply to the original work. However, the most obvious device the poet uses—that of posing a series of questions—is as effective in English as it must be in the Polish original. The entire poem is simply a series of questions that are loosely organized around certain broad themes. The poem begins by asking questions about the specific "self" that occupies the poet's body. It then moves to asking questions about time and place, moving away from the poet's particular self to her place in the cosmos as she shares it with all manner of other creatures. The poet then turns to asking questions about what could have made things as they are and what has made her the very specific person that she is. Finally, she overturns all her previous questions by asking why she is asking these seemingly meaningless questions at all. As she moves deliberately through the various questions, the poet builds a sense of wonder and "astonishment" at the world. She makes the normal, everyday world seem quite extraordinary. But then at the end of the poem, these questions are undercut and even mocked by the poet herself, who compares them to the growlings of a dog. After posing a series of profound, metaphysical questions that seem somehow so relevant to human reality, the poet questions the very act of questioning itself.

The sixteen lines of the poem have a definite rhyme scheme of *aabccbdeedfeefgg*. The work is thus bounded by two rhyming couplets, giving it a sense of order and symmetry. An impression of order comes too from the fact that the poet moves slowly and deliberately through her questions, starting with queries about her self to those about the Earth and then tackling issues of physical being, time, and space, one by one. The cerebral, reasonable tone also confers a feeling of calm in the poem; the poet never rails against the universe but simply asks pointedly and in an extremely rational manner certain fundamental questions about existence. However, the apparent order and calm suggested by the structure of the poem is contrasted with the sense of uncertainty generated by the content of the poem, in which answers to the poet's questions are not offered and nothing is known. The poem's external form seems to suggest that while things may appear to be one way from the outside, when considered more closely they are far more mysterious and complicated.

Language

Szymborska's poetry is known for its simplicity and spareness of language. The Nobel Committee, when they conferred the Nobel Prize for

literature on the poet in 1996, commented on her "finely chiseled diction." "Astonishment" is a fine example of the poet's art, as she manages to ask deep metaphysical questions using the most ordinary language and images. Nowhere in the poem does the reader encounter difficult philosophical concepts or arcane (known to only a few) references. The images provided are of the things of ordinary existence, including birds, fish, trees, and cells. The sentences used are terse, with questions being asked almost in a sort of shorthand to be as direct as possible. It is extraordinary that in sixteen simple lines Szymborska manages to probe so deeply the mysteries of the world. She does this by using straightforward, accessible language to tap into readers' direct experiences as human beings and thus to draw attention to their strange and wondrous nature.

Historical Context

Polish Politics and Szymborska's Literary Career

Szymborska wrote "Astonishment" in 1972, a period of considerable political tension in Poland. However, the poem is decidedly apolitical, like much of Szymborska's verse. Over her career, despite having lived in a country in which politics has in many ways defined how people think and live, the poet has for the most part written poetry that does not make any overt political statements. This has brought her criticism from some quarters. But, as she has expressed both in her 1996 Nobel lecture and a 1996 interview with Dean Murphy in the *Los Angeles Times*, for her to offer political opinions would be to somehow indicate that she has answers to certain questions, which she feels she does not. She says that the mistake that the Communist Party made, for example, was to think that it had the final answer to the question about an ideal form of society when it clearly did not. She admits too that in her early years, she considered that communism's "answer" was the right one. Now she looks at the political verse she wrote in her early years as a mistake, and says that she simply does not have the nature of a political activist. However, says Szymborska, it would be wrong to assume that because she does not write political poetry that she is not politically engaged; as she says in her poem "Children of the Age," "apolitical poems are political too." That is, one can write verse that is relevant to very real human concerns without offering solutions in the form of political doctrines. The poet writes verse in her own style, not making overt claims about politics and ideologies, making her readers think by probing with great intensity those ideas that are fundamental to human life and existence.

From the beginning of her career, politics played a large role in Szymborska's life, as it did in the life of every other Polish citizen. Shortly after the end of World War II, when Szymborska was a teenager, Poland had emerged as a Communist state, a "people's democracy" on the Soviet model. In 1952, a new constitution was adopted, again modeled after that of the USSR. Under Communist rule, there were considerable restrictions on individual liberties, including restrictions on freedom of expression. For example, when Szymborska tried to publish her first collection of verse in 1951, the Communist government deemed it unfit to be published because it did not adequately reflect the principles of the Communist state. Like much of Szymborska's later work, the poems in the collection were concerned with questions of basic human existence. When she could not publish the collection, Szymborska revised her work to make it more political and in line with the Communist philosophy. *Dlatego zyjemy* (*That's What We Live For*), which reflected the government's socialist-realist ideology, was published in 1952. In 1954, Szymborska published another collection, *Pytania Zadawane Sobie* (*Questions Put to Myself*), with the same political bent.

After the death of the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin in 1953, there was a move toward greater liberalization. Polish artists, intellectuals, students, and workers raised demands for government reforms and a greater measure of freedom from Soviet control. In June 1956, workers staged demonstrations in Poznan; the quelling of the uprising left fifty-three people dead and several hundred wounded. One of the results of the demonstration was greater political freedom, as the government loosened its control of its citizens. Censorship restrictions were lifted to some degree, and writers were freer to express their own opinions. In 1957, Szymborska published her third volume of poetry, *Wolaanie do Yeti* (*Calling Out to Yeti*), which was a clear departure from the verse she had published earlier that praised the ideology of communism. She disavowed the ideas in those earlier works, and in her work as an editor and writer for magazines, she aligned herself with more liberal thinkers and positions. The 1957 collection also signaled Szymborska's clear move away from writing political poetry. Her work in the 1960s continued in this vein.

Compare & Contrast

- **Early 1970s:** There is heavy censorship in Poland, but there is a lively literary underground that publishes banned books.

  Today: United States citizens enjoy a greater degree of freedom of expression than perhaps any other people, but there is a movement to remove certain books from school shelves because of supposedly inappropriate content.

- **Early 1970s:** Social dissatisfaction is rampant, and there are workers' strikes all over Poland that lead to riots, arson, and looting.

  Today: There are demonstrations and riots in several cities in the United States because of alleged racial profiling and discrimination against various minorities.

- **Early 1970s:** The Communist Party is still in power, but there is a strong movement in Poland against Communist rule.

  Today: The United States has an active Communist Party that participates in every general election but wins a negligible number of votes.

In the late 1960s, economic conditions in Poland became increasingly bad. Social dissatisfaction increased, with demonstrations against the government and popular calls for greater freedom and less censorship. In 1968, there were a number of anti-government demonstrations at universities, as students demanded greater cultural and individual freedoms. The government responded by repressing liberties even further. Dissatisfaction continued to grow, and in December 1970, there were a number of workers' strikes. A week long state of emergency was declared, and the demonstrations were put down with the help of military force. There was considerable loss of life involved. Conditions began to improve in the early 1970s with another attempt at liberalization, but the ruling Communist regime continued to have great control over its citizenry, a situation that would continue until 1989 when Tadeusz Mazowiecki, the first democratically elected leader of Poland, took office. During these decades of upheaval, Szymborska continued to write apolitical poetry. The 1972 collection in which "Astonishment" appeared, for example, is highly philosophical in nature and makes scant reference to the social and political situation of contemporary Poland. Even if her poetry was not politically charged, Szymborska was active in the Polish literary underground and engaged in the struggle against censorship. She continued to write poetry that was true to her nature, and perhaps the greatest political statement of her career is that she has steadfastly resisted presenting any ideology in her writing, preferring to use her powers of observation to look at the world and understand it from a variety of perspectives.

Critical Overview

When Szymborska was informed on October 3, 1996, that she had won the Nobel Prize for literature, she said that the world "came crashing down on me." Until then, the shy and retiring Szymborska was a well regarded poet who had a loyal following in Poland but who was virtually unknown outside her own country. Almost everyone—in Poland and abroad—was surprised that one of the world's highest literary honors was going to a woman whose poetic output was so small (she had published only around two hundred poems over her career) and who did not have an impressive international reputation. Those who knew her work, however, recognized that Szymborska was worthy of the award. Although she is not a prolific writer, she has been regarded since the late 1970s as a leading voice in contemporary Polish poetry. Beginning with her third collection, *Wolaanie do Yeti* (*Calling Out to Yeti*) in 1957, her reputation grew steadily and she gained an ever-widening audience

in Poland. Because of the decidedly apolitical tenor of her work (at least after some initial attempts at writing political poetry in the early 1950s), she drew little attention from Western critics, whose interest in eastern European poetry had a largely political motivation. Most Western critics were interested in a certain type of literature that was being written "behind the iron curtain," and Szymborska's work did not fit the stereotype. A few English translations of her work appeared in the 1980s and 1990s, but it was not until she won the Nobel Prize that her work elicited any real interest from the English-speaking world.

Even then, little has been written about Szymborska's poetry. The critic Bogdana Carpenter maintains that the dearth of studies about her work is, paradoxically, due to "Szymborska's very simplicity and directness," which "present the greatest challenge to the critic." The analytic language of literary criticism, claims Carpenter, seems powerless and inadequate when dealing with Szymborska's deceptively transparent verse; it seems heavy-handed and clumsy in contrast to the poet's light and agile lines. Thus, there are only a handful of articles written in English about Szymborska's poetry, and those tend to be general, dealing with the major themes that reappear in her work and pointing out the clarity and purity of her language. There have been no studies devoted exclusively to any poem, including "Astonishment." In the few essays devoted to her work, that poem is only mentioned in passing. Edyta Bojanowska cites the poem as an example of how far Szymborska's nature "remains . . . an inscrutable mystery, in the face of which amazement and wonder are the only appropriate reactions." And Jonathan Aaron uses it to show how Szymborska has a tendency to shift the scale in which the events she observes are happening, moving from perspective to perspective. That critics have not devoted much time to detailed analyses to this or other poems by Szymborska is, however, not an indictment of her work or a commentary on its lack of relevance. As Szymborska has made clear in the few interviews she has given, including a *Los Angeles Times* interview in 1996, she does not like to offer details of her personal life or beliefs, and she does not like to talk about and analyze poetry. She prefers her readers to have a one-to-one relationship with her poems, and she thinks that poetry should speak for itself. That Szymborska has won the highest literary honor in the world without the help of critics to champion or "explain" it, that it is accessible and moving to readers without critical analysis, is perhaps an indication that her poetry does indeed speak for itself.

Criticism

Uma Kukathas

Kukathas is a freelance writer and editor. In this essay, Kukathas suggests that Szymborska's poem has a deeper political message than is immediately apparent.

One of the reasons the world was so surprised by the announcement in 1996 that Szymborska had won the Nobel Prize for literature was that her work is so apolitical. Not that all prize winners in the past have focused on political issues in their writing, but certainly in the latter part of the twentieth century, eastern European writers with international reputations have shown a particularly political bent in their work. The Polish writer before Szymborska to win the prize, and the person most responsible for the visibility of modern Polish poetry, for example, is the poet Czeslaw Milosz, who made his name in the West in the 1950s with his critique of totalitarianism, *The Captive Mind*. In that work, Milosz observes that:

> In Central and Eastern Europe the word 'poet' has a somewhat different meaning from what it has in the West. There a poet does not merely arrange words in beautiful order. Tradition demands that he be a 'bard,' that his songs linger on many lips, that he speak in his poems of subjects of interest to all the citizens.

But Szymborska's work, unlike that of her well known compatriots, Milosz, Zbigniew Herbert, Tadeusz Rózecicz, and Miron Bialowszewski, has defied this model. Or at least, this is the opinion of most readers of Szymborska's work. Bogdana Carpenter, for example, states that Szymborska is "not a political poet"; Felicity Rosslyn remarks that Szymborska "has not shouldered [the] political and historical burdens [of Milosz], and she has played no national role"; and Clare Cavanagh notes that the poet "makes no over pronouncements on the great themes that have preoccupied other Eastern European writers." Szymborska, too, has insisted that she does not have the nature of an activist, and that her writing is not political. However, even if Szymborska's work makes no overt political statements, it seems a mistake to think of it as completely apolitical. Certainly, Szymborska does not show in her poetry (save in her early social-realist verse) allegiances to any one ideology. But this is

not to say that absent from her work are "subjects of interest to all the citizens." In fact, if one looks at the ideas set forth in "Astonishment"—an apparently apolitical poem—in the context of the poet's life and career, it would indicate that the poet does present ideas that are, in an unusual but profound way, deeply political.

At first glance, "Astonishment" appears to be a poem solely about the nature of existence in a metaphysical, not a political, sense. In it, the poet asks a series of questions about the very nature of being and humans' place in the scheme of things. She is concerned with fundamental issues about her particular "self," why she occupies the body she does, why she exists in the world at this very moment, and why the universe saw fit, after so many aeons, that she should suddenly come to be. Significantly, she does not ask any questions about human morality or governance, or anything else one would normally associate with politics. However, it is equally significant that in the poem, the poet receives no answers to the questions she poses. The entire poem is made up of ten questions, but nowhere does the poet pause to consider how she might answer the questions she has raised. The questions follow quickly one upon another, probing more and more deeply into the mysteries of the universe. But why, it should be asked, does the poet not even consider how her questions might be responded to? One possibility, suggested by the poem, seems to be that there are no appropriate responses, at least in rational terms, to these questions. The only fitting response is not intellectual at all, but emotional; it is the reaction of "astonishment." To try to articulate answers to the questions about the world in all its mystery would simply not get us very far. They would be vain attempts to get to the bottom of something that simply is not within our capacity to answer.

Another possible answer is suggested by Szymborska in the poem and also reinforced in her other writings and in her career as a poet. Again, essentially the answer is that the questions are not responded to because in some important way there are no appropriate responses to them. In fact, providing definitive answers to the questions posed would take us further from, rather than closer to, the truth. This is because coming up with answers that are deemed to be the "correct" ones might make us complacent and not investigate even further to really understand what the nature of reality is. As Szymborska explains in her 1996 Nobel lecture, poets must live and work with a constant sense that they "don't know." She says that this feeling

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of "not knowing" is essential if one is to retain an insatiable curiosity about the world. And it is only this curiosity about the world that allows people to learn more about it. For if we think we "know," we cease to be inspired to ask more questions and investigate further. In her lecture, Szymborska also explains that there are certain people in the world who claim that they "know," and this is an extremely dangerous position to take. She says, "All sorts of torturers, dictators, fanatics, and demagogues struggling for power with a few loudly shouted slogans . . . know," and

> whatever 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 any 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, cases well known from ancient and modern history, it even poses a lethal threat to society.

Thus, it seems that one of Szymborska's reasons for insisting that there are no answers to life's deepest questions is because of the trap humans fall into when they think they have come upon the "truth" about something. The Communist Party in Poland and the Soviet Union, for example, thought they had the final solution to the question of how society should function. Very often, dissent from that established position was met with violence and

What Do I Read Next?

- *Poems New and Collected: 1957–1997* (1998) by Wislawa Szymborska is the definitive collection of Szymborska's poetry in English. It includes translations of 164 of her poems as well as her Nobel lecture of 1996.
- *The Book of Questions* by the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda and translated by William O'Daly (1991) is a collection of 316 brief poems in the form of unanswerable questions, integrating the wonder of a child with the experiences of an adult.
- *New and Collected Poems: 1931–2001* (2001) celebrates the exceptional career of the Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz, who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1980. Although Milosz's poetry is far more political than that of Szymborska, it is also known for its penetrating insight into fundamental human questions.
- *The Big Questions: A Short Introduction to Philosophy* (1997), by Robert Soloman, is an introductory text to philosophy that is comprehensive without being intimidating.

repression. Szymborska was no stranger to the pressures of the Communist government as it insisted that only certain ideas—the official "truth"—should be communicated. Her first collection of poetry was not published because it was deemed by the government to not be political enough nor to sufficiently echo the ideology of the Communist state. Szymborska revised her work and published two collections that reflected the supposedly correct ideological views of her government. She later retracted the views in those volumes and has since taken a more liberal position on political issues in her country. She has been a critic of the Communist state, and under martial law in the early 1980s, published poems under a pseudonym in Polish underground and exile publications. Szymborska insists that she has not replaced what she "knew" then with another form of ideology. Rather, as she says in her Nobel lecture, she thinks it is crucial that to avoid the damaging effects of uncritical ideology, one needs to take a stance in which one continues to question, probe, think, and ponder, and not to assume that one "knows."

"Astonishment" is essentially a philosophical poem and not a political one, but this is not to say that there is no political message that can be learned from it. When one looks at Szymborska's comments about politics and the damaging effects of assuming to "know" the truth, it seems that what the poet might be doing in the poem is showing that it is the asking of questions rather than the answering of them that is most important. Indeed, by not offering any answers at all, she seems to be suggesting that perhaps there are some questions in this world that simply cannot be answered definitively at all. For when one tries to provide final answers to such questions, one runs the risk of assuming that one "knows" the truth when one does not. Dictators and demagogues, as she says, routinely assume they "know" the truth and refuse to listen to different answers to the questions, which can be a lethal threat to society. When one looks at the world, the appropriate response is not to think that one can figure out its deepest mysteries and come up with a single way to understand what reality is or how humans should live. A more appropriate response to it should perhaps be one of astonishment. Thus the poem has a subtle political message because it warns against the dangers of assuming one "knows" too much, which the poet has learned first hand is dangerous for individuals and society.

Szymborska was not the first person who, by asking philosophical questions, made a radical political statement. The philosopher Socrates, who lived in Greece in the fifth century B.C.E., was known too for upsetting the status quo in his home of Athens by asking questions of people, many of them prominent Athenian citizens, who claimed to "know" the truth in matters of religion, politics, morality, and metaphysics. Socrates, like Szymborska, claimed that he was ignorant, that he did not know, but he felt that the people who proposed to know were no more wise than he, and in fact, their positions were often dangerous because they insisted that what was false was actually true. Socrates was eventually executed because in asking questions he made people recognize that the "received," or official, truth of his government was not necessarily correct. His radicalism was not in

presenting a competing ideology with the status quo but simply in asking questions, in showing that what was accepted as the truth might not be. Szymborska in "Astonishment" may be seen to be doing the same thing. In the poem, she does not make grand statements about the political situation of her country or offer political ideas. She does show that there are some things about which it is more important to ask questions than to present answers. And if, in asking those questions, one casts doubt on ideas that to everyone else seemed so certain, this is a good thing. For only by continuing to ask questions can humans make the best of themselves and avoid the dangers of single-minded political ideologies.

Source: Uma Kukathas, Critical Essay on "Astonishment," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Wendy Perkins

Perkins teaches American and British literature and film. In this essay, Perkins examines the questions the poem raises on the complex nature of existence.

In Robert Frost's poem "Design," the speaker describes a scene that occurs regularly in nature. A moth is attracted to a flower, and after landing on it, is quickly consumed by a spider that has been lying there in wait for its next meal. The speaker offers a contradictory response to this event, considering it to be a natural part of the cycle of life as it "begins the morning right," yet at the same time, finding something sinister in these "assorted characters of death and blight."

In the second stanza, the speaker questions how and why this incident occurred. He asks what brought the spider and the moth together at the same specific moment, and what this death scene suggests about the laws of the universe. At first, he asks whether a "design of darkness" steered the two to the flower, suggesting that a malevolent force shapes our experience. Then, however, he forces us to recognize that there may be no guiding force in nature, that design may not "govern in a thing so small."

Frost raises these compelling questions on the nature of the design of the universe, questions that are at the heart of much of twentieth-century literature, but refuses to provide conclusive answers. In "Astonishment," Wislawa Szymborska continues this existential line of questioning as the speaker in the poem considers the establishment of identity. As she presents a series of questions centering on why we are who we are, Szymborska expresses an epistemological uncertainty about our sense of self. Ultimately, she suggests, we can never know or understand with any certainty the nature of our existence.

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In her acceptance speech for the 1996 Nobel award for literature, Szymborska insists that all poets constantly struggle with the statement, "I don't know." She explains that all poems delineate 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, absolutely inadequate." This type of indeterminacy is at the heart of her poem "Astonishment."

The poem consists of a series of ten questions, asked by the speaker, about the nature of existence. The poem begins its philosophical reflection in the first line, which asks what determines whether one will be a human or a bird or a fish or a tree? Szymborska suggests that a certain sense of confinement results in the acknowledgement that we have been constructed as a specific self without being allowed any input into or knowledge of the process. She asks why we have been "sewn up" in skin rather than scales, and live in a house rather than a nest, and "topped off" with a face rather than a leaf.

The next series of questions relate to the specific time and place of one's existence. The speaker asks why each of us exists during a specific moment and why we exist on earth instead of on another planet or in another universe. Szymborska reinforces the lack of free will expressed in the early lines of the poem when she notes that we live on Earth, "pinned down by the star's pin." In line 7, the speaker tries to determine the self's relationship to time, noting the "dates" and "years of my not being here." In the next question, Szymborska speaks for all of us, focusing of the development of humanity and its differentiation from simpler

forms of life, like the coelenterates. How, she asks, did our cells come together under our celestial bodies to form us into a higher order of species?

In line ten, the speaker turns the line of questioning to a specific one centering on the act of creation. He or she "really" wants to know who or what situates us in a specific moment of time and place, "neither an inch nor half a globe too far, neither a minute nor aeons too early." Line thirteen tries to get at the essence of the self when the speaker asks, "what made me fill myself with me so squarely?"

The last three lines of the poem take a more somber turn. Szymborska's suggestions of a lack of control in the process of creation become a statement on the imprisonment of the self within a wall of uncertainty. By the end of the poem, the speaker admits to "staring now into the dark and muttering this unending monologue" to which no one will respond. The inability to find answers to these compelling questions on the nature of existence fills the speaker with frustration and anger, and the monologue becomes "just like the growling thing we call a dog."

In her Nobel speech, Szymborska expresses the thesis of the poem as she insists that "whatever we might think when terrified by its vastness and our own impotence, or embittered by its indifference to individual suffering, of people, animals" or "whatever we might think of its expanses pierced by the rays of stars surrounded by planets" the world is "astonishing." Though we have "reserved tickets" to this incomprehensible "measureless theater" that has a "laughably short" lifespan, "bounded as it is by two arbitrary dates," it continually amazes us.

That astonishment, however, conceals what Szymborska calls "a logical trap." She notes that ordinarily we experience this reaction when presented with "things that deviate from some well-known and universally acknowledged norm, from an obviousness we've grown accustomed to." But her poem reveals an incomprehensible world that cannot by compared to something that we can understand. Her questions are unsettling, focusing on the precarious nature of existence. Thus, frustration and anger result, and we growl like dogs.

The astonishment in the poem becomes a complex mixture of delight and frustration. Ruth Franklin, in her article on Szymborska for the *New Republic*, notes that in her "meditations on the human condition," the poet has "a special flair for the opening line." In them, Szymborska presents "straightforward propositions that veer off in an unsettling yet gently humorous direction." The first line in "Astonishment" announces that the author will travel on a characteristic route. It begins with the central question of the poem, what defines the self, and then travels in several directions in an attempt to come up with an answer. Throughout the poem, she maintains a playful tone, full of wit and intellectual rigor. She shows true pleasure in observing and identifying nature's phenomena, the dates and fates, and the cells, celestials, and coelenterates, including human beings. We are, she suggests, special in our individuality; yet when we cannot find the answers to essential questions that help us define that individuality, we gain a sense of being confined to a state of ignorance.

In an article for *World Literature Today*, Bogdana Carpenter comments that as she crafts her philosophical probings, Szymborska rarely offers definitive statements. "Reluctant to provide definitive answers, the poet prefers a margin of uncertainty." Carpenter suggests that Szymborska's reluctance does not result from "a lack of moral determination," but is instead "an expression of openness . . . an awareness that truth is complex and ambiguous, that reality is thick and consists of a myriad details, all of which need to be taken into account." This uncertainty is at the heart of "Astonishment," as it participates in the twentieth century dialogue on the complex nature of being. Like Frost's "Design," "Astonishment" leaves the readers with the opportunity to articulate their own individual responses to the compelling questions it raises.

Source: Wendy Perkins, Critical Essay on "Astonishment," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

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Milosz's book is the standard text of Polish literary history in English, covering the highlights of Polish writing from its beginnings to the 1980s.

Rosslyn, Felicity, "Miraculously Normal: Wislawa Szymborska," in *PN Review*, May/June 1994, pp. 14–18.

This article considers what issues of importance Szymborska might be exploring in her elegant, simple verse and finds that the poet can create beautiful poetry out of the most mundane subjects.

Blackberrying

Sylvia Plath

1971

According to Plath's husband, poet Ted Hughes, "Blackberrying" was written in 1960 after the couple's return to England and the birth of their daughter. It was not included in Plath's 1960 collection *Colossus*, however, but was first published in 1971, in the posthumous volume *Crossing the Water*. With its long narrative lines, "Blackberrying" takes the reader on a journey from an external experience to an internal one. Immersed in the details of her blackberry-picking expedition, the speaker leads readers to an understanding of certain fears and foreboding without ever having to spell it out. Plath uses language and imagery in a very controlled way, leading the reader to see that every word has a possible double meaning and every image may bring to mind something internal, some inner working of the speaker. Plath has often been categorized as being a "confessional" poet who deals with painful personal experiences in her poetry; however, it is not necessary to view the speaker of this poem as Plath herself, even though it uses the first person point of view.

Author Biography

Through her life and her poetry, Sylvia Plath has influenced the shape of American feminism as well as contemporary poetry. Critics and historians often describe her as a martyr who died young, a victim of her times as much as her brilliant yet troubled mind and her choice of men.

Sylvia Plath

Born October 27, 1932, in Boston, Massachusetts, to Otto Emil, a German professor and entomologist, and Aurelia Schober, a teacher, Sylvia Plath led a relatively privileged childhood. Her father, the subject of one of her best known poems, "Daddy," died when she was just eight years old. The next year, Plath published her first poem in the *Boston Traveller*. This early achievement was an indicator of future success, as Plath garnered a number of awards for writing in the next two decades. In 1953, she won first prize from *Mademoiselle* magazine for her short story, "Sunday at the Mintons." Later that year, she made her first attempt at suicide. In 1955, at Mount Holyoke College, Plath received the Irene Glascock Poetry Prize, and in 1957, *Poetry* magazine awarded her the Bess Hopkin Award.

An accomplished poet still not halfway through her twenties, Plath was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship to Cambridge University. It was here that she met Ted Hughes, a young British man carving out a reputation for himself as a poet of nature's violence. Plath married Hughes in 1956, and took her master's degree in literature from Cambridge the next year. Their marriage, recounted in biographies and in Plath's own letters and journals, was stormy and rife with jealousy and conflict. After a year teaching in the United States, Plath and Hughes returned to England to write full-time.

In 1960, she published her first collection, *The Colossus and Other Poems*, and in the next two years, bore Hughes two children, Frieda and Nicholas. After Hughes and Plath separated in 1962, the drive to self-destruction that had intermittently haunted her throughout her life intensified. On February 11, 1963, a month after her autobiographical novel of a nervous breakdown, *The Bell Jar*, was published, Plath stuffed the door and windows of her London apartment with towels, turned on the gas oven, and put her head inside.

In death, Plath's reputation grew. Biographies were published as well as volumes of her letters and journals. Posthumous collections include *Ariel* (1966), which contains many of her most anthologized poems; *Crossing the Water* (1971), which contains her poem, "Blackberrying"; and *Winter Trees* (1972). In 1982, Plath's *Collected Poems* received the Pulitzer Prize for poetry.

Poem Summary

Lines 1–9

In this opening stanza, Plath's speaker introduces readers to the scene and the task at hand—picking blackberries in a woods near the sea. In the first line she strongly establishes the isolation of the setting, emphasizing that "nobody" is in the lane and repeating the word "nothing." Through the use of personification, Plath depicts the berries with human characteristics, as though "peopling" the scene with blackberries. They are associated with the speaker's thumb, they are likened to eyes, and they "squander" their juices. By accumulating these details, Plath prepares the reader for an unusual but intriguing bond between the blackberries and the speaker: they have a "blood sisterhood" and the berries "love" her. In this stanza Plath also introduces the image of a hook, in the curves of the blackberry "alley" or lane. She also introduces the image of the sea, although as of yet it remains unseen (it is "somewhere at the end" of the lane). In the course of the poem Plath will develop these images as the speaker is "hooked," drawn forward down the curving path to the mysterious (because unseen) and somewhat threatening sea.

Lines 10–18

In this stanza Plath expands the setting to include the sky and other living creatures—birds and flies. Choughs are dark birds, related to crows. They are presented here as vaguely ominous, sug-

Media Adaptations

- Harper Audio has released an audiocassette of Plath reading her own poems: *Sylvia Plath Reads*.
- Poet's Audio Center sells an audiocassette of Plath reading fifteen poems, entitled *Sylvia Plath* (1962). They can be reached at P.O. Box 50145, Washington, DC 20091-0145.

gestive of death. They are described as being "in black" rather than simply "black," as though they are dressed in black clothing, as if in mourning. They are compared to "bits of burnt paper," like ashes blown from a fire; and they caw in "protest" at some unnamed offense. Their noise seems to break the stillness of the scene—theirs is the "only voice." Significantly, the black coloring of the birds recalls the blackness of the berries—and anticipates the blackness of the flies in line 15. In that line the speaker says of a bush of over-ripe blackberries that "it is a bush of flies," suggesting both that the bush is filled with berries that look like flies and that the bush is literally covered in flies. Associations with death occur here too, as the blackberries are depicted as rotting and covered in flies. Plath, then, has established links between the blackberries, the choughs, and the flies through their black coloring and suggestions of death. Looking back, lines 7 and 8, in which the berries "bleed" on the speaker and establish a "sisterhood" with her, includes the speaker in this network of associations. The suggestion of death is given a positive aspect, however, with the reference to heaven in line 17. For the flies, at least, the field of blackberry bushes is heaven. The "honey-feast" (and, perhaps the "milk-bottle" of line 9) is reminiscent of the labelling of paradise as "the land of milk and honey." Line 14, with its description of the "high, green meadows" that are "glowing as if lit from within," similarly evokes a beautiful, golden world. It is also worth noting that this world is a world of nature, away from people.

The sea is again mentioned in this stanza, but it remains mysterious and distant—so distant that the speaker doubts it will "appear at all." But the path again "hooks" the speaker, drawing her closer to the sea, away from the blackberries: "One more hook, and the berries and bushes end" (line 18).

Lines 19–27

This stanza establishes a series of contrasts between the fields of blackberry bushes and the seaside. Emerging from an idyllic world into a harsher reality, the speaker is buffeted by the wind blowing off the ocean. The wind "tunnels" at her, and "slaps" her face. The hills she is leaving behind are "sweet" (recalling the honey sweetness of the berries) and what lies ahead is salty (the sea). As if being herded (the "blackberry alley" has turned into a "sheep path"), she follows the trail between two hills. She's "hooked" again, and now she is standing on the northern face of the hills she has just left. Plath's choice of the word "face" to describe the side of the hill seems intended to connect it with the face of the speaker, which has just been slapped by the wind. The hills' northern face is orange rock—a rather startling contrast to the "green meadows" up on top of the hills. This suggests that the speaker too is changed, altered by the transition from hilltop to seaside. The rock face (and the speaker's face) looks out on "nothing, nothing but a great space." This repetition of the phrase "nothing, nothing" reminds the reader of its first occurrence in line 1, when it referred to the blackberry field. That first occurrence now seems ironic or paradoxical, because Plath has, through the careful use of detail in the course of the poem, made what was originally presented as empty seem very rich and full. This fullness is now contrasted with the desolate expanse of the sea. The "din" of the sea also contrasts with the comparative quiet on the hills, where the caw-ing of the choughs is "the only voice." The fact that the sound of the birds is described as a "voice" is also significant, for "voice" implies an articulate, sensible being (what the choughs "say" has meaning), whereas the sound of the sea is violent and inarticulate, the result of beating on senseless and unmanageable ("intractable") metal. It is perhaps particularly ironic that the inarticulate sea is associated with people—the "silversmiths" whose beating on metal creates a great noise. There are other subtle allusions in this stanza to the world of humans—the references to "laundry" (human clothing), "sheep" (domesticated animals), and "pewter" (a man-made metal)—perhaps suggesting that harshness and violence are associated with humans.

In contrast, the heavenly world of the blackberry field has "nobody" (line 1) in it. The poem thus traces an interior journey within the speaker as well as the exterior journey down the path. The speaker travels from a peaceful world of "sisterhood" with nature, a world that contains suggestions of death, but which are connected with thoughts of heaven. She moves to a hard, unsettling world of violence and noise, a world of people.

Themes

Sublime

Plath's description of the blackberries and of the sea evokes a simultaneous sense of awe and reverence best characterized in the idea of the "sublime." The idea of the sublime was hotly debated in the eighteenth century and later appeared in the work of romantic poets such as William Wordsworth, whose writing is marked by speakers aware of their own smallness in relation to the grandeur and might of nature. The final image of "Blackberrying" adds terror to the sense of awe, as the speaker describes

> a great space
> Of white and pewter lights, and a din like silversmiths
> Beating and beating at an intractable metal.

Consciousness

In packing her poem with images of life's abundance and death's inevitability, Plath points to the uniqueness and the "problem" of human existence: human beings are aware that they will die and there is nothing they can do to change that. Her numerous metaphors and similes for the fruit underscore her joy at life's abundance, and her personification of the berries shows her emotional attachment to the natural world. This personification occurs in the last two lines of the first stanza when, after the speaker's fingers are covered with juice, she says, "I had not asked for such a blood sisterhood; they must love me; / They accommodate themselves to my milk-bottle, flattening their sides." Her sense of death is embodied in the images of the "the choughs in black, cacophonous flocks," and "the hills' northern face . . . / That looks out on nothing."

Nature

Nature isn't always a pretty place where flowers bloom and cute animals frolic in the sun. It is governed by the cycle of life and death, and the fact that a part of nature must die for another part to live. "Blackberrying" de-romanticizes nature in the image of the "bush of berries so ripe it is a bush of flies, / Hanging their bluegreen bellies and their wing panes in a Chinese screen. " This image of nature cannibalizing itself brings to mind German

Topics for Further Study

- Describe an incident in your life when you became suddenly aware of your mortality. Did your behavior change as a result of this awareness? Report your findings to your class.
- Interview your classmates, asking them what about the natural world most inspires them and why. Sort the responses into categories and present them to your class, then hold a class discussion about the significance of the findings.
- Is knowing about the personal details of Sylvia Plath's life important for understanding this poem? Why or why not?
- With four class members, compose a visual representation of "Blackberrying." One stipulation is that you cannot be literal; that is, you cannot draw a picture of a woman picking blackberries. Aim to represent the emotions and ideas in the poem, rather than the action. When you are finished, present the composition to the class and have them discuss its meaning.
- Brainstorm a list of symbolic images for life and for death with your classmates, then compose a class poem using these images.
- Spend some time looking at a blackberry bramble in your neighborhood, then write a thorough description of it, using as many metaphors or similes as you see fit. Compare your description with other classmates. How is it different, the same? What do you pay attention to that others do not?
- Write a short one-act play dramatizing Plath's poem and perform it for your class. Feel free to include dialogue, speech, and action not included in the poem.

philosopher, Freidrich Nietzsche's words, "All that is ripe wants to die."

Journey

The speaker's journey through the lane of berries is analogous to the human journey through life. Sometimes people feel hemmed in on all sides by life's pressures, just as Plath's speaker feels surrounded by berries. The "hooks" in the poem, on one level part of the literal shape of the alley, can be read as events that change the direction of one's journey through life. Throughout the speaker's walk through the alley of berries, she encounters signs—flies feeding on a bush berries, the "cacophonous flocks" of crows—full of meaning that only she can understand but not necessarily communicate to others. This is similar to how many people experience incidents and events in their own lives, seeing signs in nature that are ominous yet impossible to decode.

Style

"Blackberrying" has no formal structure. It is a three-stanza poem, written in free verse. Each stanza has 9 lines of varying length, some quite long. These long lines give the poem a greater prose-like feel than some of Plath's other poems. The use of assonance and alliteration, or repetition of similar sounds, in this poem is subtler than in other poems by Plath, yet, it is unmistakably present in such passages as "Blackberries / Big as the ball of my thumb, and dumb as eyes / Ebon in the hedges. . . ."

Historical Context

1960s

Plath wrote "Blackberrying" in the autumn of 1961, while living in Devon, England. The year before, she had published her first volume of poetry, *The Colossus*, which was generally well received, but not as favorably as her husband's, Ted Hughes's, second volume of verse, *Lupecal*, also published in 1960. In poetry, the late 1950s and early 1960s saw poets such as Robert Lowell, Theodore Roethke, John Berryman, Anne Sexton, and others popularize what came to be known as confessional poetry. Writers of confessional poetry detail intimate facts about their experience, often addressing previously taboo subjects such as sexual practices, drug use, or the status of their mental health. In 1959, Lowell published *Life Studies*, inaugurating the boom in confessional verse. While living in Massachusetts in the mid-1950s and teaching at Smith College, Plath audited a poetry workshop led by Lowell. Sexton also attended this workshop, and she and Plath became friends. Confessional poetry was, in part, a response to the staid and formal verse of the 1950s. In her essay, "American Poetry in the 1960s," poet and critic Leslie Ullman writes of the confessional poets: "Most of these poets . . . shared a tragic inability to redeem the self, in their personal lives, from the courageous but overwhelmingly painful process of self-confrontation they enacted in their poetry." Many of these poets took their own lives, including Plath, Sexton, and Berryman.

1970s

"Blackberrying" wasn't published until 1971, when it was included in *Crossing the Water*. By this time, the mythology of Plath's life was firmly in place. She was brilliant and talented but faced many hardships due to the influence of two abusive men in her life, her father and her husband, and she continually struggled to free herself of them. Increased attention to Plath's life was partly a result of the increased politicization of feminism. In 1966, the National Organization for Women was formed, pledging "to bring women into the mainstream of American society." In 1970, the Labor Department issued affirmative action guidelines to contractors doing business with the government. These guidelines covered women and minorities. Women's demand for control of their reproductive processes resulted in the most liberal abortion law in the country in 1970 in New York, and just three years later, the Supreme Court issued its historic *Roe v. Wade* ruling, making it illegal for states to ban abortion during the first three months of pregnancy. Women made headway in conventionally male-dominated arenas as well. For example, following a ruling by the Justice Department of the State of Pennsylvania, they were licensed to box and wrestle in Pennsylvania. In 1971, Gloria Steinem launched the feminist *Ms.* magazine, whose editors shared tasks in a communal, cooperative fashion, as opposed to the more conventional and male-oriented way of delegating tasks through a hierarchy of power. Also, books such as Robin Morgan's *Sisterhood is Powerful* (1970) and Shulamith Firestone's *Dialectics of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (1970), increased interest in women's issues and helped lead

Compare & Contrast

- **1960s:** Confessional poetry is popularized as poets such as Sylvia Plath, Allen Ginsberg, Robert Lowell, and Anne Sexton write freely and openly about sex, drugs, and their various neuroses.

  Today: Confessional poetry is a staple of poetry workshops and literary magazines and journals. Its prose cousin, the literary memoir, is also extremely popular.

- **1960s:** The Women's Movement gathers steam as groups such as the National Organization for Women and the Women's Equity Action League are formed to pursue equal opportunity under the law for women.

  Today: The Women's Movement has continued, shifting slightly to become a human rights movement in general, and has spread across national boundaries. In 1995, the Fourth World Conference on Women was held in Beijing, China, and brought women's rights groups from numerous countries together to craft strategy and share resources.

- **1960s:** Approximately 4.5 people per 100,000 commit suicide annually in the United States.

  Today: Approximately 6.5 people per 100,000 commit suicide annually in the United States.

- **1960s:** After her suicide, Plath's husband, Ted Hughes, remains mostly silent about her life and their relationship.

  Today: In 1998, Hughes breaks his silence about Plath, publishing *Birthday Letters*, a collection of poems detailing his response to her writing and death. Hughes dies of cancer months after its publication.

to the development of women's studies classes in universities across the country.

Critical Overview

Much has been written about the relationship of Plath's personal life and her work. Although her poems at first glance seem to be about impersonal subjects, they often seem to contain a personal connection. Indeed, critics often find it difficult to interpret Plath's poems without drawing conclusions based upon her suicide and earlier breakdown. One of her most ardent supporters, A. Alvarez, however, cautioned against placing too much emphasis on the autobiographical aspects of Plath's poetry. While he praised her exploration of the themes of death and suicide, he added that he "was *not* in any sense meaning to imply that breakdown or suicide is a validation of what I now call Extremist poetry. No amount of personal horror will make a good poet out of a bad one." In the case of Plath, he noted: "The very source of her creative energy was, it turned out, her self-destructiveness. But it was, precisely, a source of *living* energy, of her imaginative, creative power."

"Blackberrying" did not appear in print until long after Plath's death. In a 1985 retrospective survey of Plath's poetry, Stanley Plumly wrote enthusiastically, "'Blackberrying,' it seems to me, brings together the best vocal and most effective visual impulses in Plath's poetry. It gives the speaker her role without sacrificing the poem's purchase on the actual impinging natural world. It enlarges rather than reduces. Its ceremony comes from one of the poet's most disguised sources, the small moment, the domestic life."

Criticism

Chris Semansky

Semansky is an instructor of English literature and composition whose essays, poems, and stories

The image of the feasting flies and martyred berries, fittingly, closes the speaker's own journey through the lane, which has also been a symbolic journey through a landscape of her own fears."

regularly appear in journals and magazines. In this essay, Semansky considers the idea of persona in Plath's poem.

"Blackberrying" has drawn readers' attention because they cannot help but imagine the person behind the poem, the one speaking the words, giving the experience shape. The speaker, however, is different than the author, in that the speaker herself is a construction, a mask if you will, for the author's words. However, for writers such as Plath, whose personal life has garnered as much, if not more, attention than her writing, it is often impossible for readers to separate author and persona. Combining author and persona, however, makes the poem *more* meaningful than if it were read in some cultural vacuum. "Blackberrying" has gained in popularity among Plath's poems precisely because it meets readers' expectations of the kind of person Plath was represented as being in all of the public discourse about her: fierce, brilliant, troubled, and haunted by death. Reading the poem, we see Plath moving among the blackberry bushes, feel her shifts in consciousness and attention as each image is pegged.

By delaying the entry of the "I" until the eighth line of the poem, Plath has readers focus on the landscape rather than the speaker. She draws us in by starting off with more general description of her environment and then narrowing her aim, as if she is snapping photographs first from a distance and then from close up. Readers learn that the sea is "somewhere" at the end of the blackberry lane, but don't know when they will arrive at it. This "carrot and stick" approach creates a sense of anticipation and of claustrophobia in readers, which they, in turn, assign to the speaker.

When the speaker's focus shifts to what is literally at hand, she compares the blackberries first to the ball of her thumb and then to eyes, emphasizing the physicality of her experience. The gap between the observer and the observed is closing. The full-fledged identification of the speaker with the thing she sees occurs after the berries "squander" their "blue-red" juices on her fingers. Squandering something is akin to wasting it, and using this word to denote the berries' power to stain suggests the speaker does not feel worthy of the berries' juice. Her sense of unworthiness, however, turns to gratitude in the very next line, when she says: "I had not asked for such a blood sisterhood; they must love me." This newfound communion with the berries is symbolic of the speaker's attitude towards nature in general. Critic Jon Rosenblatt, in *Sylvia Plath: Poet of Initiation*, puts it best, writing:

> The poet seems to identify with the vulnerable, animate form in the midst of a hostile nature. The berries thus become internalized objects: they symbolize the fate of human beings who are "eaten" by the universe, a metaphor Plath employs time and again in the late poetry. The speaker wishes to establish a very special relation with the berries and with the landscape: it is as if the natural scene had been transformed into a human body and she were commenting on that body's condition.

The speaker, having identified with the berries, now adopts a worried tone. She describes a flock of choughs (Old World crows) in ominous, almost apocalyptic terms, as, "Bits of burnt paper wheeling in a blown sky." Such imagery starkly contrasts with the lushness of the berries in the first stanza, and suggests that the speaker, landed, is potentially at risk, a victim in the making. She never states what the birds are "protesting" about, but the implication is that they are hungry.

Plath, a student of myth, steeps her poetry in such symbols. Historically, crows have been a harbinger of death, following Viking armies into battle expecting to feast on the dead. The Celts personified death in the female triplicity known as the Morrigan, or "the Queen of Shades." Consisting of three spirits, the Morrigan was often depicted as a large, black crow or raven, sweeping down to catch its prey. Plath's image carries these associations. It is after the crows' emergence that the speaker does "not think the sea will appear at all." Her increased anxiety leads her to read the environment as a land-

scape fraught with danger and signs of danger. For the first time, she sees the land outside the lane, describing it in preternatural (supernatural) terms: "The high, green meadows are glowing, as if lit from within." This luminosity, however, is a prelude to death, not life, as she next sees "one bush of berries so ripe it is a bush of flies." The speaker, now fully inhabiting the persona of victim, identifies with both berries and flies. The former, having fruited, are ready to die; the latter, doomed by nature to a short life, are quite possibly enjoying their last meal. By saying that the flies "believe in heaven," the speaker assigns them a human attribute. The image of the feasting flies and martyred berries, fittingly, closes the speaker's own journey through the lane, which has also been a symbolic journey through a landscape of her own fears.

The last stanza signals a tone of acceptance, as the speaker finally arrives at the sea, a symbol of life, chaos, and rebirth. Rather than observing and identifying with elements of nature, as she has done in the first two stanzas, the speaker now receives nature's force, as "a sudden wind funnels at . . . [her], / Slapping its phantom laundry in . . . [her] face." By comparing the wind hitting her to "phantom laundry," the speaker introduces a domestic image, and calls to mind readers' extra-literary knowledge of Plath's private life, which was riven by marital discord. This knowledge cannot but feed into their understanding of the speaker's persona. She is now pushed along the sheep path, prodded by unseen forces both inside and outside her, until she arrives at the "hills' northern face" that "looks out on nothing." This "nothing" suggests both death and the absence of meaning. Her literal journey through the blackberry lane, a figurative journey into herself and her place in nature, has come to an end. The last things she sees and hears are:

> a great space
> Of white and pewter lights, and a din like silversmiths
> Beating and beating at an intractable metal.

Rosenblatt notes that, "Unlike the blackberries, which Plath converted into 'sisters,' the sea resists all comforting anthropomorphic interpretation." However, the sound *is* a human one, and made by those who labor. Regardless that the metal is "intractable," the sound is one that suggests the possibility, if not the probability, of change, even if that change comes at death. At the poem's end, readers are left with the image of a speaker who creates nature in her own image but who cannot sustain that image throughout her entire journey. When she loses her ability to see herself in nature, she turns toward the human world. If readers see the speaker in the image of the silversmith, they see someone who continues to figuratively "bang her head" against nature, willing it to change.

"Blackberrying" wasn't published until 1971, when it appeared in her collection, *Crossing the Water*. This is a full eight years after Plath committed suicide and the stories of her life and tragic death had worked their way into public consciousness. It is these stories that readers bring with them to her poem, and which help to fashion their image of the speaker behind it.

Source: Chris Semansky, Critical Essay on "Blackberrying," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

What Do I Read Next?

- *Ariel Ascending* (1985), edited by Paul Alexander, collects essays about Sylvia Plath's writing, her life, and her reputation. This is a useful resource for those just beginning research on Plath.
- Plath's novel *The Bell Jar*, published a month before her suicide in 1963 and considered by many to be a fictionalized autobiography, tells the story of a woman's battle against depression and her emotional breakdown.
- Plath's posthumous collection of poems entitled *Crossing the Water* contains her poem "Blackberrying."
- Margaret Dickie Uroff's 1979 book entitled *Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* is the first full-length assessment of the relationship between Plath and Hughes.

Carl Mowery

Mowery holds a Ph.D. from Southern Illinois University and has written extensively for The Gale Group. In this essay, Mowery examines color and sea imagery in Plath's poem.

The most important aspect of a poet's creative effort is the manipulation of language to create

In 'Blackberrying,' Plath adopts a sparseness of expression that focuses the reader's attention sharply on the imagery she presents."

unique images. It is through the clever use of the words that the writer invites the reader to experience routine images in new ways. For Sylvia Plath, the value of imagery "is not its novelty but its accuracy," notes Alicia Ostriker. An image is anything in a poem that calls on the reader to respond using the senses. Images are the sensory content of a work and they may be literal or figurative. The words "red rose" call on the reader to "see" a rose; the rough texture of sandpaper asks the reader to "feel" the gritty surface of the paper; the aroma of a pot of baked beans evokes the "smell" of the beans. This, in the hands of good poets, is what makes poetry engaging.

Two prominent aspects of Plath's poetry are sea imagery and the colors used to intensify the imagery. Edward Lucie-Smith (writing in 1970) notes that her "obsession with the sea" runs throughout her major volumes of poetry, including *The Colossus* (1960), *Ariel* (1965), and *The Uncollected Poems* (1965). She "returns to it obsessively, again and again" and this becomes one of the most important images in all of her poetry, including the posthumous volume *Crossing the Water* (1971). Many critics report that the image of the sea is symbolic of a variety of objects or events, *i.e.*, death (drowning) or a life-giving and maternal medium. In Plath's poetry, "contrary to tradition, it is thought of as male," says Lucie-Smith. Here, the focus will be the literal imagery, not what the image represents.

E. D. Blodgett wrote that one purpose "of Plath's poetry is to use imagery . . . to make a savage appeal to the reader." Many of her poems that are filled with this kind of appeal include verbal and visual savagery. The poem "Full Fathom Five" (written in 1958) is an early example of Plath's use of threatening sea imagery. This poem, with the same title as a poem by Shakespeare from *The Tempest*, begins:

> Old man, you surface seldom.
> Then you come in with the tide's coming
> When seas wash cold, foam-
> Capped.

From these seemingly benign opening lines the sea is then transformed into:

> keeled ice-mountains
> Of the north, to be steered clear
> of, not fathomed.

In this poem, the poet takes the reader on a journey that leads away from a threatening sea. The reader is encouraged to avoid it rather than understand it.

Contrary imagery is found in other poems of Plath's that employ the sea as the chief image. In "Finisterre" (from September 1961), the opening image is "the sea exploding / With no bottom." But at the end of the poem, the image is transformed through the eyes of "Our Lady of the Shipwrecked" in this line: "She is in love with the beautiful formlessness of the sea." From an exploding image to the object of the Lady's love, Plath juxtaposes the threatening and beckoning nature of the sea. A brief reference to a comforting sea is found in "Morning Song" (February 1961) when a mother, listening for her child's cry, says "A far sea moves in my ear." In the motherly context of the poem, this is a positive sea image. These conflicts are part of the intrigue of the sea imagery in Plath's poetry.

The poem "Man in Black" (from 1959) begins with the "shove and suck of the gray sea," showing the sea as a hostile, threatening force. Later, "the wave unfists" against the headland in its relentless attack on the shore. Similarly in "Point Shirley" (1959) she writes:

> The gritted wave leaps
> The seawall and drops into a bier
> Of quahog chips,
> leaving a salty mash of ice.

In this poem, the sea not only attacks the seawall, it crosses it and attacks an area behind it.

"Suicide off Egg Rock" (1959) contains even more disturbing imagery with:

> —that landscape
> of imperfections his bowels were part of—
> Rippled and pulsed in the glassy updraught.

In these lines, the corpse of a suicide victim has washed up onto the shore. The final line of the poem closes with "The forgetful surf creaming on those ledges." These are examples of Plath's imagery of the sea as a relentless force, one that is unaware of the damage it does to the shore and the breakwaters that have been built to hold it back. It

is an impersonal force with a disregard for the people it encounters; even the suicide's body is "Abeached with the sea's garbage." In these three poems, the brutal nature of the images shows the sea as male.

"Blackberrying," written in September 1961, is what Douglas Dunn calls "a poem of menacing description" that uses "direct statements"—"Blackberries as big as the ball of my thumb"—to create "surprising" imagery in the poem. A striking combination of the critiques by Dunn and Blodgett comes at the end of "Blackberrying." After following the sheep path, the speaker and the reader are assaulted by the overpowering image of the vast and mysterious sea. This final impression from the poem combines the calls of the choughs (an Old World, crow-like black bird with a harsh, electronic-sounding call), the rush of the wind and the din of the sea itself into what Plath calls a "doom noise" in "Finisterre."

Plath draws the reader into the text through what Dunn has called her "improved sense of drama," especially in her volume *Crossing the Water* (1971). This is created by her use of the "direct statements" and a "freedom of movement" that avoids "the earlier clotted style" of poems from previous volumes. Compare the introduction of the hills in the following lines from "The Great Carbuncle" (1957) to a similar introduction in the last stanza of "Blackberrying":

> We came over the moor-top
> Through air streaming and green-lit,
> Stone farms foundering in it,
> Valleys of grass altering
> In a light neither of dawn
> Nor nightfall.

Note the more simply described hills in the last stanza of "Blackberrying" and the somewhat congested presentation in the earlier poem. (This comparison does not mean to imply that one poem is better than the other; it merely indicates the difference in style that Dunn points out.) In "Blackberrying," Plath adopts a sparseness of expression that focuses the reader's attention sharply on the imagery she presents. In this way, she adopts the motto of the Bauhaus architects that says "Less is More." (In architecture this was a movement away from a florid style to a more austere style.) This analysis applies especially to Plath's poetry from her later volumes.

Dunn also comments that the poems in *Crossing the Water*, including "Blackberrying," are filled with "unexpected imagery" of the kind now under discussion. A writer for the London *Times* has commented that the poems in this volume are compelling because they "map out a territory which is unique, harrowing, . . . and which breeds its own distinctive landscapes." The writer remarks that these poems create a world filled with "the shock of surprise" at the mutable nature of the images in them. In the present context, this means that the sea is both changeable (always in motion) and permanent (always present). Plath plays with these contradictions to increase the dramatic tension in "Blackberrying."

In "Blackberrying," the dramatic moment of meeting the sea is intensified by the hesitant way it has been introduced (by the poet) into the poem. At first it is at the end of the path, "heaving." Then the speaker, impatient at the length of time it takes to follow the path, says, "I do not think the sea will appear at all." Finally, the sea is confronted but it is "nothing but a great space." It is this combination of hesitation and anticipation that creates the reader's interest. But when the sea is met, it is not what is expected at the end of a walk spent picking blackberries. It is an empty hostile sea that Jon Rosenblatt calls a "powerful and gigantic nothingness." The hope of a comforting encounter is dashed just as the sea itself dashes repeatedly against the shore in the deafening din. The speaker and the reader are left on the shore facing the unrestrained savagery of this hostile sea.

Brita Lindberg-Seyersted claims that the speakers in many of Plath's poems are uneasy in the out-of-doors, exhibiting "feelings of estrangement and fear." In "Blackberrying," the impatient speaker seems to be in a hurry to get to the end of the journey without taking the time to enjoy the experience of the blackberry patch. Stanza three opens with "The only thing to come now is the sea." However, this seems a bit of wishful thinking because two hills and one more turn in the path remain in the walk to the sea.

Margaret Newlin says that it is "tempting to call Sylvia Plath a landscape poet." This comes from the fact that she often writes about outdoor locations near her home. Lindberg-Seyersted reports that when she lived in the United States, inspiration came from the New England coast. When she lived in England, scenes were often taken from Devon and London.

Plath's deliberate approach to poetry, especially the land and seascapes, gives her poetry crispness and clarity. Lindberg-Seyersted explains that "Plath's depictions of places and landscapes reveal her interest in pictorial art." It is readily seen

in her use of color and color combinations that contribute to the development of crisply drawn outdoor scenes. Many of her best poems are "landscape word-paintings," according to Phoebe Pettingill. An example of this "word-painting" is found in these lines from "Blackberrying":

> A last hook brings me
> To the hills' northern face, and the face is orange rock
> That looks out on nothing.

This passage could have been inspired by a painting hanging in a museum. The *Seascape at Saintes-Maries* by Vincent van Gogh and *The Stormy Sea* by Gustav Corbet are both excellent examples of paintings that embody the same intense quality described in these poems by Plath.

Some of her poems take their names from paintings. For example, "Snakecharmer" (written in 1957) and "Yadwigha, on a Red Couch, Among Lilies" (from 1958) are both inspired by paintings by Henri Rousseau. At the end of the latter, Plath writes:

> Rousseau confessed . . . that he put you on the couch
> To feed his eye with red: such red! under the moon,
> In the midst of all that green and those great lilies!

The colors in these excerpts function as intensifiers of the scene. The rock and the couch could exist in the poems without the stated color, but including unexpected or intense color descriptions adds to the drama of the passage. In "Blackberrying," the rock face is "orange," an unexpected color. In "Yadwigha," the couch is "such red" and it stands in direct contrast to the "great lilies" and "all that green." Just as a crafty painter would use unconventional colors or color contrasts, so too does Plath. Her use of green twice in "Blackberrying" pushes the reader to see this color in two different ways. The first is a green that is "lit from within" and the second describes the hills as "too green and sweet." Moreover, Plath's attention to the pictorial details of her poetry yields, what Newlin has called, a "salt-aired painterly scene." In "Blackberrying," facing the funneling wind at the moment the sea is first seen is a particularly poignant "salt-aired" image.

The "savage appeal" that Blodgett notes builds continuously toward the closing line: "Of white and pewter lights, a din like silversmiths / Beating and beating at an intractable metal." Here the poet captures one final powerful image—a noisy, determined, overpowering, yet mysterious sea. To do this, she combines two descriptive sensory attributes, color and sound, into one concluding image. The progression of color from pure unaltered white, through the unrefined gray pewter to shiny silver is paralleled in the sounds of the poem, a movement from the raucous cawing of the choughs through the rushing wind to the din of the roaring sea. As these are combined, they drag the speaker and the reader through ever-intensifying levels of sight and sound.

Margaret Uroff has commented that as a result of Plath's attempts to write about landscapes realistically, she created "deceptive and encroaching" landscapes. The images in the poems herein discussed make Blodgett's "savage appeal" to the reader an unrelenting challenge to the senses and imagination. While the images themselves may not be literally savage, they grasp the reader on a primordial level.

This essay has focused on Plath's crafty use of color as an intensifying agent in image building and on literal sea images that are at once beckoning and threatening. In "Blackberrying," the pewter-colored sea is the most powerful and enduring image.

Source: Carl Mowery, Critical Essay on "Blackberrying," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

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Arguing that criticism on Plath has been "tendentious and extra literary," Rosenblatt reads Plath's poems as enacting a private ritual process of death and rebirth.

Dream Variations

Langston Hughes

1924

"Dream Variations" combines two distinct motifs that were evident in Langston Hughes's poetry throughout his lifetime. It is written in a structure that copies the repetitions of American blues music, and it is aimed, as many of his works were, primarily at children. Published first in 1932, in the collection *The Dream Keeper and Other Poems*, "Dream Variations" imitates the overall structure of blues music: the first, second, and fourth lines of each stanza parallel each other in that they each have four syllables, while the third is extended, longer, building to an emotional climax. Hughes was a major figure in the Harlem Renaissance, an artistic movement of the 1920s and 1930s, which brought the New York African-American arts community into prominence. He used the blues structure because it was familiar to blacks who found no point of reference in standard literary modes. Using a blues style also helped Hughes swiftly and efficiently convey the mixed emotions of hope and fear that the poem brings together. Analyzing blues music in a book previous to *The Dream Keeper*, he observed, "The mood of the *Blues* is almost always despondency, but when they are sung, people laugh." This poem takes whatever the mental process is that makes people react to bleakness with laughter, and nudges it upward toward positive action.

Hughes was a writer committed to his people, American Negroes, who suffered under segregation and discriminatory laws. His concern for justice drove him to write in a number of literary genres, including poetry, short stories, novels, plays, and

essays. His poems for children stress the potential in life, encourage them to look for the good things that life has to offer, and to actively seek happiness. He was one of the few poets to state such simple ideas in the elementary language that his intended audience would understand, raising undereducated readers up to noble thoughts instead of talking down to them.

Author Biography

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

Langston Hughes

the 1960s he was known as the "Dean of Negro Writers." Hughes died of congestive heart failure in New York City, New York, on May 22, 1967.

Poem Summary

Lines 1–2

In line 1, Hughes uses the word "fast," not only because it means the same thing in this context as "close" or "tight" would, but also because the reader cannot help but think of hurrying, and this adds a sense of urgency to the poem at its very start. The question of how to hold a dream, which is not as obvious as it might first seem to the casual reader, is central to this piece. Throughout the poem, Hughes's language treats dreams as if they were physical objects.

Lines 3–4

In line 3 the poem metaphorically identifies life with a bird. Hughes is very specific about why this bird could not fly. In using "broken-winged" instead of "crippled," he implies that some violence has occurred to the bird, and therefore to the dreamless life. Birds are commonly associated with dreams and ideals in literature because their flight in the empty sky matches the idea of uninhibited freedom, like the mind's freedom.

Lines 5–6

The first two lines are nearly repeated in lines 5–6, resembling the repetition in blues music, which this poem is based upon. Traditionally, blues lyrics describe hardship and suffering, which this poem does also. The poem, though, twice mentions holding fast to dreams, emphasizing that hardship and suffering are not inevitable. Line 6 changes the word "die" to "go": not only does this start a new rhyme, but it also adds to the sense of how vulnerable dreams are, and how easy it is to lose them.

Lines 7–8

Since blues music is traditionally from the southern part of the United States, which is warm and was mostly farm land at the time Hughes was writing, the idea of the "barren field" is an expected metaphor. The description "frozen with snow," however, is pointedly strange and hostile. There is a common association between barrenness, sterility (in the sense of sustaining no life), and being frozen. The picture Hughes gives of life in these lines is bleak, but even worse than doomed: he says that life can be hopeless if you allow it to be.

Line 9

This line states explicitly that these images and actions constitute the speaker's dream. The exclamation mark demonstrates the speaker's certainty and elation about his dream.

Lines 10–11

These lines introduce the second stanza's repetition and variation of the first stanza. Line 11 is a metaphor that personifies the sun, giving it a human "face." Line 11 also rhymes "face" with the "place" in line 2, but changes the line's meaning. Now that the first stanza has established the speaker's association of the sun with whiteness, "in the face of the sun" takes on two meanings. Not only would the speaker like to fling his arms freely in daylight, but he wishes that gesture to signal joyous defiance to that face. What he defies is ambiguous; perhaps he defies all that the sun represents in this poem—whiteness, labor, exhaustion, or the passage of time that the sun's cycles mark. Lines 12 and 13 also support this notion of defying time.

Line 12

Again, this line repeats the words "whirl, dance, day" and "done" of lines 3 and 4, yet means something different. Whereas line 3 suggests how the speaker might dance to celebrate a sense of freedom, in line 12 the celebration seems frantic, ominous, and obligatory: "Dance!" is a command. The tone of the speaker's dance may have changed be-

cause the speaker has come to recognize that each passing day marks one less day to live.

Line 13

Line 13 changes the "white day" of line 4 to "quick day." The day's "quick" passage may explain the speaker's feeling of urgency, as if there is precious little time left in which to live. He may feel that daylight time is stolen from him by the sun as it withdraws each day. Since the effects of whiteness or white culture on this speaker are probably not "quick" (unfortunately), here the sun may shift from its previous symbolic associations with whiteness to a more conventional and literal association with time's passage.

Lines 14–15

Like line 13's transformation of the "white day" to a "quick day," line 14 transforms the "cool evening" into "pale evening." On a literal level, these variations describe day and evening in ordinary terms. But on a figurative level, "day" loses some of its associations with whiteness while "evening," by becoming "pale," acquires more whiteness. The ellipses (three dots indicating an unfinished thought) at the ends of lines 14 and 15 make the lines' meanings more ambiguous. Once the evening takes on an ambiguous complexion, is it "dark" like the speaker or white like the day? The speaker's relation to the tree is similarly uncertain. He no longer rests "beneath" it. The tree simply floats beside the image of evening. Which one "rests": the evening or the tall slim tree? If the tree is resting (and "slim" usually refers to people), the speaker may be imagining himself as the tree. As a tree, he would achieve his dream of flinging his arms, or branches, wide in the sun, and he would have found a peaceful, safe, and more permanent home on Earth. Simply by using the vague punctuation of ellipses, Hughes uproots the reader's sense of where the speaker is at and what is being compared. Although the reader can assume that the speaker does not actually become a tree, the speaker's vision of transformation suggests that he achieves a momentary feeling of peace and eternity, if only in his imagination.

Line 16

As either a tree or a man, night still seems to the speaker to be tender and familiarly black. The change from "dark like me" (line 8) to "black like me" in the final line suggests a shift like that of evening to night: from an in-between stage to a complete stage, where darkness predominates over light.

Media Adaptations

- *Voices and Visions: Langston Hughes, The Dream Keeper* (1999) is a video biography that illustrates the importance of Langston Hughes as a poet and as the voice of African Americans and a champion of black artists.
- In *Langston Hughes Reads His Poetry* (1995), Hughes reads from his works and shares his experiences growing up black in the early- to mid-twentieth century in an openly segregated and prejudiced society.
- The Academy of American Poets maintains a Hughes web page at http://www.poets.org (last accessed January, 2002) with links to other interesting sites.

Line 17

Here the speaker compares nature to himself ("like me"). Night closes the poem, forming the last image of passing time. Through this comparison and this concluding image, Hughes conveys a pride in Blackness. Hughes's poems consistently create images and arguments for black pride. In 1924, when this poem was written, the concept of black pride was radical and rarely expressed in print. Contemporary readers must consider the era and culture in which this or any poem was written in order to understand more fully the poem's impact on literary and American history.

Themes

The Spiritual Reunion with Africa

Although nowhere in "Dream Variations" does the speaker say where his dream takes place, it has been suggested by many critics that the "place of the sun" to which he refers is Africa. Langston Hughes wrote the poem in 1924, a time when the Back to Africa movement was gaining strength, when African art was being introduced to Europe

Topics for Further Study

- Research the different ways that dreams are used and understood in different cultures. For example, find out how dreaming is viewed in the Australian aboriginal tradition, in ancient African myths and legends, and in modern Western theories of psychoanalysis. What do these various approaches to understanding dreams have in common?
- Try to find examples in Western literature where "blackness" has been used to stand for negative, sinister, or depraved and evil qualities and where "whiteness" has been looked upon as implying purity, innocence, and goodness.
- Examine how the "American dream" has been depicted in American literature. Is there a difference between how the idea has been expressed by white writers and black writers?
- Explore how the black nationalism movement has evolved since the 1920s.

and America, and when many African Americans were searching for a place and values that were distinctly their own and not part of white American culture. Hughes had traveled to West Africa in 1923, and in many of his early poems, he uses Africa to represent an ideal, a place of warmth and freedom that is a foil to the cold, uncaring atmosphere of the United States where for blacks discrimination, racism, and often brutal treatment were a feature of everyday life.

In the first stanza of the poem, the speaker describes his dream. He is in a sunny place, his arms flung wide as he whirls and dances until the end of the day. At evening, he rests beneath a tall tree. The images of the sun, dancing, and a tall tree seem to suggest an exotic, tropical paradise free of worry and where the spirit can be liberated. The second stanza presents the same images in more intense form. In both stanzas, there is a sense that the place of the dream is beautiful and primitive. If the place is Africa, it is a land of joy and freedom, and there the speaker enjoys a sense of spiritual as well as physical liberation. The references to "dark" and "black" in positive terms also seem to indicate that this is a place where blackness is celebrated, not condemned. For many African Americans, Africa was viewed as a spiritual homeland, the place of their ancestry where they could finally be themselves. In "Dream Variations," this idea of Africa as a place of freedom, unspoiled charm, and celebration is suggested by the speaker's feeling of contentment from morning till night.

While Hughes's early poems show a degree of interest in Africa as the spiritual homeland of American blacks, he wrote in his autobiography, *The Big Sea*, that he rejected this idea in the 1930s. The poems that refer to Africa were written in response to a mood of the 1920s rather than from his own personal convictions. Hughes says that he

> did not feel the rhythms of the primitive surging through me, and so I could not live and write as though I did. I was only an American Negro—who loved the surface of Africa and the rhythms of Africa—but I was not African.

Still, in "Dream Variations" and other poems that celebrate the ideal of an African homeland, Hughes captured an important sentiment expressed by American blacks who were searching for a spiritual home where they would be accepted and treated as equals and not judged by the color of their skin.

The Dream Motif

The dream motif is one that pervades much of Hughes's writing, and the idea of the dream is used in several ways in "Dream Variations." In one of his most famous poems, "Harlem" (1951), the author asks, "What happens to a dream deferred?" The dream of political freedom and economic well being for African Americans, he suggests, is one aspect of the "American dream," but it cannot be fulfilled because of the racism that pervades American society. In Hughes's social poetry he depicts black life and shows how African Americans' attempts to fulfill their dreams have been thwarted. The other type of dream that Hughes often refers to in his poems is the romantic dream-fantasy, where the speaker dreams of ideal love, adventure, or spiritual release. This latter type of dream is more personal than social, as the poet yearns for a state of being or mind that may not be achievable through political means but through some mental awakening or in one's fantasy. In "Dream Variations," the speaker seems to merge these two ideas of the dream. The speaker describes a dream that he is having where

he is in a faraway place and things are good. It is an intensely personal, romantic dream. There are no overt references to political or social events or situations, as the speaker tells of his own dream where his soul is set free. The speaker's dream, it has been suggested, might be of Africa, a place where he can finally feel joyful and at home. However, it should be asked why the speaker is dreaming of the kind of liberation he describes. Most likely this is because his life as it is is not free. In the dream, the speaker can dance and whirl with abandon, which seems to indicate that in reality this is simply not a possibility. That is, because of the racism that is such a part of American society, he cannot be a part of the "American dream" and must hope instead for a freedom of a different kind and in a different place. Thus in his intensely personal dream-fantasy, the speaker longs for spiritual freedom because for him, as an African American, his dream of freedom is by necessity "deferred" because of the effects of racism.

It has also been suggested by one critic that because the poem has nine lines in the first stanza and only eight in the second stanza, this implies the dwindling of the dream. The speaker, it is claimed, longs for his dream and sees the externalization of it in his love for nature, the place, and the sun. But the dream exists only in the lyric moment of timelessness, and in the dynamic world of social change (seen in the second stanza), the dream decays. Another interpretation of the poem takes a quite different approach. It claims that in the first stanza, the speaker describes the dream in mental, rational, conscious terms and in the second he is actually *in* a dream state, experiencing the dream. The first stanza is descriptive, uses infinitives ("To dance," "to whirl"), and is syntactically organized. The second stanza, on the other hand, is fragmented, elliptical, and intensified, as are dreams. The poem, according to the second interpretation, can thus be seen as an exploration of different types of mental experiences, showing a movement from a rational, ego-dominated state to an irrational, innocent dreamlike state. These two states are described in the poem to show that black Africans are encumbered with two identities, a "double-consciousness," as well as to show that this dualism can be unified.

The Celebration of Blackness

"Dream Variations" is a subtle celebration of blackness as it presents darkness and night in positive terms. Again, the ideas in the poem are not stated overtly but merely suggested. The speaker is in a dreamy place of love and relaxation and he is identified with the "gentle" and "tender" night. The references to "white" and "pale" are not at all derogatory, implying that feelings of prejudice because of color are unnatural and unfounded. In the speaker's dream, white, paleness, darkness, and night are all part of the beautiful landscape. But the speaker himself identifies with night and darkness. In the place of his dream, night comes gently and tenderly; it is not to be feared but welcomed. The speaker praises night, the time of dreams, and with it, he also celebrates himself and his race.

Style

By conventional poetic standards, the structure of "Dream Variations" is simple: there are two rhyming lines (die/fly, go/snow); the first, second and fourth line of each stanza each have four syllables; there is no consistent rhythmic structure (no meter); and 26 of the 32 words are just one syllable. But, this poem does not intend to follow any poetic structure: Hughes has given it the structure of the blues, a musical form from the American South with its rhythmic roots in Africa. Blues songs deal with loss and defeat in such a way that hardship can be contained, even conquered, in the minds of the people who have suffered. It is the strict structure of the blues that helps the mind take control of the misery stated in the words. In standard blues, there is one long line, with a pause in the middle, repeated and then followed by a long unbroken third line, followed by a fourth line that resolves the problem, sometimes happily but usually stoically, accepting a bad situation. In each stanza of "Dreams," Hughes uses the long first line with the pause in the middle (represented by the line break after "dreams" in lines 1 and 5), but he does not repeat this line. There is a climax in the third line of each stanza that draws attention to itself by giving the reader the poem's vivid imagery ("broken-winged bird" and "barren field"); and a final line that could, by itself, leave the reader with a bleak view of the world if the poem did not twice offer the solution to that bleakness: "Hold fast to dreams."

Historical Context

Black Nationalism and the Back-to-Africa Movement in the 1920s

The end of World War I in 1918 proved to be a mixed blessing for black Americans. When the

Compare & Contrast

- **1920s:** Marcus Garvey, the charismatic and controversial leader of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, gains popularity with his call for education, solidarity, and black pride to help lift African Americans out of the cycle of poverty and despair that is a result of racism.

  Today: Minister Louis Farrakhan, the charismatic and controversial leader of the Nation of Islam, preaches a message of black pride and solidarity to help African Americans forge their own identity separate from white American culture.

- **1920s:** Racial tensions result in violence in a number of U.S. cities, including Chicago, Houston, and Philadelphia.

  Today: Racial tensions in many U.S. cities are high after the 2001 racial riots in Cincinnati following the police shooting of a young black man.

- **1920s:** African Americans work at the lowest paying jobs available, usually as janitors, dishwashers, garbage collectors, and domestics, because they lack education for better jobs. Further, many unions work actively to exclude them from their trades and organizations.

  Today: More than one-third of all black families lives in poverty, while 10 percent of white families can be officially classified as poor. The percentage of black high school graduates going on to college is nearly the same as that of white high school graduates, but a far smaller proportion of blacks than whites complete high school.

400,000 blacks who had served during the war returned home, many were dismayed to find that their service to the United States did not mean that they would finally achieve the respect and dignity necessary to participate fully in the American dream. To make matters worse, thousands of blacks who had moved from the South to work in northern factories during the labor shortages of the war years were thrown out of their jobs to make room for returning white soldiers. As racial resentment grew between the two groups, violence spread throughout the country. In the South, lynchings increased alarmingly, and in 1919, over seventy blacks were murdered by white racists who feared black advancement as an assault on southern culture. Conditions were hardly better in the North, and in July 1919, tensions came to boil in Chicago after a black youth swimming in Lake Michigan drowned after being stoned by whites who feared he was swimming too close to their exclusive beach. Chicago erupted in rioting that continued for over a week and subsided only after the deaths of 38 people. In other northern cities, similar violence erupted, leaving 120 Americans dead, the majority of whom were black.

The greatest black populist response to this racial tension and violence was organized by Marcus Garvey, a Jamaican immigrant who made New York's Harlem the international headquarters for his Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Before Garvey arrived in New York in 1916, he had become convinced from his experiences in Central and South America, the Caribbean, and Europe that blacks were at the bottom of the social ladder throughout the world, that they suffered the greatest indignities, and that they usually performed the most backbreaking and menial labor. Inspired by the writings and work of Booker T. Washington, Garvey sailed to New York in 1916 intent on raising money to build a black university in Jamaica, which—like its model, the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama—would become a haven where blacks could gain the educational tools necessary for equality with whites.

As Garvey traveled throughout the United States, he quickly rose to prominence for his great skills as a public speaker and for his poignant message that blacks should not be ashamed for being black, but instead should be proud to be descendants of Africans. African civilizations, Garvey

told his appreciative audiences, had reached astounding heights when European civilizations were little more than savage tribes of hunters and warriors. God, Jesus, and the Virgin Mary, Garvey insisted, were black, and Negroes who worshiped a white God were doomed to perpetuate Negro inferiority. Preaching this message of black pride in speeches and through his newspaper, *Negro World*, Garvey's UNIA rapidly expanded its membership. By the time of the Chicago riots, the UNIA boasted two million members and included thirty-eight chapter organizations around the world, its leader affectionately dubbed "the Black Moses" for his work to uplift his people from oppression.

In August 1920, Garvey organized the First International Convention of the Negro People of the World in Harlem. For an entire month, black delegates from around the globe met, delivered speeches, and called for universal black solidarity to resist racial inequalities in the United States and worldwide. These delegates drafted the *Declaration of Rights of the Negro Peoples of the World*, which listed many of the injustices inflicted on blacks around the world and solutions for those problems. Before the conclusion of the convention, Garvey made explicit his own dream that one day Africa would be liberated from its white colonial masters and would once again be ruled by black leaders. This new Africa, Garvey believed, was the natural and rightful home of all the world's blacks, and they would return to their ancestral homes where they could determine their own fates unmolested by white racism and domination.

Garvey's call to make Africa a black Zion became known as the Back to Africa movement. Although few American blacks ever immigrated to Africa, Garvey sent several delegations to Liberia in 1922 and 1924 to discuss the possibility of creating settlements for the thousands of blacks Garvey anticipated would rush to create a new Africa. Liberia eventually rejected the idea of these settlements, but Garvey and his organization continued to advocate for Africans to establish their own homeland. While Hughes did not ever consider returning to Africa, "Dream Variations," written at the height of the black nationalism movement, shows the influence of the notion of Africa as the true homeland for American blacks.

By the mid 1920s, Garvey's movement was unraveling nearly as quickly as it had gained prominence. Garvey's own uncompromising personality made him many enemies, and the head of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover, believed Garvey's message was dangerous and fostered racial violence. In 1923, Garvey was convicted of fraud for promoting sales of stock in his Black Star Line, a shipping company he had started four years earlier to create a black-owned industry and that would eventually assist in the back-to-Africa migration. After a year and a half of appeals, Garvey began serving his sentence in 1925. For the next two years, angry blacks led rallies, some attracting over 100,000 protesters, demanding that the government release Garvey. In 1927, President Coolidge had Garvey set free, but immigration officials immediately declared him a dangerous criminal and ordered his extradition to Jamaica. Far from the international limelight, Garvey's fame and influence faded, as did his Back to Africa movement.

Critical Overview

Hughes was a true Renaissance man, a term meaning that he was expert in many different fields, but he received his best critical response for his poetry and fiction. Sometimes, though, critics would not recognize that Hughes was writing for an undereducated audience and would accuse the writer himself of being remedial and marginally talented. Harry Allan Potamkin, for example, recognized what Hughes was trying to do—use the American folk music tradition in poetry—but he did not think it was a feat that took much skill. "Whatever value as poetry the Negro spirituals or blues may have," Potamkin wrote in the *Nation*, "duplicate spirituals or blues have only duplicate values. In the conformation of the inherent qualities of these indigenous songs to an original personal intelligence or intuition lies the poetic performance. And Mr. Hughes has not made the material so perform." In short, Potamkin believed the blues could be made into good poetry if an author put his original ideas into his work, but he did not think that Hughes added enough of himself. Famed novelist James Baldwin, reviewing *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes* in the *New York Times Book Review* in 1959, categorized the works as "poems which almost succeed but do not succeed, poems which take refuge, finally, in a fake simplicity in order to avoid the very difficult simplicity of experience."

The majority of critics, though, appreciate and approve of Hughes's attempt to bring traditional Negro art forms to literature. In the words of Theodore R. Hudson, reviewing Hughes's last book of poetry in the *CLA Journal*, "His message is both

valid and valuable. Hughes depicts with fidelity the Negro's situation and the Negro's reaction to this situation. Hughes has the discerning and accurate eye so necessary for the poet, and his poet's eye and hand are synchronized." Most critics today would agree with Hudson's judgment.

Criticism

Uma Kukathas

Kukathas is a freelance writer and editor. In this essay, Kukathas maintains that because of the nature of the poem as a dream, an understanding by the reader of Hughes's background, political beliefs, and influences aids in interpretation and discovering new levels of meaning in Hughes's poem.

Upon first reading, Hughes's poem appears to be merely the recounting of a simple dream by an unnamed speaker. The action and images of the poem are so spare, at first sight seeming to reveal only that the speaker is having a dream about dancing in a "place in the sun" and then resting underneath a tree until night descends. But of course, the poem is about much more. Indeed it is striking that in seventeen uncomplicated lines Hughes is able to suggest such a wealth of ideas, touching as he does on subjects like the social reality of the 1920s, Black Americans' spiritual connection with Africa, and racial prejudice. Part of the reason he is able to call up so much in so short a space is that the subject of the poem is a dream. As with all dreams, to understand fully the significance of what is represented requires a significant amount of interpretation, imagination, and background knowledge. As anyone who has helped a person close to them decipher the meaning of a dream knows, close scrutiny of the dream's images coupled with an intimate knowledge of the dreamer can yield impressions or truths that are not at all obvious at the outset. Thus "Dream Variations," more than most poems, benefits not only from a careful probing into the action and imagery in the poem itself but also an examination of the poet/dreamer and his beliefs, social background, and main concerns. A fuller understanding of the poem comes when the reader can understand the layers of meaning that are contained within the simple descriptions presented, and these layers of meaning may be uncovered by gaining a deeper understanding of the poet and his interests and influences.

"Dream Variations" is one of Hughes's early poems, written in 1924 when he was only twenty-two. Although he had not yet established his reputation as a poet, during this time, Hughes was gaining some renown as an important new voice in African-American circles. Also, despite his young age, the poet had already lived a full life. His parents separated when he was young, and he lived with his grandmother and then his mother in Kansas and Illinois, where he felt the full effects of the racism against African Americans that was a feature of life in the United States. By 1921, Hughes had also visited his estranged father several times in Mexico, taught school there, traveled to Europe and Africa, moved to New York City, and attended Columbia University. After leaving Columbia in 1921, he began to publish in *Crisis*, the historic magazine of the N. A. A. C. P. founded by the poet W. E. B. DuBois.

In his autobiography, *The Big Sea*, Hughes discusses his early years, noting his loneliness growing up; his love of books and ideas that provided an escape; the racism he encountered in school, where he and other Black children were routinely placed separately from the other pupils; being called names and hurt physically by White youngsters; being denied entrance to the movie theater because of his color; and his friendships with White students at school. He mentions that his closest friend in school was a Polish boy who also had to put up with racial remarks from his own teacher and classmates. Growing up in poverty and a constant sense of insecurity, Hughes says in his autobiography, he "believed in books more than in people," and sought his escape from reality by reading. He also talks about his travels to Europe and Africa in 1923. His six-month voyage along the West Coast from Dakar to Luanda he describes as transforming. He says

> when I saw the dust-green hills in the sunlight, something took hold of me inside. My Africa, Motherland of the Negro peoples! And me a Negro! Africa! . . . it was . . . the Africa I had dreamed about—wild and lovely, the people dark and beautiful, the palm trees tall, the sun bright.

In Europe, Hughes traveled, worked as a dishwasher, and met the distinguished African-American scholar Alain Locke, who invited him to submit his poems for publication in a special issue of *Survey Graphic*. Returning to New York, Hughes met a number of distinguished literary figures, won awards for his work, but had to continue working at menial jobs in hotels and restaurants in order to be able to live.

All of Hughes's early experiences contributed profoundly to his poetry, and this is especially ap-

parent in "Dream Variations," which calls up a number of the poet's early experiences in compressed form. As Hughes himself notes in *The Big Sea*, he was from a young age a dreamer, someone who sought to escape his present reality by being transported to other worlds through books. The present reality that was particularly disturbing to him was the racism that held his family in poverty. In the first stanza of "Dream Variations," the speaker describes his dream and in doing so expresses that he wants to escape his present reality by being in a far-away place. He says, "To fling my arms wide," to dance, to rest at nightfall—"that is my dream." He is not only describing the dream he has, but explains that these things happening in the dream are what he wishes for. The sun conjures up an image of warmth and well-being as well as of life. The image of arms flung wide and dancing signifies a sense of freedom, happiness, and abandon. The tree seems to symbolize a sense of rootedness. When he announces "That is my dream," the speaker makes clear that the things in his dream are what he longs for and also shows he is aware that his present reality is much different from the preferred state of things.

The poet, then, dreams of the things he did not and does not have as a child and young man growing up in the United States. He wants to be transported to a different place, where there is a sense of warmth and well-being that he did not experience as a Black American, where he feels rooted and secure, and where he can enjoy the freedom that is denied to him in his present situation. As he describes his dream, longing for a different type of life—one of happiness and freedom—Hughes calls up the social reality of the time and place he was growing up and shows its severe limitations. It is a place where he and his family struggled but could not enjoy the fruits of their labor because of the discrimination faced by every African American.

At the same time, Hughes suggests that there is a very real place where he *can* enjoy the things in his dream. The images he uses in the poem are strikingly similar to those he uses as he describes his initial impressions of Africa in *The Big Sea*. In "Dream Variations" the speaker dreams of dancing wildly in "a place in the sun" and of resting in the evening beneath a "tall tree," which in the second stanza becomes a "tall, slim tree." In his autobiography, Hughes finds Africa "wild and lovely" and comments on the brightness of the sun and the tall palm trees. He also thinks of Africa as the homeland of all people of African descent, admires the "dark and beautiful" people, and is struck by the fact that he is African like them. In "Dream Variations" the poet admires the night and is struck by the fact that he is dark and black like the night. By using certain key images, Hughes suggests in the poem a spiritual connection with Africa, the true homeland to him and other Black Americans because blackness there is celebrated and not condemned, and because in Africa happiness and freedom can be found.

> *"[I]t is striking that in seventeen uncomplicated lines Hughes is able to suggest such a wealth of ideas, touching . . . on subjects like the social reality of the 1920s, Black Americans' spiritual connection with Africa, and racial prejudice."*

But despite the fact that the poem celebrates and admires darkness and night, it shows light and dark, pale and black complementing each other and playing important roles in the speaker's dream. The speaker is dancing in the sun, during the "white day." He then rests at evening until dark night falls gently. In the second stanza, the speaker says he rests at "pale evening" before night comes tenderly. In both the stanzas, there is balance of white and black, dark and light. The white day, warmed by the sun, is a time for dancing. The pale evening is a time for rest. And black night falls to gently end the day. The speaker certainly identifies with darkness, blackness, and the night, but the poem makes clear that light and dark are important elements in his dream of well being. This sentiment, it could be argued, expresses Hughes's understanding and insistence of the humanity of both Whites and Blacks. At an early age Hughes made friends with and understood the experiences of both White and Black Americans. He was profoundly aware of his own heritage of color and much of his life's work was devoted to giving voice to particularly Black concerns, but he was cognizant of the dangers of all kinds of racism, whether directed at Blacks or

- The great American civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr.'s most famous speech, "I Have a Dream," (1963) looks forward to a time when all races can participate fully in the "American dream."
- In his poem "Harlem" (1951), Hughes asks his famous question: "What happens to a dream deferred?" referring to the fact that African Americans' hopes for political and economic freedom were not able to be realized because of racist attitudes.
- *The Harlem Renaissance: Hub of African-American Culture, 1920–1930* (1996), by Steven Watson, traces the influential African-American cultural movement, of which Hughes was a key figure, that changed the way black intellectuals and artists thought about themselves.
- *Children of the Dream: Our Own Stories of Growing Up Black in America* (2000), edited by Laurel Holliday, presents the stories of thirty-eight African Americans who explain what it is like to grow up black amidst racial prejudice.
- *Race Matters* (1995), by Cornel West, is a collection of highly readable essays that explore the problem of race in America.

Whites. "Dream Variations," then, seems to indicate this mindfulness of the essential humanity of people of all backgrounds, Black and White, as the poet identifies strongly with darkness and blackness but shows both light and dark as important aspects of the speaker's dream.

Hughes's simple work, when examined closely in the context of the poet's life and influences, has levels of meaning that make reading it a rich and rewarding experience. The use of the dream as a subject is particularly appropriate subject for a poem, as both dreams and poems invite interpretation through the use of imagination and knowledge. No doubt more detailed investigation of Hughes's personality, interests, and life combined with creative interpretation of the poem's ideas and symbols will yield further insights into this seemingly straightforward but interestingly complex poem.

Source: Uma Kukathas, Critical Essay on "Dream Variations," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Ryan D. Poquette

Poquette has a bachelor's degree in English and specializes in writing about various forms of literature. In the following essay, Poquette explores Hughes's use of imagery and pattern in his poem.

Langston Hughes became popular during a period in the 1920s commonly known as the Harlem Renaissance, a time when a number of black writers emerged in society. Unlike many of his peers, who focused on poems about middle and upper class blacks, Hughes strived to be the voice of the common African-American people. In one of his first poems, "Dream Variations," Hughes imagines two African scenes of natural tranquility, which are a stark contrast to the oppressive, lower-class life most African Americans faced during this time period in "white" America. Through the poem's imagery and pattern, Hughes emphasizes this contrast, leaving the reader with a sense that the inequalities that blacks face in white society are unnatural.

"Dream Variations" is a poem set in Africa, a place with which many African Americans have tried to identify, especially during the Harlem Renaissance. "Many of Hughes's best early poems explored the nature of, and the beauty in, the African element of African American identity," says David Roessel in *American Writers: Retrospective Supplement*.

Although "Dream Variations" depicts African scenes, it is also infused with overt black and white references that invoke the racial discrimination of 1920s America, and paint it as unnatural. This main polarity (or opposite)—black Africa as natural vs. white America as unnatural—is emphasized throughout the poem through the use of several differences in imagery and pattern.

The poem is divided into two stanzas, which feature extremely similar wording. It is the subtle differences in these words that give the poem its strong imagery. The most noticeable difference in image is the change from the first stanza to the second. In the first stanza, the persona—the voice that speaks to the reader in the poem—rests "beneath a tall tree," while in the second stanza, through the use of a metaphor, the persona becomes the tree.

A close comparison of the two stanzas in the poem reveals that the tree, which represents nature,

is the ideal to which the human persona in the first stanza strives. The first stanza begins as follows:

> To fling my arms wide
> In some place of the sun,
> To whirl and to dance
> Till the white day is done.

With the exception of the first line, which is identical in both stanzas, the poet changes certain words in this four-line sentence from the first stanza to the second. In the second stanza, the first line changes from "In some place of the sun" to "In the face of the sun." As a product of nature, the tree is more in touch with other aspects of nature, like the life-giving sun. Because of this, a tree is always "in the face" of the sun, while a human can only ever be in "some place" of the sun.

In the third line of the second stanza, "To whirl and to dance" from the first stanza gets upgraded to a much more emphatic "Dance! Whirl! Whirl!" When the persona is a tree, the dancing and whirling is more vibrant. This is a curious idea, because in the physical world, a human has more capability for movement than a tree. By giving the tree the greater freedom of movement within the context of the poem, Hughes demonstrates the fact that a tree with physical roots has more freedom than a black man in a white man's society, which is supposed to be free.

One of the most striking differences comes in the change from "the white day" in the fourth line of the first stanza to "the quick day" in the corresponding line of the second stanza. Since days are not usually described as "white," the word takes on a special connotation, or emotional meaning, within the poem. The days in the first stanza are "white," because the black persona is in a white man's world, and so is forced to view the world as white. But a tree, like other forms of nature, does not view the world in terms of black and white. Instead, the tree views the day by the passage of time. For a tree, one day in its long life would, in fact, be viewed as "quick."

The imagery in the second half of each of the stanzas serves to further the idea of Africa as pure and natural. In both stanzas, night is viewed as a gentle or tender force, which is "dark like me" and "black like me," respectively. The persona, both as a man and a tree, identifies with the color and comfort of the dark night, which symbolizes the protective quality of Africa. This is opposed to Hughes's white world, where all things "black" or "dark" are looked upon with mistrust or seen as inferior.

In Hughes's America, African Americans were denied the American dream of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and many leaned toward their native Africa to find hope and the fulfillment of their dreams."

These examples serve to illustrate the differences between the artificiality of humanity—especially as it existed in a racially oppressed America—and the purity of nature, as embodied by the ideal African homeland.

In other poems, Hughes lashed out at white America, using angry language to express his views toward racial discrimination. But with this poem, and certain others, he took a different approach to express his views. "Prejudice does not always stir Hughes to resentful poetic tones," says James A. Emanuel in his entry for Twayne's United States Authors Series Online. "He sometimes turns toward nature, toward innocent forms of life, to suggest that racial discrimination is a hybrid creature of man-made, aberrant principles."

Hughes's dream is to live in a world that embraces the simplicity of nature, as in the Africa of his heritage. This simplicity is also emphasized by the pattern of the poem. Nearly all of the words in "Dream Variations" are one-syllable words. The words are chosen for their ability to sum up a concept simply, so that the reader is left with a concrete image, without having to struggle with the difficult or unfamiliar words that some poets employ.

This simplicity is extended from the words themselves to the lines of the poem. The first eight lines of each stanza share the same end rhyme scheme, in most cases repeating the same end word from each line in the first stanza to its corresponding line in the second stanza. It is only the ninth and last line of the first stanza, "That is my dream!" that is missing from the second stanza. Many critics have commented on this conspicuous omission.

Emanuel suggests that the ninth line in the first stanza "should have been removed," while R. Baxter Miller, in *The Art & Imagination of Langston Hughes*, suggests that the top heavy structure with a long first stanza and shorter second stanza signifies "the possible dwindling of the dream" through the progression of the poem.

However, if viewed from a simplistic standpoint, the extra line in the first stanza serves to inform the reader that the persona is in fact dreaming, something that a reader would not know otherwise. So if this is the case, why is it not mirrored in the second stanza, as with all of the other lines? In the second stanza, the persona is living as a tree. If a reader is to assume that nature is the ideal, as Hughes goes to painstaking lengths to demonstrate, then the tree, a form of nature, is already living that ideal, and has no need to dream.

Other patterns in the second stanza support the notion that the persona is literally thinking like a tree. The fifth and sixth lines, "Rest at pale evening . . ." and "A tall, slim tree . . ." make deliberate use of an ellipsis at the end of each line, whereas in the first stanza, each corresponding line has no punctuation at all. As stated before, the subtle differences between corresponding lines in the two stanzas of this poem point to Hughes's greater intentions. In poetry, ellipses introduce a pause into the reading, causing the reader to deliberately slow down and ponder the effect of the words. In this case, the use of ellipses signifies the deep, natural resting quality of the tree. This is unlike that of the human persona in the first stanza, whose rest is touched upon briefly but is not felt as fully by the reader.

This double pause in the poem sticks out even more due to the pattern of the remainder of the poem. Throughout "Dream Variations," Hughes uses a line of action followed by a line of passive description. For example, look at the first four lines of the second stanza:

> To fling my arms wide
> In the face of the sun
> Dance! Whirl! Whirl!
> Till the quick day is done.

In these lines, one can see how the first and third lines feature an active verb or verbs, while the second and fourth lines feature a passive description. This alternating pattern of action/description is repeated throughout, and it sets up a sing-song pattern, which causes the reader to race through the poem. If read according to the punctuation, a reader needs only halt for a long period of time at two points: the eighth line of the first stanza, "Dark like me—" and the double-pause of the tree's rest, mentioned above. By tying these two points together through pauses, Hughes links the "dark" persona to the tree that is resting at pale evening, and the tree that is peacefully resting in the second stanza fulfills the dream of the "dark" human persona in the first.

In Hughes's America, African Americans were denied the American dream of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and many leaned toward their native Africa to find hope and the fulfillment of their dreams. In *The Life of Langston Hughes, Vol. 1*, Arnold Rampersad noted that in this poem and other poems "written in Africa, Hughes responded emotionally to the most dangerous lies of European colonialism," which promised all Americans that they could achieve their dreams. In the end, through his carefully crafted poem that uses specific differences in images and pattern, Hughes expresses his own dream: a life that mimics the freedom and colorblindness of nature, as idealized by his natural, African heritage. This is a stark contrast to the unnatural oppression and prejudice that Hughes and other African Americans faced in the white America of the 1920s.

Source: Ryan D. Poquette, Critical Essay on "Dream Variations," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

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Miller's book is a detailed study that considers the complex patterns of meaning in the literary imagination of Langston Hughes.

For a New Citizen of These United States

Li-Young Lee

1990

Li-Young Lee's "For a New Citizen of These United States" appeared in the poet's second collection, *The City in Which I Love You*, published in Brockport, New York, in 1990. Like the majority of Lee's poems, this one is based on his memories of a turbulent childhood, beginning with his family's escape from Indonesia by boat in the middle of the night when he was only two years old. The past often plays a significant role in Lee's poetry, for it is something he feels is always there—that, unlike a country or a prison, history is inescapable. But not all of the poet's relatives and friends who endured the same fears and upheaval of life in exile share his notion of an unavoidable past. "For a New Citizen of These United States" addresses a "you" who is not specifically identified but who appears to be an acquaintance of Lee's from the time of their flight from Indonesia. In this poem, the person spoken to is not enamored of things from the past, as Lee is, and seems not to recall any of the events and settings that Lee describes. Although the poem's speaker—Lee himself, in this case—pretends to accept his acquaintance's lack of interest and real or feigned forgetfulness of their shared history, his tone of voice and subtle sarcasm make it clear that he is frustrated by the other's attitude. This premise dominates the poem from beginning to end.

Author Biography

Li-Young Lee was born in Jakarta, Indonesia, in 1957. His parents were Chinese and were well educated and influential in their native country. Lee's father was Mao Zedong's personal physician while the family lived in China, and his mother was a descendant of China's provisional president, Yuan Shikai, elected in 1912 when the nation was in transition from a monarchy to a republic. The Indonesian government imprisoned Lee's father not long after Li-Young's birth. The older Lee's interest in Western culture did not sit well with the Southeast Asian leaders—he enjoyed opera, Shakespeare, the philosophical writings of Kierkegaard, and the Christian Bible. In 1959, Li-Young's father escaped from prison and fled Indonesia with his family. They spent the next five years traveling throughout Hong Kong, Macau, and Japan before moving to the United States, where they settled in Pennsylvania in 1964. Eventually, Lee's father studied theology at a seminary in Pittsburgh and became a Presbyterian minister.

The tumultuous early upbringing influenced Lee throughout childhood and into his current middle age. But in spite of the family's migration from country to country, one constant was his exposure to poetry—especially from hearing his father recite it—and his familiarity with the King James Bible, from which his father also frequently read. The most dominating factor in the poet's life was indeed his father, and much of his work reflects that. Lee attended the Universities of Pittsburgh and Arizona and the State University of New York at Brockport. He has taught at various institutions, including the University of Iowa and Northwestern, and his first two books of poetry won major awards. In 1986, *Rose* won the Delmore Schwartz Memorial Prize, and in 1990 *The City in Which I Love You*—including "For a New Citizen of These United States"—was awarded the Lamont Poetry Selection of that year. Lee now lives in Chicago with his wife and children.

Poem Summary

Lines 1–2

The first two lines of "For a New Citizen of These United States" are intriguing and somewhat ambivalent. In poetry, the "I" in a poem should not be confused with the poet him- or herself, and, therefore, critics and reviewers typically refer to the "I" as the "speaker" or "persona" when discussing the work. But because Lee's poetry is well documented as actual accounts of his past and of his personal feelings toward it, one is safe in presuming the speaker here is indeed Lee. Given that, he begins this poem by asking someone for forgiveness, but who that someone is, is not yet revealed. The real ambivalence, however, falls in the second

Media Adaptations

- A videocassette of Lee's April 18, 1995, reading in Los Angeles was recorded in VHS format by the Lannan Foundation (Sante Fe, New Mexico). Lee reads from his two poetry collections and his autobiographical prose poem *The Winged Seed* and is interviewed by Shawn Wong. The tape runs sixty-six minutes.

line, in which he compares death to an "irregular postage stamp." It is possible, of course, that what the poet has in mind with this metaphor is just that—in his own mind and not accessible to readers in general. But one who has read other poems by Lee may liken this haunting, yet striking, imagery to his visions of a past that creeps up on the present through a letter turning up years after it was lost in the mail. The first poem in *The City in Which I Love You* is called "Furious Versions" and contains the lines, "Memory revises me. / Even now a letter / comes from a place / I don't know, from someone / with my name / and postmarked years ago." The postage stamp in "For a New Citizen of These United States" is irregular with its old date, and it reminds Lee of the deaths that occurred in his past, both those of loved ones and those of citizens killed by soldiers in China and Indonesia.

Lines 3–5

In these lines, Lee admits that the flash of what he imagined to be the "postage stamp of death" was really only a moth that he has trapped in a piece of richly patterned cloth ("the damask"), typical of Oriental linens and fabrics. He also admits that there is "no need for alarm," but this first stanza suggests the poet's encumbered state of mind. He is so fixated on his troubling memories that he mistakes a common insect for a tragic omen.

Lines 6–8

At this point, the reader has no reason to doubt Lee's sincerity in claiming that there is "no need for alarm" and, in line 6, "no need for sadness" either. As the poem progresses, however, one sees that he is continually alarmed and saddened, by both the past itself and his acquaintance's lack of response to it. In lines 7 and 8, Lee makes first mention of the "you" in the poem, stating that the person addressed is not reminded of the past by "the rain at the window." (Although one cannot tell from the poem whether Lee's acquaintance is male or female, for the sake of simplicity here, the individual will be referred to as "he.") Rain itself is significant in this poem, and to Lee in general, because his family fled Indonesia in the springtime—monsoon season in that part of the world.

Lines 9–11

The first hint of the poet's frustration is revealed here as he describes a memory in vivid, yet metaphoric detail, but his acquaintance does not appear to recall the same images. The "parlor" mentioned is the compartment of the boat in which his family gathered when they escaped from Indonesia, fleeing the father's persecution by government officials. The reference to "nave" is pertinent in Lee's life because his father was a pastor in a small church and Lee used to help him clean it. The shadow images indicate the fluctuation between despair and hope that the escapees felt—"cloud-shadow" implying darkness and doubt and "wing-shadow" recalling the moth flickering in the light in the first stanza, as well as the promise of flight and freedom. The "father-shadow" is a constant in Lee's poetry, for his father was the dominant figure in his life and the son is forever in the older man's shadow. Together, cloud, wing, and father "confused the light" with continual movement, or fluctuation. Line 11 ends with a double meaning in the word "flight": It not only perpetuates the wing imagery, but it also represents the Lee family's flight from Indonesia.

Lines 12–13

Here, Lee describes the chaotic rush to escape, his family battling both monsoon rains and winds creating a "leaf-throng" all around, making it difficult to see as they tried to protect themselves from harsh weather and approaching soldiers. In other poems, Lee describes waves so high that the boat seemed to sail underwater, and it is the tumultuous mixture of wind-whipped leaves, soldiers, and the ship's flags that he believes "deepened those windows to submarine."

Lines 14–17

Lee's memory now turns to other places and events in the history he shares with the acquain-

tance, but he knows this recollection, too, is not shared. Line 15 employs a touch of irony in that he claims he "won't mention that house" and then goes on to do just that, including a description of what others in the house, including the acquaintance, were actually doing. "Lin" is probably Li-Young's older brother, Li Lin Lee, an accomplished painter also living in Chicago. "Chung" and "you," the acquaintance, may be Lee's cousins or other relatives, or they may be friends. "Ming" seems to be an adult trying to keep the children quiet by singing to them.

Lines 18–21

These lines describe Lee's memory of his church experience as a young boy and of words from the Bible—"*garden, heaven, amen*"—so beautiful and so heavy that they "exhaust the heart" with their hopeful, yet sad sounds. The irony is even stronger at the end of line 21 as the poet says he will "mention none of" everything he has just mentioned in provocative detail.

Lines 22–23

Although the poet's tone of voice seems soft and melancholy as he recalls the events of his life throughout this poem, there is an underlying bitterness that surfaces from time to time. Line 22 is one of those times. The flippancy is obviously intended in "After all, it was just our life," and his sarcasm continues in the metaphor comparing one's life to only a few pages in a fat book of many pages.

Lines 24–27

These lines recall yet another memory from a specific year and a specific place. Although the Lee family reportedly fled Indonesia by boat, this scene in 1960 implies that another part of the escape involved rail travel as well. Apparently other families were trying to leave, including the acquaintance's. Lee notes that in the confusion of trains pulling in and rain coming down, "we got separated," as though the original intent was for their families to flee together.

Lines 28–31

These lines imply that on the train, and perhaps on the boat leaving Indonesia, Lee was the one who took notes on the events occurring around him. That, of course, cannot be true, for he was only two years old. But in many of his poems, Lee blends, or intentionally confuses, the past and present to call attention to the difficulty in separating them. Here, he vaguely states that "one of us" wrote things down, but if that is not literally correct, it is still figuratively a snide way of telling his acquaintance he should be more closely in touch with what happened to their families long ago.

Line 32

Line 32 contains the central idea in "For a New Citizen of These United States." The bird metaphor may simply be translated as "human beings should look to the future ('fly forward') instead of trying to live in the past." This is apparently the philosophy of Lee's acquaintance, evidenced in the poignant phrase "as *you* say." This idea is a key element in the poem because it expresses the exact opposite of Lee's own philosophy—his own inescapable search of the past to understand the present.

Lines 33–41

These nine lines reiterate the irony of Lee's claiming he will not do something and then proceeding to do exactly that. He says he "won't show," "won't hum," "won't . . . recall," and then he details what it is he won't show, hum, or recall. His recollections center on his mother and his acquaintance's mother, both of whom still sing old songs about the homeland together. Lee still hangs on to family memorabilia, such as old letters and his mother's shawl, and thinks about the way she sewed money into his coat lining before their springtime flight from Indonesia. The acquaintance, of course, does not remember his own mother preparing for whatever the exile might bring, including separation.

Lines 42–43

The poem ends by returning to Lee's sense of bitterness over his acquaintance's lack of interest in their history together, but the flippancy that surfaced in line 22 sounds more like resignation now. In saying "it was only our / life," he repeats the earlier idea, but he now adds, "our life and its forgetting." This tension between forgetting and remembering is another constant in Lee's life and in his poetry. As he ages, he tries to concentrate less and less on history in favor of life today. Perhaps the last line of this poem is his recognition that letting go may not be easy but it is necessary.

Themes

Inescapable History

The most dominant theme in "For a New Citizen of These United States" is the poet's own

Topics for Further Study

- If your family had decided to emigrate to another country when you were a young child, what are some of the things you think would be different about your life? Try to think of both positive and negative aspects and write an essay describing your life in a foreign country. Include information about that country that differs from the one in which you now live.
- Lee is frustrated because his acquaintance cannot or will not share in his memories of their past lives together. Think of a time when you could not get someone to understand or share a feeling that is very important to you. Write about your approach to the situation, how you handled the "rejection," and how the situation was resolved.
- Write a poem titled "Birds Fly Forward." What does the metaphor mean in your poem? How is it different from or the same as Lee's meaning?
- Li-Young Lee has a famous brother, Li Lin Lee, who is an accomplished visual artist. Discover some of his paintings, in books or online, and write an essay describing one you like in particular. Give specific details to explain why it appeals to you.

inability to escape the memories of his family's troubled past. Tied directly to the personal tragedies are the social tragedies that Lee witnessed as a young boy. The childhood he recalls is full of persecution and fear: tales of his father's imprisonment in an Indonesian jail and the family's eventual life in exile after the father's escape. For Lee, the present is continually infiltrated by the past. His thoughts, actions, and beliefs are all shaped by the disturbing history that followed him throughout five years of traveling from country to country and into his youth and adulthood in the United States.

From start to finish, this poem discloses an ongoing struggle between living in the past and letting it go. Lee pretends to be able, even if unwillingly, to stop bringing up events that occurred years ago, but what he says he will do and what he actually does are two different things. He cannot help but to talk about the house where he and his family and friends hid, about the chaos on a crowded railway platform, about his mother's belongings and the day she prepared him for their escape. Even the common experiences of the present—a moth flying by or "rain at the window"—remind him of death, shadows, and windows covered with water. Some may be tempted to call the poet's persistent thoughts an obsession, one that he should try to get over. It is difficult, however, if not impossible, for anyone who has not been through the turmoil that Lee's family has experienced to understand the relentless memories of such horrible times. The poet himself would be the first to admit the pain and frustration of recurring thoughts that will not go away, and in "For a New Citizen of These United States" he is even apologetic about it. His first words are, "Forgive me," and later he claims his mother's letters and shawl have been "meaninglessly preserved." But even though the last two lines of the poem indicate the possibility of forgetting the past, there is little evidence elsewhere to support Lee's ability to so do.

Self-Alienation

A secondary theme in Lee's "For a New Citizen of These United States" is actually a result of the primary one. Because his thoughts are so centered on events of the past, he is often alienated from friends and relatives who prefer to move on and put history behind them. Who the "new citizen" is in this poem appears to be the acquaintance addressed as "you," but it could also refer to Lee himself in regard to his arrival in America at the age of seven or eight. Past and present tend to intertwine in much of Lee's work, and the ambivalence mimics the melding of times and events in his own mind. Some people, however—including immigrants who suffered similar experiences in their own histories—are put off by the constant recollection of times gone by. The acquaintance in this poem is surely not as forgetful as Lee portrays him (how could one forget such overwhelming events?), but more likely he *chooses* not to remember. Perhaps this is what frustrates Lee the most, but it is also what separates him from someone he wants desperately to connect with. Although the reader does not get to "hear" the acquaintance's responses, one can easily assume his words: No, he does not remember the house he "languished" in; no, he did not record his life experiences; and, no,

he does not remember his mother preparing him to flee the country. The most penetrating and revealing statement attributed to the acquaintance is "birds . . . fly forward." In one line, he is able to strike down what it takes Lee forty or more to say. And it is the poet's desire, or *need*, to relive the past that alienates him from those who shared the experience, but not the fixation.

Style

Free Verse

Lee is noted for his "plain talk" poetry, written in free verse without many poetic devices, such as alliteration or meter, and hardly any rhyme, if at all. Most of his poems could be written in prose and not lose their meaning or impact. The only poetic function that does tend to surface in his work is an occasional potent metaphor, often surprising, sometimes elegant in tone and image.

In "For a New Citizen of These United States," the first striking metaphor comes right up front, in the opening stanza. The comparison of a black moth to the "irregular postage stamp of death" is dark and beautiful at the same time. So, too, are the "cloud-shadow," "wing-shadow," and "father-shadow" images in the second stanza, along with the notion of windows "deepened . . . to submarine." Surrounding these metaphors, though, is plain language that simply conveys the poet's thought at that moment. He says, "There is no need for alarm. And / there is no need for sadness," and he opens the third stanza with, "But you don't remember, I know, / so I won't mention that house."

Lee intertwines the simple language with powerful imagery throughout this poem, with probably the most compelling metaphor occurring in line 32. "But birds, as you say, fly forward" is a very straightforward, common sense piece of information, but its significance lies in what it represents rather than what it literally means. It is arguably the most important line in the poem and is clear evidence of Lee's ability to speak in plain English and still startle the reader with remarkable revelation.

Historical Context

Only a few decades after its declaration of independence from England, the United States of America became known as a melting pot, so named because of the number of immigrants who landed on its shores from all over the world. For a while, this influx of diverse groups of people was a welcome sight, for it helped to "grow" the new country and make it stronger. But personal bias and stereotypes do not go away quietly, and before too long immigrants—especially those of color or distinguishable physical features—found themselves the victims of racism and unfair treatment in the work place, on the streets, and in residential communities everywhere. Asian immigrants were no exception, and in 1960 nearly two hundred years after gaining independence, the United States was still a hostile place for many foreigners, including the Lee family who arrived that year.

Five years after the Lee's arrival, the Immigration Act of 1965 was passed, abolishing the discriminatory practice of fulfilling immigrant quotas based on national origins, which had favored northwestern Europeans prior to that. Although the act limited the number of people who could migrate to America from both the western and eastern hemispheres, close relatives of those immigrants already in the country were exempt from the quotas, so the number of newcomers was still more than anticipated. By the time Li-Young Lee was writing poetry heavily influenced by his family's history and life in their new home, Asians were still pouring into the United States, even though Asia itself had registered the most rapid economic growth of any nation on the planet. During the 1980s and 1990s, the continent's share of the world's output increased from 10 to 20 percent. This growth is partly attributed to American recovery programs after the Vietnam War, as well as the American provision of capital and technology to help increase industrialization. Probably the greatest factor in American contribution to Asian development is the purchase of huge quantities of Asian products in the United States.

Lee's parents were Chinese, but he was born in Indonesia, called Tanah Air Kita, or "Our Land and Water," by its native citizens. The name refers to the area's geographical makeup, consisting of 17,508 islands connected by six seas in the South Pacific. Indonesia is the largest archipelago in the world and the fourth largest nation. Jakarta, the capital city and Lee's birthplace, is on the island of Java. During the mid-twentieth century, much of Asia, including Indonesia and China, had governments that frowned upon free speech and freedom of religion. Lee's father encountered the repression firsthand, and his promotion of Western religion

and Western philosophy resulted in imprisonment. But during the 1980s and 1990s, parts of Asia, including China, stopped overt repression of religious activity, and, as a result, interest in various religions grew. Also during this time, many Chinese citizens became enamored of American culture in the form of McDonalds fast food, Coca-Cola, trendy clothing, and rock music. Westerners delighted in this turn of events, believing it signaled China's move toward capitalist ideas and democratic values, but scattered news stories of young Asians enjoying fashionable clothes, heavy metal, and Big Macs did not tell the entire story. Economic reforms triggered negative, as well as positive, results. Inflation, unemployment, and corruption kept much of society in check, leaving the door open for government to retain as much repressive control as possible.

In 1989, America and other Western countries had their hopes for China's development dashed on national television. When Chinese students staged a demonstration in Tiananmen Square to draw attention to the continued repression, they were eventually met by troops and tanks. After the massacre of the demonstrators, Chinese officials instigated a wave of arrests throughout the country, resulting in many Westerners fearing nothing had changed in China at all. Since the Tiananmen Square debacle, relations between China and the West have been unstable, although signs of China's willingness to be part of the common world market are increasing again. While Indonesia's development has come along at a faster rate, that nation, too, still struggles with political strife and religious repression. However, Indonesians are also no strangers to the hustle and bustle of big business, entertainment, sports, arts and culture, and social life. Though complete freedom may not yet exist in this nation of over seventeen thousand islands, the possibility appears stronger for Indonesians than for their neighbors in China.

Critical Overview

It is not unusual for a talented young immigrant writer with a less-than-happy past to find an intrigued and sympathetic audience in America. Not all of them, however, have the success of Li-Young Lee, who seems to dwell beyond the normal level on his family's history as the basis for his poetry. But in spite of this seeming obsession, Lee has been accepted as a viable poetic voice since the publication his first collection, *Rose*, in 1986. Critics praise his candor in relating real-life experiences and his ability to do so both forcefully and creatively. In an article for *Melus*, critic Mary Slowik calls Lee's writing "insistently in the present tense, where past experience and future promise are fused in the confusion of the present moment, intensely and immediately experienced." In *Publishers Weekly*, Penny Kaganoff describes Lee's second collection, *The City in Which I Love You*, as a "journey through his wayward consciousness to relive sad and strange moments, their emotional impact somewhat deadened by the distance of his memory." Of the poet's style, Kaganoff says the "images are economical yet fluid, and his language is often startling for its brave honesty."

Honesty is a key factor for any poet who relies so heavily on troubling personal experiences for inspiration. Without it, the writing can quickly falter into pathos and sentimentality, turning off readers who may feel a tug on their heartstrings but not on their intellectual prowess. Lee's work presents sorrowful stories, but it leaves a reader stimulated and thoughtful, as well as saddened. It has appeared in major literary journals across the country, such as *American Poetry Review*, *Iowa Review*, *Ploughshares*, and *TriQuarterly*, and Lee has received a National Endowment for the Arts grant, a Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship, and various creative writing grants in Illinois and Pennsylvania.

Criticism

Pamela Steed Hill

Hill is the author of a poetry collection, has published widely in literary journals, and is an editor for a university publications department. In the following essay, Hill contends that Lee's poem is more an attempt to gain sympathy than to produce a creative work.

If one defines *pathos* as the essence of a creative work that arouses feelings of sympathy or pity in its audience, then Lee's "For a New Citizen of These United States" is, at least, an attempt to be pathetic. Generally, this is a tricky issue for poets, as they run the risk of turning off readers who may consider the pathos simply whining. In Lee's case, the subject of his poem is real, the premise of his poem is real, and the "new citizen" to whom it is addressed is, presumably, real. Therefore, one is

tempted to say that the poet is only reporting the facts and his feelings about them and should not be criticized for doing so. This poem, however, takes "reporting" to a new level—a new *low* level of pity-seeking that detracts from the power of what it is actually about.

No one should doubt the enduring emotional pain suffered by people whose childhood experiences were traumatic and, in some cases, life-threatening. Insecurity and instability are surely factors that result in many children growing up fearful and mournful, unable ever to put away the misery they encountered for so long. Li-Young Lee and his family—as well as countless other human beings living under tyrannical governments and forced into exile—know all too well the mental, as well as the physical, suffering that results from simply trying to stay alive in stressful conditions. They know, too, that eventually landing in America may have been a blessing but not one without some drawbacks. "Foreigners," after all, are up against ethnic and racial biases no matter where they go. And although the Lees may not have been under the same threats to their physical well-being in Pennsylvania as they were in China and Indonesia, they still had to deal with the frustration and degradation of not being fully accepted in their new home. Li-Young was only a boy when he arrived in America, but after five years of moving from one country to another, his troubles did not go away upon making it to the United States—they just changed in nature.

Given all that, is it not expected that a young poet would use his creative ability as an outlet for expressing sorrow and anger over the events that so heavily burdened his life? Yes, of course. But purely emotional expression is difficult to pass off as creativity, especially if it is not very carefully presented. The problem with "For a New Citizen of These United States" as a literary work is its presentation; in particular, the irony tactic is too obvious and too frequent.

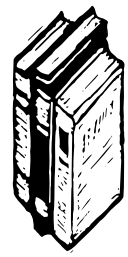
The first two stanzas of this poem are really very remarkable in their intricate description and metaphoric quality. The comparison between a "postage stamp of death" and "a black moth" is an engrossing thought, and the portrayal of various shadows moving about "confus[ing] the light" is a captivating picture to imagine. Unfortunately, the poem takes a downturn in creativity beginning in the third stanza with "so I won't mention the house," which is the first time Lee uses the ironic twist of describing what he has just said he would not describe. This may work once in a brief poem (forty-three total lines, in this case), but in a longer poem it becomes too obvious and trite. Lee does it again in lines 21 ("I'll mention none of it"), 33 ("So I won't show you letters"), 35 ("And I won't hum along"), and 37 ("I won't . . . recall my mother"). Granted, the repetition is intentional, and in some poems repetitiveness can be an effective tool for communicating a vital message in the work. But when the recurring tactic strings together pathetic descriptions of personal misfortune, it loses the punch it may have otherwise had.

All this is, indeed, heart-wrenching as actual events, but as strictly poetry, it slips into that dubious area of pathetic complaint."

"For a New Citizen of These United States" exhibits pathos in the details of the crowded railway platform where frightened families huddle in the rain, losing track of each other in the melee; it is exhibited in the stanza-long description of the poet's and his acquaintance's mothers—their singing nostalgic songs together, the old letters and shawl Lee has kept for years, the memory of his mother sewing money into his coat lining before they attempted their escape. All this is, indeed, heart-wrenching as actual events, but as strictly poetry, it slips into that dubious area of pathetic complaint.

It is interesting to ponder what may have saved this poem from crossing the thin line between creative autobiography and autobiographical pathos. Perhaps it is something as simple as expanding on one of the most important lines in the poem: "But birds, as you say, fly forward." There is more power—both in meaning and in simple poetics—in this one line than in much of the drawn-out details of Lee's troubled past. If he had addressed at greater length his acquaintance's apparent philosophy on the past, a more cohesive, more intriguing poem may have resulted. Instead, Lee belabors the point of sorrowful memories and dismisses the beautiful metaphor of birds flying forward—implying the de-

What Do I Read Next?



- Many people think of Indonesia, Vietnam, Cambodia, and so forth, when South or Southeast Asia is mentioned, but the Indian subcontinent is a major part of this area of the world. *Living in America: Poetry and Fiction by South Asian American Writers*, edited by Roshni Rustomji-Kerns, is a comprehensive collection of work by authors from the Indian subcontinent. Published in 1995, these writings reflect the experiences and concerns of predominantly middle-class, English-speaking, educated South Asians living in America, caught between two cultures and struggling to define their identity.
- In 1999, Gavan Daws and Marty Fujita published *Archipelago: Islands of Indonesia, from the Nineteenth-Century Discoveries of Alfred Russell Wallace to the Fate of Forests and Reefs in the Twenty-first*. This is a wonderfully illustrated book that follows the journey of a young English naturalist named Alfred Russell Wallace in the mid-1850s. It is a fascinating historical and biological look at Indonesia, a country that comprises only 1.3 percent of the world's surface but harbors nearly a quarter of the world's species.
- Jonathan D. Spence's *Mao Zedong*, published in 1999, is one of the better biographies of the "Great Helmsman" of Communist China, whose personal physician, for a while, was Li-Young Lee's father. This book concentrates primarily on Mao's early life, including the poetry he wrote to his first wife, but eventually depicts the behavior and mindset of a colossal leader considered responsible for the deaths of some sixty million people.
- Readers interested in Indonesian contemporary history and society will enjoy Timothy Lindsey's lengthy but intriguing *The Romance of K'Tut Tantri and Indonesia: Text and Scripts, History and Identity* (1997). This book tells the story of an American woman who established the first hotel in Bali and, later in life, became known as the revolutionary "Surabaya Sue." Portraying herself as a heroine of the Indonesian Revolution, Tantri eventually died abroad, forgotten by most Americans and Indonesians alike.

sire to look to the future—without second thought. This quick dismissal likely stems from the fact that Lee cannot escape the past and, therefore, the future is almost insignificant to him. So why include the line in a poem that is otherwise centered in history and carries a tone of sarcasm and admonishment on the part of the speaker toward the "you" he addresses? Without it, the work would display no evidence whatsoever of its author's acknowledgement that some people choose not to dwell on their troubled pasts. But with it, the poet has an opportunity to show his recognition of the opposite philosophy, even if that translates only into another chance to shoot it down. The latter seems most plausible; after all, this wonderful line about flying birds is the beginning of one of the most pathetic stanzas in the poem.

Perhaps it seems too harsh, unjustified even, to criticize a poet who records the truth, as he sees it, and who is not afraid to wear his heart on his sleeve, as the saying goes. Perhaps, but the *heart* in this case is as stubborn as it is pitiable. It is not just the repeated message of how bad life was in his early years that diminishes the quality of Lee's work in this poem but also that he appears hostile toward those who opt not to wallow in dark memories along with him. As a result, the poetry suffers. After considering "For a New Citizen of These United States," readers may feel more sympathetic toward people who have endured hardships they never will, but they may also feel cheated out of the high-quality work that this poet is capable of producing.

Source: Pamela Steed Hill, Critical Essay on "For a New Citizen of These United States," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

David Kelly

Kelly is an adjunct professor of creative writing and literature at Oakton Community College and an associate professor of literature and creative writing at College of Lake County and has written extensively for academic publishers. In this essay, Kelly explores the dark undertone to the poem, finding it to be an indictment of the immigrant experience.

It is far too tempting to read Li-Young Lee's poetry in terms of the biographical facts of his life. This is especially a problem in the case of a poem like "To a New Citizen of These United States," which includes a few details that can be confirmed as corresponding to the life the author has led. Like Lee, the speaker of this poem came to America long ago after a harrowing struggle against one or more oppressive political systems, a life of hiding from soldiers. But it is misleading to concentrate on the similarities and to ignore the differences. In this case, the differences lie in the details of the character's life that the author has not chosen to share. A conscious decision has been made about what details to leave out and which to include, making the character his own individual person. To fill in details by matching given facts from Li-Young Lee's life would trivialize the poem's artistic achievement. The situation that is given in print should be allowed to speak for itself, with no need for any outside influence. In spite of the fine details that make the poem come alive, "To a New Citizen of These United States" is not about its author nor about any particular people from any particular place; it is about the cultural experience of becoming American.

This poem is one of those subtle, carefully calibrated artistic works that yields a slightly different meaning with each reading. It starts out bestowing its reader with a feeling of optimism toward the future and sadness toward the past, but with each successive reading its spirit of anger becomes more clearly evident. The story it tells is about two friends who have each escaped from a repressive life and who have reunited in the United States. Even without equating the speaker with the author, it would be a fair guess to say that the inclusion of a date here might mean the same to the character as it would to Li-Young Lee. If so, the separation would have happened when the poem's speaker was two or three years old, Lee's age in 1960. There is no indication of how old the poem's New Citizen would have been then, or whether these two were relatives, friends, or acquaintances, or what

Even if one accepts the fact that this speaker is being insincere in his modesty and that he wants his insincerity to show through his words as sarcasm, there is still a question of whom the sarcasm is meant for."

brings them together now; there is only the history that they share, one of fear and suffering. A superficial reading might leave the impression that the poem's speaker avoids the subject of the past's horrors out of politeness, but that is taking his words at face value. It leaves too many questions raised but unanswered.

The poem's initial impact is of one person, its speaker, trying to connect with a person who has presumably just crossed over into safety. This entails working around any mention of the difficult conditions that they once shared. The title hints at a much different poem, mentioning a transitional moment that usually ranks with life's most celebrated. To immigrants, new citizenship can be as significant a rite of passage as marriage or childbirth, indicating a future overflowing with promise. The title also uses the folksy, commercial phrase "*These* United States," common to popular magazines and textbooks, to imply that the New Citizen is entering a happy community and can leave his worries behind.

The poem introduces its dark side in the very first few lines, with the mention of death, but it immediately undercuts the severity of this idea, explaining it away as a simple mistake. Ironically, this "mistake" continues to be an image of violence even after it is explained: The moth, for which the speaker claims to have mistaken death, is captured in a cloth of damask, likely made of silk, which moths destroy. At the same time that it introduces this sinister aspect, though, the poem also introduces its speaker's polite, humble tone toward the New Citizen. The first two words of the first line are "forgive me." With the mistaken impression,

the newness promised by the title, and the gentle begging for pardon, the poem starts in a hopeful mood, subverting its frightening imagery of death as a fluttering black moth. Like the moth in silk, though, the poem also carries the hint of destruction that is obscured by opulent beauty.

The speaker of the poem is clearly struggling to suppress some ideas that are unacceptable for this reunion. Sprinkled throughout its lines is the phrase "I won't mention," which belies a strained, insincere form of humility. It brings up a subject while pretending that it is not doing so. This speaker actually seems eager to talk about the adventures of the past, which include hiding and escape, but he is held back from open discussion of such matters. The idea implied is that the danger that these two have overcome would gain validity if they were to dwell upon it, allowing those who terrorized them before to take control of their future. There is a strong implication in this poem that the past needs to be buried so that when the mind drifts toward times gone by, even while thinking of the good things associated with those times, it ought to be redirected away from such thoughts.

What comes out from reading the poem carefully is the speaker's disassociation from this idea of burying the past and his complete disdain for it. Willful ignorance is not a poetic stance, although this speaker seems to be willing to go along with it. Each time the poem asks for forgiveness or mentions some aspect of the past that it says it will not mention, the speaker draws attention to the struggle that he is putting up to remain silent.

The third stanza offers a perfect example of this. In the second line, it begins, "I won't mention," and then it goes on to render a scene in full, intricate detail, given the short space of a poem. Three other characters are mentioned, and songs and bells and specific words tickle the memory. Lee's use of sounds is one of the surest ways of jogging memory, which means that the poem does exactly what it says it is trying not to do, by bringing buried memories to the fore. In fact, in reference to the things just detailed, the stanza ends with "I'll mention none of it," just to make the irony clear to readers who might have been duped into believing that the speaker really intended to avoid discussing the past.

The speaker is, in fact, obsessive about the past. The reference in the fifth stanza "faithfully" chronicling the events that occurred in childhood and since is, like the events themselves, given emotional importance by the meticulous details with which the written record is described: The words "pencil," "day-book," and "rubber band" are all aspects that would not occur to someone who takes the responsibility of recording history lightly. Under other conditions, the speaker's explanation that "one of us" kept this record could function as a unifying technique, as if it were irrelevant whether the speaker or the New Citizen was the one writing all of this down. Here, however, since there can be no question that it is the speaker, the effect is sarcasm. It adds emphasis to what the speaker has done to keep the past alive and thereby highlights what the New Citizen has not done in that same regard.

Given this tension between remembering and forgetting and the speaker's clear, strong support for the former, it is hard to accept all of the poem's pretensions of humility. The frequent apologies in the beginning and the vows not to speak of the past in the poem's middle lead the speaker to, in the later stanzas, abandon his own personal beliefs with such exaggeration as to summon up a fierce sense of anger. He refers to treasured mementos, such as letters and a shawl that he has held on to for decades, as "meaningless," although readers cannot really doubt their sentimental value. He promises to forget the songs that his mother taught him, even to forget his own mother, if the New Citizen is willing to do the same. The last half of the poem has a bitter tone, full of pain and sorrow and hatred, established by the phrase "After all, it was just our life."

Even if one accepts the fact that this speaker is being insincere in his modesty and that he wants his insincerity to show through his words as sarcasm, there is still a question of whom the sarcasm is meant for. The most obvious candidate is, of course, the New Citizen, whose past is so closely tied with that of the speaker. The New Citizen is presented as the one who cannot or will not remember the details of the house they hid in or the mission bells or his mother. According to the poem, it is the New Citizen who lives by the motto "birds fly forward," indicating that this person believes it no more wise or practical for a human to examine the past than it would be for birds to fly in reverse.

The New Citizen *could* be the speaker's adversary in this, as the advocate of letting the past go, but then one needs to ask why this person, meant to hold up the opposing view from the speaker, is never presented in the poem with any clear personality. It would make sense that the details about the past would be obscured, given that the New Citizen stands for forgetting and the

speaker seems to have come to the United States long ago. It does not make sense, however, that Lee would not balance the speaker's point of view with the ideas of a character rendered with a respectable degree of realness. Readers are not even given the New Citizen's age or gender nor told what part of the world this person has come from. To argue effectively against a character who believes that the past should be forgotten, it is important to know if he or she has been fighting political oppression for ten years, or twenty, or fifty; if the character is educated enough to appreciate the broad scope of history or if his or her sense of the world is based solely on personal experience; and, most importantly, if this is a person so psychologically damaged by the struggle to emigrate that dwelling on the past would only do harm. Without being told these things, it would be unfair to criticize the New Citizen, or to blame an unknown person wanting to forget. Yet, the poem's stance is accusatory, showing the desire to forget, to be self-indulgent and even cowardly. This is not the sort of point that an intelligent poem like this would have to make by hiding the truth about the title character.

The New Citizen and the country or countries the New Citizen came from are irrelevant. The object of Lee's sarcasm about forgetting must, by process of elimination, be "these" United States, and the malaise that would make a newcomer forget his or her entire previous life is citizenship itself. The new country is one of the few specific, knowable elements given in the poem, the one thing of which all of Lee's readers would have some knowledge. Though the country is not mentioned after the title, it is quite easy to understand how, in this piece, becoming a citizen of the United States is equal to forgetting.

It makes sense sociologically: The obvious side effect of the American "melting pot" that brings all citizens together would have to be that each individual loses the past that made him or her unique while yet blending into the whole. The logical consequence of adapting to a "new" land is that the old one, and all of the things associated with it, would have to be left behind. It makes sense, too, on a more personal level, that the speaker of this poem would reserve such sarcasm for a cultural environment rather than at the old friend that he is greeting. When the speaker says, "you don't remember" or "it was only our life," he seems to have more pity than blame for his old friend. It is clear enough that this speaker is angry and resistant toward someone who is trying to make both characters in the poem forget, someone who supports the idea that their pasts, individually or together, are not worth holding on to: If it is not the unnamed, repressive former country and if it is not the victimized New Citizen, then the next most likely candidate is the new country. As it appears here, the problem of forgetting is a United States one.

New citizens are often so elated with their achievement that they do not look at what could be lost. There is nothing in this poem to suggest that Li-Young Lee himself opposes the ideals that the United States stands for, only that there is an inevitable inclination to forget the past when starting an exciting new future. In this poem, the speaker argues his points by pretending to believe the opposite of what he really does: He is apologetic when most angry, and he claims to be ready to forget when that is clearly the last thing on his mind. This speaker is fighting a cultural battle so large and complex that it could only be against his chosen home.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on "For a New Citizen of These United States," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

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Further Reading

Hongo, Garrett, ed., *The Open Boat: Poems from Asian America*, Anchor Books Doubleday, 1993.

This extensive collection of contemporary Asian-American poetry provides an in-depth look at the experiences, hopes, fears, and dreams shared by this segment of the American population. It contains four poems by Lee.

Lee, Li-Young, *Book of My Nights*, BOA Editions, Ltd., 2001.

This is Lee's latest collection of poems, again presenting lyrical, free verse work that fuses memory, family, culture, and history. The book includes four black and white drawings from the University of Rochester's Memorial Art Gallery.

———, *Rose: Poems*, BOA Editions, Ltd., 1986

This is Lee's first collection of poetry. Compared to *The City in Which I Love You*, it concentrates more heavily on the poet's relationship with his father and the overwhelming influence the older man had on his son.

———, *The Winged Seed: A Remembrance*, Simon & Schuster, 1995.

This book is as close to an actual autobiography as Lee has yet come. Written in the form of a prose poem, it is a beautiful, but haunting, recollection of the poet's past and his search for answers to the disturbing inner questions of his mind.

Geometry

Rita Dove

1980

This poem was published in Dove's first complete book of poems, *The Yellow House on the Corner*, in 1980. "Geometry" like other poems in the same volume, explores the dynamic between knowledge and imagination. Through an evolving series of increasingly surprising and fantastic dramatic images, the poem takes the reader on a swift and fanciful excursion from indisputable knowledge ("I prove a theorem") to the realm of imagination. The speaker of the poem seems to be suggesting that the very act of attempting to impose intellectual certainty results in the unleashing of a mysterious, and ultimately wonderful, transformative force. The geometrical "house" immediately "expands" from what is known and certain, and suddenly the speaker is no longer protected, but is "out in the open." The windows, those framed devices through which the speaker observes the external world, "jerk free" and hinge "into butterflies" in a transformation from rational thought to imagination. The poet seems to be saying that where intellect and imagination "intersect" there is "sunlight," or enlightenment, and that, in the end, it is the imagination that is "true and unproven."

Author Biography

Born in 1952 in Akron, Ohio, to well-educated parents, Dove is the daughter of Ray A. Dove, the first African-American chemist to break the racial barrier in the tire and rubber industry, and the former

Rita Dove

Elvira Elizabeth Hord. An excellent student, Dove was invited to the White House in 1970 as a Presidential Scholar, ranking nationally among the best high school students of the graduating class of that year. She earned a bachelor's degree from Miami University of Ohio in 1973—where she had enrolled as a National Achievement Scholar—and graduated summa cum laude. The following year, Dove studied at West Germany's Tubingen University as a Fulbright scholar. This led to further studies at the Iowa Writers' Workshop. There she met her husband, the German-born writer and journalist Fred Viebahn. In addition to her other achievements, which include fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Guggenheim Foundation, and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Dove holds the distinction of having been the first African American, as well as the youngest individual, to hold the post of United States Poet Laureate, a position she held from 1993 to 1995. Dove lives with her husband and daughter in Charlottesville, Virginia, where she is professor of English at the University of Virginia Commonwealth.

Poem Text

I prove a theorem and the house expands:
the windows jerk free to hover near the ceiling,
the ceiling floats away with a sigh.

As the walls clear themselves of everything
but transparency, the scent of carnations
leaves with them. I am out in the open

and above the windows have hinged into
butterflies,
sunlight glinting where they've intersected.
They are going to some point true and unproven.

Media Adaptations

- Rita Dove, Maya Angelou, and S. E. Hinton are featured on a 1999 video from Films for the Humanities, entitled *Great Woman Writers*.
- Journalist Bill Moyers presents an in-depth look at Dove's life and her writings in *Poet Laureate Rita Dove*, a one-hour videocassette produced in 1994 and released by Films for the Humanities. It was originally broadcast on PBS as part of the *Bill Moyers' Journals* series.
- Rita Dove was the executive producer for *Shine Up Your Words*, a 1994 television program meant to introduce students to poetry. It is available from Virginia Center for the Book, in Richmond, Virginia.
- *New Letters* magazine produced the radio series *New Letters on the Air*. This series is available on audiocassette, including #305, *Rita Dove*, which features the author reading and discussing her poems in 1985.

Poem Summmary

Line 1

In this first line, Dove sets the stage for the rest of the poem. The speaker asserts indisputable rational knowledge ("I prove a theorem") and immediately a mysterious force is set in motion ("the house expands").

Lines 2–3

In these lines, inanimate objects, which are the product of rational thinking, take on living and even

human characteristics: "the windows jerk free to hover near the ceiling," and "the ceiling floats away with a sigh." This attribution of human characteristics to inanimate objects is known as personification.

Lines 4–6

In these lines, the mysterious force that dismantles everything that is known and certain continues. The walls disappear, "the scent of carnations leaves with them," and suddenly the speaker is no longer protected: "I am out in the open." The use of carnations may suggest a celebration of moving from one level of knowledge to another.

Lines 7–9

In the final tercet, the transformation is complete: "above the windows have hinged into butterflies." Windows, rationally constructed frames of perception, have been transformed into living creatures of the imaginative realm, "sunlight glinting where they've intersected." The poet seems to be suggesting that where rational thought and imagination intersect there is enlightenment. These imaginatively transformed creatures "are going to some point true and unproven."

Themes

Order and Disorder

Geometry is the branch of mathematics devoted to understanding physical space in terms of logical theorems. In Rita Dove's poem "Geometry" human beings' ability to understand the world in terms of logic is viewed as a mixed blessing. In the first stanza, the expansion of a house can be taken as a symbol that the intellect has conquered the limitations of the physical world, making what is there bigger and better. The poem's speaker seems to control the dimensions of the house by understanding them. Up to this point, humanity's ability to understand the principles of order that already exist in nature is presented as a marvelous skill because it has not only made the house possible but has also improved beyond its original sense of order, creating this expansion.

By the second stanza, however, the poem raises doubts about the overall worth of geometric order. It shows the things that are lost when there is too much importance placed on logical understanding. The walls "clear themselves," presumably of art works that have been hung on them, which relies on a sense of disorder that has no place in logical theorems. Flowers then lose their scent because their fragrance does not fit into geometric equations. The joys of life are the disorderly and illogical ones, which cannot be appreciated when humans focus strictly on their ability to create order.

In the end, the poem finds a peaceful compromise between order and disorder by observing that the untidy elements that give life pleasure can never be completely deadened by theorems but will always be able to escape them. The windows, made by humans with the help of geometry, have some element to them that makes them as natural and free as butterflies, with the sunlight shining off them in a way that is aesthetically pleasing but not measurable by geometry. The last line refers to "some point true and unproven," expressing the confidence that

Topics for Further Study

- Rewrite an existing geometric proof, explaining all of the steps in the proof in your own words.
- Dove has said in interviews that poetry is the meeting of words and music. Explore the relationship between music and geometry and explain it in a poem.
- Research the ways in which butterflies have changed and relocated in the past thirty or forty years to adapt to the growth of the human population. Report on their fate: Are they becoming extinct or "going to some point true and unproven"?
- Of all flowers, Rita Dove chose to note that it was "the scent of carnations" that disappeared when the theorem was proven. What are the associations that people have with carnations? Talk to a florist and then make a chart of the characteristics of carnations that might be ruined by excessive logic.
- Find an event that occurs in everyday life that you find mysterious and develop your own theorem to explain it. Try to follow the form of a mathematical proof in your explanation.

the natural world has its own order that exists independently of the geometric sense of order.

Beginning and Ending

In a world that thinks that logic is the only really important thing, the proof of a geometric theorem might be considered an end unto itself. The proof may be the start of a different road of scientific inquiry, as scientists and mathematicians apply the information from the theorem to some practical use, but that one particular theorem has been proven, marking an end to a line of inquiry. In this poem, though, Dove presents the proof of the theorem as the beginning of the physical world's independence. Abstract thought, such as geometry, has been seen as confining the essence of nature in the past, but this poem shows that nature's essence can never be captured in a theorem. It is a never-ending resource. As many times as humans can create logical models of the physical world, the world has even more mysteries that go beyond all logic. Just when it might seem that geometry has made the pleasures of art and flowers vanish, as depicted in the poem, the physical world asserts itself again.

In this poem, man-made windows are no more contained by logic than are butterflies. Both have "unproven" qualities about them that go beyond their mathematical qualities, which is why the poem presents them, in the end, as escaping. As Dove presents it, no one logical proof can offer complete understanding of the physical world, but instead it represents the start of a new line of inquiry in the quest for knowledge about reality, which is constantly elusive.

Absurdity

This poem presents a struggle against the constraints of logic. It is a warning that the clearly defined view of the world that is sought by mathematics is too limited, because it only presents a small segment of reality. To make her readers think about reality in ways that go beyond logic, Dove presents them with a sense of reality that is unfamiliar and unexpected. By weaving absurd notions throughout the poem, she is able to counter the human predisposition for logic with the equally strong tendency toward imagination.

Of course, it is absurd to state that a mental act like proving a theorem can cause a physical result like making a room expand, but it is exactly the absurdity of such a statement that forces readers to reconsider the situation being described. Describing a natural and predictable physical reaction would not pique readers' curiosity: when Dove describes things that could not happen, she challenges her readers' assumptions about what they do and do not know. Mathematical equations do not make windows float or walls turn transparent, but the poem does raise the issue of how these imaginary consequences resemble the actual goals of geometric proofs.

Style

"Geometry" is a contemporary American narrative poem. It is like traditional, formalist poetry only in its organization into stanzas. The stanzas are of equal length of three lines each known as tercets; this organization conveys a sense of geometrical symmetry even though three is an uneven number. The poem employs no formal rhyme scheme. It is written in free verse, which means it uses no set pattern of meter, but contains its own unique accents and rhythms. The poet chooses consciously where to break the lines, and does so to produce the sounds that make its ultimate rhythm.

Historical Context

Euclidean Geometry

Most principles of geometry upon which mathematicians base their work today—and for the past twenty-three centuries—are related to the theories and methods first recorded around 300 B.C.E. by the Greek writer Euclid. His comprehensive work on mathematical theory, *The Elements*, was probably heavily based on the work of his predecessor Eudoxus, who had been a student of the philosopher Plato. Euclid refined Eudoxus's theories, along with geometric principles that were the results of generations of mathematicians. His *Elements*, written in Egyptian Alexandria, has been a central influence for twenty-three centuries, from the Hellenistic world after the conquest of Alexander the Great to the Roman Empire, to the Byzantine Empire, the Islamic Empire, into the medieval world and on to today.

The Elements is a comprehensive treatise that brings together geometry, proportion, and number theory, tying them all into one complete theory for the first time. It is divided into thirteen books. The first six are about geometry. At the heart of Euclid's geometry are five postulates. A postulate is a rule that is assumed to be true and does not have to be proved, as opposed to a theorem, which needs

Compare & Contrast

- **1980:** The United States Department of Education is developed, comprised of a staff of seventeen thousand full-time employees.

  Today: Some people feel that the centralized Department of Education should be disbanded because it cannot adequately understand local issues that affect schools' environments.

- **1980:** A study by UCLA and the American Council on Education finds that college freshmen express more interest in money and power than at any time in the past fifteen years. It is the beginning of a period that came to be known as The "Me" Decade.

  Today: After a long period of economic stability in the 1990s, many students take economic stability for granted. Colleges are seeing renewed interest in careers that are not focused on accumulating wealth, such as mathematics and poetry.

- **1980:** Humanity's understanding of the universe expands with the findings of Voyager I, an unmanned space craft that made new discoveries about Saturn's moons as part of its three-year, 1.3 billion-mile journey.

  Today: Plans are underway to send two unmanned space crafts to Pluto, the farthest planet in our solar system.

- **1980:** The United States Supreme Court finds, in the case of *Diamond v. Chakrabarty* that a man-made life form—specifically, a microorganism that could eat petroleum in cases of spills—can be patented.

  Today: Biotechnology and genetic technology are growing scientific fields and lucrative sectors of the stock market.

proving. Euclid's first three postulates have to do with construction. For instance, the first one states that it is possible to draw a straight line between any two points. The second and third postulates deal with defining straight lines and circles. The fourth postulate states that all right angles are equal. The fifth postulate was to become a challenge to the mathematical community for centuries to come. It states that two lines are parallel if they are intersected by a third one with identical interior angles. This postulate assumed many facts about parallel lines continuing on for infinity. Euclid himself was said to be uncomfortable with the absolute truth of this statement and declared it to be a given truth only after some hesitation. Its acceptance was a factor that defined a set of geometric theories as Euclidean geometry.

Non-Euclidean Geometry

For centuries, mathematicians tried either to prove Euclid's fifth postulate right once and for all or to find the overlooked element that proved it to be wrong. In 1482, the first printed edition translating Euclid's work from Arabic to Latin appeared, stimulating the progress. During the 1600s, various mathematicians rewrote the fifth postulate in ways that helped redefine such concepts as "acute angle" or "parallel" in new ways. By 1767, the French writer Jean Le Rond d'Alembert referred to the problem of parallel lines as "the scandal of elementary geometry."

In the early nineteenth century, there arose various schools of geometry that rewrote the assumptions, creating whole systems of understanding space without having to accept the fifth postulate. Collectively, these schools of thought came to be known as non-Euclidean geometries. There are two different types of non-Euclidean geometry, each relying on a different understanding of the concept of parallelism. Those that assume that there is no such thing as a "parallel" line that will fail to eventually meet the original one are called "elliptic geometries"; those that assume that there can be multiple lines passing through a point that will par-

allel the original line without touching it are referred to as "hyperbolic geometries."

Three mathematicians, working independently of one another, came up with systems of geometry (almost at the same time) in the beginning of the 1800s, all of which left out Euclid's problematic fifth postulate. Carl Frederich Gauss is credited with being the first of them. Gauss disliked controversy and was unwilling to disagree with the prevailing view that Euclid's geometry was the inevitable, indisputable truth, so he devised his system in private and did not publish his findings. In 1823, Gauss read the works of Janos Bolyai, a Rumanian whose non-Euclidean theories were hidden in his introduction to a book by his father, who was also a famous mathematician. Though Bolyai could not have known of Gauss's results, his theories were similar. In 1829, a Russian, Nikolai Lobachevsky, who was himself unfamiliar with the work of Gauss and Bolyai, published his own work of non-Euclidian geometry. These three gave rise to a new way of conceiving of space, changing the assumptions that had been put into place by Euclid more than two thousand years earlier. It is just this sort of advancement of knowledge, of restructuring assumptions that were previously taken to be indisputable truth, that Rita Dove considers in her poem "Geometry."

Critical Overview

Critic Nelson Hathcock, writing *Critical Survey of Poetry* , says that while Dove "can exult in the freedom that imagination makes possible," she also demonstrates in her poems that such imaginative liberty has its costs and dangers. He writes about "Geometry": "Dove parallels the study of points, lines, and planes in space with the work of the poet. . . . Barriers and boundaries disappear in the imagination's manipulation of them, but that manipulation has its methodology or aesthetic." For example, in "Geometry," the voice of the poem tells us: "I prove a theorem." Critic Robert McDowell, writing in *Callaloo* about *Yellow House on the Corner*, praises Dove's "storyteller's instinct," her "powerful images," and "her determination to reveal what is magical in our contemporary lives."

Well-known critic Helen Vendler, in a 1991 article in *Parnassus: Poetry in Review*, says that Dove "looks for a hard, angular surface to her poems," and that "She is an expert in the disjunctive." By this, Vendler means Dove is an expert in disunity or, or that she is very good at expressing an opposition between the meanings of words.

Criticism

David Kelly

Kelly is an adjunct professor of creative writing and literature at Oakton Community College and an associate professor of literature and creative writing at College of Lake County and has written extensively for academic publishers. In this essay, Kelly examines reasons why it would be a mistake to include Dove's poem in the tradition of anti-scientific poetry.

It would be very easy for readers to oversimplify the message that can be found in Rita Dove's poem "Geometry," taking the poem to be nothing more than yet another burlesque of humanity's endless fascination with intellectual order. Read lightly, the poem does in fact seem to suggest that the drive to make order out of chaos is a vain and hopeless one that is doomed to failure. It begins with a blunt, triumphant declaration of success, as the speaker announces proof of a theorem. After that, the poem does not portray geometry as any sort of mastery of the world, but instead things go haywire: the house expands, the ceiling fades away, the odors of nature vanish.

These are not the results that are expected to follow proving a theorem, and their illogical nature must be particularly offensive to the mathematician who tried to find some sense of order with the initial proof. Predictability is the point of geometry; when chaos results, it can seem like the poem's speaker, and mathematicians in general, are doomed to fail. This interpretation is supported by a long-standing tradition that the arts have of presenting rational thought as an affront to nature, creating some sort of battle zone between the natural and the rational.

It is one of the most basic questions about being human, and Dove handles it with such sublime grace that readers could easily miss the overall significance of what she says. Philosophers have long divided human essence into two parts, recognizing the distinction between our mammalian bodies that make us part of the physical world even as the purely human capacity to reason separates us from the physical. In recent centuries, poets have tended to side with nature, presenting reason as a form of corruption that alienates humanity from the rest of

the natural world. Just because this has been the trend, though, and even though the poem does approach serious thought playfully, still there is not enough evidence for reading "Geometry" as an assault on the weakness of logic.

The ancient Greeks, whose ideas have formed the basis of Western thought, recognized this basic duality in the human condition, representing it in the forms of Apollo, the god of (among other things) light and therefore of logic and truth, and Dionysus, the god of fertility and of wine, whose followers celebrated irrationality. Their concept of humanity's divided essence has come down through time to the present day, when it is still thought that "too much" logic will lead to an orderly but sterile, emotionless existence, whereas the absence of logic leaves one in the realm of animal instinct, at the mercy of unexpected violence and unforeseen occurrences. The Greeks may have worshipped Apollo and Dionysus equally, but the fear of favoring one too heavily over the other has caused supporters to divide rigidly into two camps.

In general, most fields of human endeavor can be seen as drawing on both their intellectual achievement and their physical contact with the natural world. Architects, for instance, cannot design purely theoretical buildings without any recognition of the terrain and the atmospheric conditions that those buildings will be housed in; even physicists, who deal with concepts that are too minute, grand, or old for human experience, find that their theories are pointless if they cannot be supported by some real-world evidence. Geometry is one of the most abstract of cerebral pursuits, with only the thinnest relationship to immediate reality. Poetry was once a field of abstract thought, although it has become increasingly focused on the world's physical nature.

This is, to a large extent, the legacy of the romantic movement that began at the end of the eighteenth century. It followed on the heels of the Enlightenment, when the intellectual world focused on applying scientific methods to understanding human behavior. The French and American Revolutions, for example, were Enlightenment byproducts, and one can see in them the shift from political order based on tradition to political order based on rational principles, such as the rule of the majority. As with most intellectual movements, romanticism is marked by its movement in the direction opposite from the movement that came before—in this case, from intellectualism to physicality. The romantic response to the Enlightenment was to focus attention on humanity's relationship to nature. If logic is a set of ideas that can be transferred from one situation to another, the romantics turned away from shared knowledge to focus on the subjective experience of the individual writer; if logic is used to find ways to channel water, build bridges, and traverse mountains, romanticism focused on appreciating but not controlling the natural world. The common use of the word "romantic," referring to love within a personal relationship, offers insight into the nature of romanticism; romance emphasizes personal experience and is generally accepted to be beyond of the rules of logic. To apply geometric theorems to romantic love would strike most people as heartless and cynical. In its extreme, romanticism would reject the intrusion of any and all such mental designs.

Proving a theorem should provide a sense of completeness, but in this line there is less a sense of liberation than of vulnerability."

The age of romanticism has long since faded, but its most enduring legacy is the bond forged between poetry and nature. Poetry is, of course, a cerebral event, built of words, not of flesh or earth. Though some poetry can be instructive or contemplative, most poetry offers straight, unexplained description, or at least relies heavily on the physical evidence that humans know from their five senses. There is a basic distrust, in modern poetry, of ideas that the poet spoon-feeds to the reader, and so poetry instead moves to capture the physical experience with words. Some poets have extended their distrust of theorizing to a deep resentment and suspicion of all logic. From Whitman to Eliot to Neruda, there is a clear path of poets who have been resistant to order, with an assumption that logic and creativity cannot exist at the same time and that one must therefore give way to the other. Since this has been the prevailing trend for the past century or two, it is understandable that readers might assume "Geometry" to be an attack on the insufficiency of words.

What Do I Read Next?

- The best poetry of the early part of Dove's career is collected in *Selected Poems*, an anthology of works from *The House on the Yellow Corner*, *Museum*, and *Thomas and Beulah*, which won her the Pulitzer Prize for 1987. *Selected Poems* was published by Pantheon Books in 1993.
- Dove is also a novelist. Her book *Through the Ivory Gates*, published by Vintage Books in 1993, tells the fictional tale of a young black artist, whose life is much like the author's, who returns to her home in Akron to run an artists-in-schools program.
- W. S. Merwin's poem "The Horizons of Rooms" is similar to "Geometry" in the way that it contemplates the ways that humans surround themselves with logical constructs of their own making, forgetting about the independent world of nature that goes beyond human order. It is found in Merwin's 1988 collection *The Rain in the Trees*, published by Knopf.
- Walt Whitman's poem "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer" expresses sorrow at the ways that scientific knowledge narrows one's experience of the world. It can be found in *Walt Whitman: The Complete Poems*, edited by Francis Murphy, published by Viking Press in 1990.
- Other poems like "Geometry" can be found in *Against Infinity: An Anthology of Contemporary Mathematical Poetry*, initiated, collected, and edited by Ernest Robson and Jet Wimp, published by Primary Press in 1979.
- "Ode to Numbers," by the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, is a short poem that looks at math in the same spirit that informed Dove. It can be found in the anthology *Selected Odes of Pablo Neruda*, translated by Margaret Sayers Peden, published in 1990 by University of California Press.
- Linda Pastan's poem "Arithmetic Lesson: Infinity" is included in her collection *Carnival Evenings: New and Selected Poems, 1968–1998*, published in 1998 by W. W. Norton Company.

In fact, the imagery Dove uses in the poem does lend itself to be interpreted as being anti-logical. Though the first stanza presents the proof of a theorem as an uplifting experience, with the windows and ceiling floating up as if all of the weight of the physical world had been rendered irrelevant, the second is clouded with hints of the theorem's unintended side effects. Walls are cleared of paint, paper, or anything else that may have adorned them; flowers lose their fragrance. The second stanza ends with "I am out in the open." Proving a theorem should provide a sense of completeness, but in this line there is less a sense of liberation than of vulnerability. Readers who see this poem as another example of art rejecting science will focus on the second stanza, with the implication of the danger it carries.

It does not help that the poem's stance toward geometry is not cleared up in the final stanza, which is, if anything, more ambiguous than the previous two. The physical room that the speaker describes *does* experience an uplifting sense of freedom from the same proof that took the walls away. Does this mean that finding the proof is a good thing because it has liberated the physical world (giving man-made windows the independence and beauty of natural butterflies, for example) or that the proof is bad because life is only tolerable in the places that have escaped the deadening confines of geometry? The poem does not explicitly say, but it does have several aspects that should lead readers to accept intellectualism and not treat it, as so many poets have, as the enemy.

One clue is that this final stanza, though open to interpretation in several ways, clearly is meant to evoke a mood of hope and optimism. The dominant images are of sunlight and truth, and the poem does not say that either has suffered from the proving of the theorem. If reality is escaping from geometry here, it isn't being aggressively pursued, indicating that its escape is part of the overall plan. In fact, the final word, "unproven," loops the process back to the opening salvo, "I prove a theorem," indicating that even something as intellectual as a geometric proof is a part of the cycle of nature.

A minor point, but one still worth mentioning, is the poem's structure. It does not follow any strict rhythm or rhyme scheme, but it does have a geometric symmetry, with three stanzas of three lines each. Such a structure could be meant to parody the rigors of geometry, but if this were the case, Dove could have made the case better by using a

sing-song pattern to mock the lack of inspiration in formal thought. Instead, the limited use of regular structure implies that order can, in a limited way, be of some good.

It is too simple to say that logic and instinct are mutually exclusive, that the world only has room for nature or rationality, but not both. Obviously, both can come together: The combination of reason with physicality is what defines humanity. Readers who have become accustomed to seeing poets and other writers take sides in this conflict are used to reading the works of extremists, who either warn that humans might become unfeeling machines if mathematical order prevails or that barbaric destruction will rule if mathematical precision is forgotten. Usually, poets tend to favor instinct over reason. It is the self-expressive thing to do. Rita Dove is too intelligent to deal in half-truths, however, and "Geometry," a poem that seems simple and light, refuses to take the easy way out. This poem is too intelligent either to embrace or to reject logic blindly but instead establishes its place in the vast strangeness of the universe.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on "Geometry," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Judi Ketteler

Ketteler has taught literature and composition. In this essay, Ketteler discusses the way in which Rita Dove makes a comparison between geometry and poetic form.

The poem "Geometry," by Rita Dove, is a poem about ideas and space and the way in which ideas and space represent possibility and liberation. A mathematical science, the discipline of geometry revolves around precision and around measurements that add up to an organic whole to prove a scientific truth. The human mind has the capability to create such precision and order, to make sense of what would otherwise be chaos.

By titling the poem "Geometry," Dove alerts the reader as to the subject of the poem. Unlike a "riddle poem" (such as Emily Dickinson's "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass"), this poem makes its metaphor explicit—in this case, the comparison of geometry and poetry. The reader then begins reading this poem thinking about the science of geometry and brings with him- or herself ideas about geometry and what it means. Simply defined, geometry is the branch of mathematics that deals with the relations and measurements of lines, angles, surfaces, and solids. Most students study geometry at some point in their schooling and, as part of their learning, have to memorize theorems, proofs, and formulas. Geometry is exact; a measurement is what it is; an angle is what it is—there are no grey areas. Whether the reader likes or dislikes geometry, these are some of the perceptions he or she may bring to this poem upon glancing at the title.

> *"Nothing in all Emerson's writings is more eloquent and popular than some bits of his patriotic verse."*

If, by chance, the reader has forgotten his or her high school geometry, the first line brings it all back: "I prove a theorem and the house expands." The word "theorem" is very much associated with geometry, and proving theorems is a main tenet. The speaker immediately takes ownership of the poem, as well as the action of doing geometry. The first line highlights the setting of the poem nicely as well. The reader can imagine a school-age girl, inside of her house, working on her geometry problems. Dove is deliberate in her choice of verbs for the first line. She doesn't equivocate or say "I study" or "I grasp"; instead, she says, "I prove"—a strong statement. The speaker is clearly both confident and competent in her geometry skills.

The second part of the first line is even more interesting: "the house expands." There is a causal connection; the house expands because the speaker proved a theorem. The house even takes on human characteristics. The last two lines of the first stanza showcase this personification: "the windows jerk free to hover near the ceiling, / the ceiling floats away with a sigh." The mood is one of lightness. The softness of "hover" and "with a sigh" suggests this is a peaceful transformation. The house is expanding beyond its walls. The walls are, in fact, ceasing to exist. And the liberating force is the theorem, which the speaker has proven to be true.

There is a way in which the house in this poem stands in for the mind, especially in the way that it expands. Literary critic Therese Steffen writes in her book *Crossing Color: Transcultural Space and Place in Rita Dove's Poetry, Fiction and Drama*:

> Two slightly different readings are imaginable: Either the house metaphorically portrays the mind, or the mind-blowing expansion blasts the house apart." In any case, it is the mental powers at work that cause the shift from solid to soft. What was once a stable structure is drifting apart. In the same way, what was once a stable knowledge base is drifting too—expanding outwards and upwards.

The reader might think about childhood drawings of a house—very angular, consisting of a box with a triangle roof, a rectangle door and two box windows, usually crisscrossed with a "t." As a physical space, the house is very much a center of geometrical shapes—walls, doors, windows, floors, ceilings, and furniture. But it is also a center of ideas; in other words, of cultural space. Therese Steffen reads the difference between physical space and cultural space in this way: "Cultural space, as distinguished from place and location, is a space that has been seized upon and transmuted by imagination, knowledge, or experience." This is a useful distinction because it helps us separate the metaphorical from the actual. If we speak in literal terms, we know the actual house isn't actually expanding; rather, the cultural space the house represents is expanding—namely the mind of the speaker.

As the poem progresses to the second stanza, the structure of the house continues to destabilize. "As the walls clear themselves of everything / but transparency, the scent of carnations / leaves with them. I am out in the open." That last line of the second stanza is very powerful—why is the speaker "out in the open"? Why has this geometry caused her to lose her grounding? Even sensory perception has faded away with the carnations. Critic Helen Vendler, in her book *The Given and the Made*, reads this as an experience of "pure mentality": "As the windows jerk free and the ceiling floats away, sense experience is suspended; during pure mentality, even the immaterial scent of carnations departs." The speaker is one with her mind—outside forces do not seem to matter. Her surroundings have become "transparent," leaving nowhere to hide. One way to read "openness" is that the speaker's foundation of knowledge has been so altered, the "walls" around her mind so shaken, that all of the limits of imagination and understanding that previously held her back have now vanished. There is great liberation in the transparency because it allows her to see beyond what she previously thought were the limits.

Though some readers may love geometry and see unlimited possibilities in mathematical science, to claim that theorems and geometry problems are inherently beautiful and liberating is still a hard sell for many math-fearing readers. Dove isn't speaking strictly of geometry, though. Just as the house can be read as a metaphor for the mind, geometry itself has a metaphorical quality, especially as it relates to Dove's true love: poetry. Vendler understands the poem "Geometry" in this way:

> It is a poem of perfect wonder, showing Dove as a young girl in her parents' house doing her lessons, mastering geometry, seeing for the first time the coherence and beauty of the logical principals of spatial form. The poem 'Geometry' is really about what geometry and poetic form have in common.

Both geometry and poetry concern space. Simply speaking, geometry takes a logical approach and studies the relationship of objects to the space around them. Poetry takes a more fluid, less tangible approach in that it "studies" the inner space of the mind and the mind's relationship to thoughts and ideas. Poetry and geometry are alike in that they both seek truth. Geometry is guided by logical principles: If *x* and *y* are true, then we can make a statement about *z*, and it must be true as well. While this is a mathematical way of thinking, it is also highly poetic. There is poetry in the thought process and in the belief that the truth is important in that it helps us to organize our world and understand our place in it. Theorems are as much about shapes and angles as they are about human beings. The speaker in the poem "Geometry" is swept away by these thoughts and connections, and her world is altered as a result.

The experience of "pure mentality" continues through the third and final stanza. There is a sense of a great transformation in the final lines: "and above the windows have hinged into butterflies, / sunlight glinting where they've intersected. / They are going to some point true and unproven." Butterflies are often symbolic of beauty, wonder, and freedom. Here, the windows have actually transformed into butterflies. Solid materials like wood, brick, and glass have changed into brightly colored, delicate wings. Steffen remarks: "This liberating move from the initial "prove" to the final unproven . . . metamorphoses the wallbound windowframes like earthbound caterpillars into butterflies." The windows of the house, which provide only a limited view on the world, are exchanged for a more expansive view through the eyes of butterflies. They are flying away, as the speaker says, "to some point true and unproven."

The last line of the poem suggests that there is much more still to be discovered. The speaker be-

gins the poem by "proving" a theorem. This sets the initial outward movement into action. This new knowledge leaves the speaker left out in the open, without solid walls to shield and limit her. Her entire relationship to the world has shifted by the last stanza. The solid windows have "intersected" with the liberated butterflies—an intersection of an old way of thinking and the new way of thinking and looking at the world. Another way to read the line "sunlight glinting where they've intersected," is to understand it as the intersection of geometry and poetry—the meeting point of mathematical science and emotional introspection. In that intersection is true liberation, which causes the curious, well-rounded mind to continue searching for truth in the world.

This is a poem about poetry and about the beauty of ideas and human thought processes. But it does not exist in a vacuum. Thinking about the larger social implications for this poem enriches the reading of it. The speaker in "Geometry" experiences a liberation brought on by learning something new about herself and the world around her. The saying "knowledge is power" comes to mind. There is great power in the implications of this poem—the sense of wonderment increases with each stanza, as boundaries disappear and possibilities loom. By proving the theorem, a whole new world opens up to the speaker, and it is a world where windows can transform into butterflies.

In short, education is the real stimulus behind the speaker's transformation. And Dove, a highly educated woman, not to mention former poet laureate of the United States, certainly knows the value of education. Much of Dove's poetry speaks to the African-American experience. This poem does not so much speak to that experience as it does to the value of education, which is certainly relevant to the African-American experience. Education is wonderful in that it brings about personal enlightenment, but it is also the way out of poverty and despair. Poetry and abstract ideas about space and people's relationship to the world may seem far removed from the social and cultural realities of everyday working people, particularly poor people who are more concerned with basic needs. However, as the final lines of "Geometry" suggest, there is a key intersection—whether it be the intersection of rational thought and emotion, of thought and action, or of old and new—that can lead to liberation.

Source: Judi Ketteler, Critical Essay on "Geometry," in *Poetry for Students,* The Gale Group, 2002.

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This renowned modern philosophical text, first published in 1964, explores poetry's relationship to the measurable, physical world.

Dove, Rita, *The Poet's World*, Library of Congress, 1995.

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Mlodinow, Leonard, *Euclid's Window: The Story of Geometry from Parallel Lines to Hyperspace*, Free Press, 2001.

Dove's poem assumes that its reader has a sense of what geometry is about. In this book, Mlodinow traces the history of geometry by discussing the major figures who have shaped modern thought, giving a funny, spry spin to a topic that students can sometimes find dull and dense.

Steffen, Therese, *Crossing Color: Transcultural Space and Place in Rita Doves' Poetry, Fiction and Drama*, Oxford University Press, 2001.

In one of the only books analyzing Dove's overall career, this recent publication looks at the issues of spatial concept that are raised in "Geometry."

The Horizons of Rooms

W. S. Merwin

1988

"The Horizons of Rooms," from W. S. Merwin's 1988 collection *The Rain In the Trees*, published in New York City, is a solid example of the late style of one of the twentieth century's most influential poets. Merwin's work began in his post-college years in the 1950s with a strong, intellectual mastery of the classical poetic forms. By the time of his 1967 collection, *The Lice*, he had developed a unique voice: terse and angry, the poems in this collection did without punctuation, as if what they had to say was too overwhelmingly personal for the writer to bother with conventions of grammar. *The Lice* was Merwin's best-known book, with over a dozen reprintings, leading a generation of poets in the late 1960s and early 1970s to copy his style to express their own social concerns. Merwin's later poetry shifted its focus toward the destruction of the environment and began showing more and more rumination on history, especially natural history. These subjects are explored in "The Horizons of Rooms."

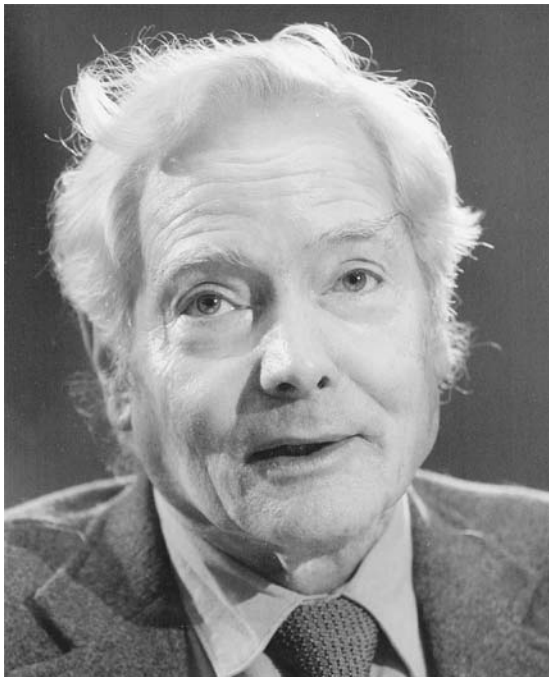
This poem reflects on the way humanity has come to accept the concept of "rooms" as a defining part of existence, blocking out any sense of nature in the process. It reminds readers that rooms have actually been in existence for just a small fraction of the large scope of world history and gives an example of how making a room in a cave allowed for survival in prehistoric times. The problem, as Merwin presents it, is that people no longer see nature for what it is, only that it is outside of rooms, making even the widest open places just an

interlude between one room and another. "Many have forgotten the sky," the poem tells readers, and the problem is getting worse every day.

Author Biography

William Stanley Merwin was born on September 30, 1927, in New York City. His father was a Presbyterian minister. He was raised in Union City, New Jersey, and then in Scranton, Pennsylvania. In the 1940s, he attended Princeton University, receiving his bachelor's degree in 1947 and going on for just one year toward his graduate degree in modern languages. It was at Princeton that Merwin began writing poetry, with the encouragement of the noted literary figures R. P. Blackmur, Herman Bloch, and the poet John Berryman. He left there for Europe, where he earned his living for several years as a language tutor, living in France and Spain and Majorca. From 1951 to 1954, he lived in London and worked as a translator for the British Broadcasting Corporation. Once his reputation as a poet and translator began to build, Merwin returned to the United States, first living in Cambridge, Massachusetts (where he became acquainted with such giants of American poetry as Sylvia Plath, Adrianne Rich, Donald Hall, and Robert Lowell), and then in New York City. For a while in the 1960s, he lived in the rural area near Lyon in the south of France, which he was later to write about in the memoir *The Lost Upland* and the poetry collection *The Vixen*. In the 1970s, Merwin moved to Hawaii. The concern for nature and the ecology that shows throughout his poetry is reflected in his life in Haiku, Hawaii, where he lives on a former pineapple plantation that he has worked to restore to its original rainforest condition.

Merwin has been an influential force in American poetry since the publication of his first collection, *A Mask for Janus*, in 1954. *A Mask for Janus* was selected by W. H. Auden to be part of the Yale Series of Young Poets. (Merwin himself is the judge for this award today.) Since then, he has gone on to publish many collections, including 1988's *The Rain In the Trees*, in which "Horizons of Rooms" was published. Other honors that he has received include fellowships from the Rockefeller Institute, the Ford Foundation, and the National Institute of Arts and Letters; fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the American Academy of Poets; and almost all major awards available to poets, including the Bollingen Prize for Poetry, the Tanning Prize, the Lila Wallace/Reader's Digest Award, and the Pulitzer Prize in 1970. In 1999–2000, he served as a special consultant to the poet laureate of the United States, Robert Pinsky. He has published dozens of books of poetry, as well as numerous works of translations and histories of places where he has lived, including Pennsylvania, France, and Hawaii. His poetic style has evolved from strict formal poetry that he wrote fresh out of college to the current work, which uses little traditional structure and concentrates on his growing sense of history and a spiritual connection to the land. His most recent collection of poetry is *The River Sounds* published in 1999.



W. S. Merwin

Poem Summary

Lines 1–6

The main ideas of "The Horizons of Rooms" are introduced in the poem's first line, with a sharp directness that serves to catch readers off guard. The poem uses the familiar, comfortable word "room," but it quickly makes clear that it means more by this word than the way that it is commonly used. Readers can tell that they need to think in broader terms when the poem tells them that rooms have existed "for such a short time": "Such" usually limits "a short time" to seconds or minutes, but such an idea conflicts with any possible definition of "rooms." Rooms have been around for a long time, and calling their existence short draws a comparison to the time before recorded history when humans did not live indoors at all. This idea sets the poem in historical terms of centuries and eons, broadening the idea of "rooms" to the varieties of caves, tents, huts, or anything else that could be called a room throughout the span of time.

The second line hints at the reason why humans never really consider the rooms in which they live. Living in rooms is so thoroughly familiar that it is taken for granted. The only times that people become aware of being confined to indoor living are when they are unable to go outside, such as when it is raining or snowing. The line break from lines 3 to 4 is a run-on line, meaning that it carries the thought over with just the slight pause required by returning to the poem's left-hand margin but without any punctuation. Here, the run-on line is used to make readers think two different ideas about one phrase. In one sense, "or very late" can be read as the third example of a situation that would make people stay in their rooms, similar to the rain and snow already mentioned. Whereas rain and snow present natural dangers, this phrase introduces the ways society makes it dangerous to leave rooms, implying that there is a time, beyond late night that is "too" late, when criminals lurk. Reading beyond the line break, however, creates the phrase "very late with everyone else in another room." This line conjures an image of some lonesome person sitting in the darkness, contemplating familiar objects, such as the walls of a room, isolated from the people that they live with. The first sense of "very late" presents a world outside that is dangerous and confining; the second describes a person suffering from a social separation that is personal and psychological.

Lines 5 and 6 return to the main theme, which was merely implied in the first two lines, making those points more directly. The phrase "time beyond measure" clarifies what the poem meant earlier when it said that rooms have existed for "such a short time," and the phrase "many have forgotten the sky" restates the idea that, regarding rooms, "we can think of nothing else."

Lines 7–10

The geological sense that the poem has applied to the word "room" is raised again in line 7, which describes the first room as a cave, presumably during the Ice Age. Here, the poem shows a distinction between what it means by the word "room" and shelters that occur in nature. The cave described in line 7 is just a place with stone and ice, but the addition of a fallen tree in line 8 implies that humans added to what was already there, dragging the tree from where it fell to block the mouth of the cave, making the room complete.

In line 9, the poem balances its images drawn from nature with a reminder of the human presence in the room, representing human life with one of its most common bodily functions, the beating of a heart. The close relationship between nature and humans is implied symbolically in line 10, with the heartbeat of a human echoing off the wall of ice, showing that each is as responsible as the other for the sound that enlivens the room. Merwin uses irony here by linking the life-sustaining heartbeat to ice, which is usually associated with coldness, immobility, and death.

Lines 11–16

Continuing with its historical perspective, the poem focuses on the how the shelter of rooms enabled humanity to survive. Line 11 explains that people could give birth safely once they were able to do so inside. In line 12, though, the poem reverses this view of the room providing security and, instead, makes it seem somehow threatening by repeating the word "room." The unnecessary addition of the phrase "in a room" so soon after the last use of the word indicates how the idea of the room insinuated itself into human consciousness, becoming present in all aspects of life for people millions of years ago. In lines 13 and 14, the poem asserts that humans came to see everything as a room, even the landscape. This is a reversal of the normal understanding of these ideas, because landscapes are generally thought of as being, by definition, open and natural, whereas rooms are closed and indoors.

Merwin explains how the landscape is seen as a room in lines 15 and 16, changing the concept of a room's enclosure from the physical space that it generally connotes to a segment of time. In human minds, the mountains mentioned in line 15 are squeezed between ideas of rooms, confined between one memory of a room and another because the minds of humans are so filled with thoughts of rooms.

Lines 17–18

In the poem's most psychologically complex stanza, Merwin combines memory, identity, and metaphysics. In contrast to the previous stanzas, which discussed the development of ideas from their earliest forms, this stanza uses the present tense voice to describe human thought today. More and more people remember childhood as being a room, the poem says. Rather than just restating the idea that people see things in terms of the rooms that they live in, though, the poem adds a twist in line 18. The idea of childhood as a room is one that these people have after they have grown up, and within that idea they have another, the idea of sitting in that room and thinking of a forest. The poem does not imply that these people could ever have gone to the forest, or even that they may have seen the forest from their childhood rooms, but only that the forest existed within their memories of when they were young.

Lines 19–22

These two stanzas continue with the memory begun in the stanza that preceded them. They describe the world from a baby's perspective, with "the first hands and the first voices" representing the child's initial contact with other humans, mentioning the ceiling that the baby, lying on his or her back, would see beyond the people who hover over

Media Adaptations

- A 1991 videocassette of Merwin reading from the book this poem came from, entitled *W. S. Merwin: The Rain in the Trees*, is available from Atlas Video. It is part of the series *A Moveable Feast: Profiles of Contemporary Authors*.
- Merwin reads from his *Selected Poems* and *The Rain in the Trees* on a videocassette from the Lannan Foundation, taped in Los Angeles on May 16, 1988, and released in 1989.
- Films for the Humanities and Sciences has released a 1997 videocassette of Merwin talking about his life and poetry and reading from his works, under the title *Witness the Ecological Poetry of W. S. Merwin*.
- Roland Flint interviewed Merwin on October 10, 1994, just after he won the prestigious Tanning Prize. That interview, along with Merwin reading some poems from *The Rain in the Trees*, is on a videocassette titled *The Writing Life*, released by The Society, of Columbia, Maryland, in 1994.
- Merwin reads his poetry on a 1991 audiocassette from In Our Times Arts Media entitled *Selected Poems* and *The Rain in the Trees*.

its head. The use of the word "emerge" gives this memory a particularly vague quality, like the forest that the person is said to remember thinking about in line 18: the memories show up from nowhere in particular and can disappear just as suddenly. Lines 20 and 21 describe a grown person, later in life, lying back and staring at the ceiling, much in the same way that the baby did, but in different circumstances. In the same way that the poem travels back to a time when the human race first started to use rooms, these lines travel back to one person's awareness of ceilings.

Lines 23–24

Lines 23 and 24 serve to remind readers that this person's experience of the ceiling is the same as the one that the first person in a room, giving birth in a cave millions of years ago, went through.

Lines 25–28

Line 25 serves to remind readers of how infrequent the practice of sleeping outdoors has become. This might seem an obvious and inconsequential fact, but it fits with the historical perspective that the poem has provided up to this point. Though rooms are millions of years old, people still frequently slept outside, at least on special occasions, such as vacations, or during hot weather, until fairly recently. The number of people sleeping outside has dwindled "by now" to a small minority. The second function of line 25 is to remind readers, through the mention of sleep, of the "unconsciousness" motif that was first introduced in line 17 as a hazy memory. Line 26 shows a social conscience by remembering the homeless, who live on the streets and sleep in doorways. Whereas most of this poem views society's debt to rooms as a mixed blessing at best, this line shows the homeless aspiring to be room dwellers, sleeping next to rooms that they are not allowed to enter.

Lines 27 and 28 describe the spread of civilization, which is represented by rooms and the products that are manufactured indoors, into areas that have not previously been civilized. The uncivilized areas are identified as being remote and hard to access or else inhabited by poor people who do not own any methods of transportation so that they have to transport the manufactured items by foot. This line refers to "the final uplands," which is echoed later in Merwin's career in the title of his 1992 book about the ancient farming communities around the Dorgdone River in France, *The Lost Upland*. The word "uplands" is mostly used in rural societies to describe either land that is at a higher elevation (which would echo the mention of mountains in line 15) or to describe land that is inland, away from oceans, and thus more difficult for colonists to reach with their man-made products.

Lines 29–34

The last three stanzas of the poem can be seen as a summary of the ideas that have been presented before. Lines 29 and 30 repeat the idea of a room being a starting place, which is expressed earlier in the poem with the image of a child being born in a cave during the Ice Age. The "we" in this line might be a contemporary gathering that actually would convene in a "meeting room," but it also could serve as a statement on civilized society. The fact that, as line 30 puts it, we "go on from room to room," is a restatement of the earlier idea that any one human is accustomed to having one ceiling after another over her or his head from birth.

Lines 31 and 32 repeat the idea of memory that was raised in line 17, implying that humans have some innate knowledge of what life was millions of years ago, before there were rooms. As it is stated here, the idea makes sense: These lines do not pretend to tell readers what they might remember about the time before rooms but only state the probable fact that a person entering a room might, on some unconscious level, register some curiosity about what existed on that land long before it was cultivated for human use.

The poem's final two lines raise a tone that is at odds with everything else it says. There is nothing in the previous thirty-two lines that would lead readers to believe that "living in the room" can be construed as "good fortune." On the contrary, most of the poem indicated that rooms are a curse, if only because they isolate humanity from the real world. If the poem's last line is to be accepted as being sincere, then the good fortune of living in the room can only be meant in contrast to the worse fate of what life would be without the shelter that human beings need. This sense of "good fortune" is foreshadowed earlier by the assertion in lines 11 and 12 that giving birth in a room allowed for a successful childbirth and, in line 26, by mention of the hopeful who would like so much to be in a room that they will sleep as close to it as they can get, on doorsteps.

Themes

Man versus Nature

"The Horizons of Rooms" makes a clear distinction between humanity and nature, showing

how the two initially worked in cooperation but drifted apart over the centuries. In this poem, a room means any indoor space that is made by human control. It does not have to be entirely manufactured but can show as little human interference as moving a fallen tree to block the opening of a natural cave foundation.

According to the history that Merwin presents here, the early relationship between humans and nature was a mutually beneficial one. Nature provided shelter, as the poem describes in the sixth stanza, where the poem credits the cave with *causing* a child's birth. The human in the cave gives nature life, with heartbeats echoing off the cave's ice. In the beginning, at least, when humans were thought to be less mentally complex, there was a close bond between nature and man.

This relationship is shown to have evolved, however, as humans began taking control of their environment and creating rooms where they could live comfortably. Eventually, nature has become little more than a dim memory, and humans can see nothing surrounding themselves except rooms. They even see the widest open areas in terms of the rooms that they have seen last or are going to see next.

The end of the poem is ambiguous about the current relationship between humanity and nature. Taken literally, it says that humans are fortunate to be sheltered from nature. The poem does indicate, in several places, the dangers of nature, but for the most part it views humanity's isolation from nature with regret. The "good fortune" referred to in the last stanza can only be good when compared with an implied worse fate that would befall humans if they were not living indoors.

Security

The poem implies that the reason humanity has taken to living in rooms is for security, for shelter from the elements of raw nature. It is very clear about the fact that, millions of years ago, the birth it describes would not have been completed successfully if it had not occurred in a room. This single instance can easily be expanded to stand for all births and the vulnerability of humans when they are born. In the present day, as the poem points out in the first and second stanzas, people use rooms to protect themselves from rain and snow. The sense of security humanity derives from rooms is made most obvious in the twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth lines, which mention people sleeping "on doorsteps leading to rooms," implying their desperation to be inside. The security that rooms offer is not without

Topics for Further Study

- Research what anthropologists have been able to determine about humanity's earliest housing. In particular, show the differences between the first free-standing structures made by human beings and the earliest "rooms," the caves in which people lived.
- This poem suggests that people have memories of what life was like before the human species started living indoors. Read about psychologist C. G. Jung's theory of the "collective unconscious," which assumes that some of mankind's earliest experiences are still carried in the memories of all people. Show how Jung would agree and disagree with Merwin.
- With a pencil, pen, or computer program, design a room you would like to have in your house that you think W. S. Merwin would approve of. Use examples from this poem to show why your design would be acceptable.
- This poem mentions the idea of sounds echoing off ice several times. Research the acoustic properties of ice and report on how sounds bouncing off it would be different from those bouncing off stone, snow, or wood.
- Talk to an architect or a carpenter about how personal computers have changed the design of rooms in American homes being built in the last ten years. Try to imagine how other major innovations, such as electric lighting, changed the shapes of homes in the past.
- Some people think that babies born at home have an advantage over those born in a hospital, whereas others think that it does not matter because the baby is too young to register her or his surrounding. Read an article from each perspective. Refer to both articles in explaining whether or not you think that the room that one is born in matters.

its drawbacks, though, because it makes people think in terms of man-made ceilings instead of the natural sky that their ancestors looked up at. This, however, is given as a fact of modern life that may be regretted but cannot be ignored.

Nostalgia

The word "nostalgia" is often used casually to refer to fond memories of something that one has experienced. It does not draw off one's personal experience, though: People can have a nostalgic longing for some bygone era that happened before they were born. This kind of vague longing is described in "The Horizons of Rooms," which describes a feeling that all humans have for things that they know their ancestors experienced millions of years ago. In line 11, Merwin presents one particular scene from millions of years ago, the birth of a child, and then he echoes that experience in a modern situation, with a newborn looking up at the hands and voices and a ceiling beyond them. The connection is made even more explicit when the poem gives the modern room a facet that the prehistoric room had, a wall of ice that sound bounces off.

An idea of this sort, which is familiar to people across different ages and in different countries, is called an "archetype." The word came to literary criticism from psychology, particularly from the work of Carl Jung, who theorized that the experiences of ancestors would still resonate in their descendents in hidden memories, or a "collective unconscious." In this poem, Merwin presents modern humans as being familiar with the experiences of the past and as longing for things that members of the race experienced, even if they did not have those experiences themselves.

The poem's nostalgic element can be seen in the way that modern humans feel about their memories, viewing them with sadness and longing. In the eighth stanza, there is an aura of regret about the way humans are so far removed from nature that they do not even have memories about forests but only remember having ideas about forests. The poem focuses readers' attention on things that are gone or are soon to go: "[M]any have forgotten the sky," it explains, and "most sleeping is done in rooms." Near the end, the poem explicitly states why humans are nostalgic for the way the world once was, when it says that, wherever there is a room, "we know there was something before."

Alienation

The problem with rooms, as this poem presents it, is that they alienate humanity from the real world. In the very first stanza, it makes rooms seem minor and inconsequential in the larger scope of time, but it also shows humans to be mistaken about their importance because "we think there is nothing else." Much of the subsequent poem serves to remind readers of the richness of nature that exists outside of rooms: rain, snow, trees, sky, mountains, and even the remote upland areas that have not yet been civilized. Whereas rooms originally coexisted with nature, as in the example of the ancient room made of stone, ice, and a fallen tree, people currently use the concept of rooms to separate themselves from nature. They stay inside, alienated. As the fifteenth stanza puts it, "we meet in a room / and go on from room to room." The vastness of nature has been scaled down, so that even the mountains, the landscape, and the horizon are thought of in terms of rooms and are not experienced in their own right anymore.

Style

Style

This poem is written in free verse, which is a way of saying that it does not follow any regular pattern of rhythm or rhyme. The lines do not follow any standard length either. This can be seen with a cursory glance at the poem, which sometimes has a long line followed by a short line, sometimes a short line followed by a long one, and sometimes pairs of lines of nearly equal length. Although the stanzas are two lines each, it cannot properly be said that this poem is written in couplets, because that term is usually used for lines that are similar in rhythm and length and that rhyme with each other.

The voice of the poem is usually omniscient, which means that it can give information from anywhere at any time. It is cold and logical, such as when it explains that "many have forgotten" or observes that "there are more every year who remember." At the end of the poem, the voice uses the first person plural form of address, including itself with those being described, referring to humanity collectively as "we."

Merwin often uses the poetic technique known as the synecdoche to make his ideas more forceful. Synecdoche is the use of one particular member of a group or one particular part of a thing to represent the whole. For instance, when he refers to "a heart beating," it is clear that he means a whole person, but by focusing on this one specific part he

is able to use the emotional associations that come with a beating heart without wasting extra words to mention the person attached. He does a similar thing by referring to "the first hands and first voices" in line 17. Here, the synecdoche not only implies the whole persons, without taking the trouble to state the obvious, but it also gives an infant's eye view of the world, specifying the things that a child in a crib would notice. In a sense, "rooms," the main image of the poem, is a synecdoche because it is just one symptom of humanity's narrowed and sheltered existence that is used to represent an entire problem.

Tone

Merwin achieves an ironic tone in this poem, not by making any claims that are too outlandish, but by the use of repetition. In nine of the stanzas—just over half of them—the words "room" or "rooms" are at the end of the first line. In addition, they end the second line in four stanzas. The hollow sound of this word, which is repeated so often, gives the poem a hollow, haunting sound. The fact that the poem uses this word so often creates a somewhat mocking tone, as if the speaker of the poem does not believe that rooms are as important as they are generally believed to be. For example, the lines "because of a room a heart was born / in a room" could easily have been handled grammatically without the second use of the word "room," but using it twice overemphasizes it, making readers resistant to the concept of rooms.

Near the end of the poem, in the three stanzas that lead to the final one, a repetitious pattern occurs to take the speaker's exhaustive use of the word "room" to an extreme. Stanzas 14, 15, and 16 start with lines that parallel each other in structure and in sound: "[A]nd the products of rooms," "we meet in a room," and "once there is a room" all come in such close succession that it is difficult to avoid the tone that they set. They are plain statements, and, clustered together like this, monotonous ones, and in that way their tone fits the lackluster quality that the poem is attributing to rooms themselves.

Historical Context

Throughout history, there have always been people who were forced to live out of doors, with no permanent address and no means to afford any type of "room." In the 1980s, though, the issue of homelessness became a significant social issue. The country's homeless population soared during that time. It is difficult to know just how many people were homeless at this time, because, by definition, homeless people have no addresses where they can be contacted and therefore counted. Some sources estimated that two or three million Americans were without housing at the height of the problem, although more recent calculations say that the number was closer to 600–700,000. The wide variance in numbers is due to the fact that different organizations have used different methods to determine the number of homeless people. Counting the homeless has always been done by mathematical formulae that try to expand on what little information is available, with varying degrees of accuracy.

Several factors are seen to have caused the homeless crisis of the 1980s. One of the most direct causes was the recession at the end of the 1970s, which resulted in the highest rate of poverty in two decades. By 1982, unemployment in America was at 10.8 percent, its highest rate since the Great Depression. The recession reached across the globe, where some countries suffered triple-digit inflation. This made it cheap for American manufacturers to move their production facilities to Third World countries, taking away hundreds of thousands of manufacturing jobs that had provided the promise of secure, lifetime employment to earlier generations. The semi-skilled took jobs from the unskilled, pushing them deeper into poverty just as prices were rising.

At the same time, the cost of housing was rising faster than other necessary budget items, especially for those at the lowest economic levels. A shift in population movement had affluent Americans moving into cities, reversing a trend that had existed since the end of World War II of cities losing population to suburbs. Developers bought inexpensive apartment buildings and tore them down and rebuilt on the land or else renovated them to high-priced condominiums, driving away tenants who could afford rent but had no down payment for a mortgage. To attract higher-class residents, cities bulldozed the Single Room Occupancy hotels (SROs), which had provided inexpensive, subsidized shelter. Falling crop prices created intense economic difficulties in rural areas, and many farmers, unable to meet mortgage payments, underwent bank foreclosure and were left with no livelihood and no place to live.

One significant segment of the homeless population was those who suffered from mental health disorders that kept them from work. During the

Compare & Contrast

- **1980s:** The price of housing is on the rise. Investment firms find real estate a lucrative place to make money, as Americans spend proportionally more for shelter than for any of their other requirements.

  Today: New construction is stable, thanks to low interest rates, and the profits to be made are comparable to other investments.
- **1980s:** Third World nations, like the "final uplands" mentioned in the poem, weaken their shaky economies by importing more than their gross domestic products can pay for. More than twenty countries are forced to default on international loans.

  Today: The world economy is on the decline but is still enjoying a record-setting long period of prosperity.
- **1980s:** In a development related to the rise of holistic medicine in the 1970s, more Americans started having their babies at home, with the aid of midwives.

  Today: Holistic medicine and herbal supplements have become accepted mainstream products, but Americans still have little faith in midwives' ability to handle birth complications, and women overwhelmingly have their babies in hospitals, or with a midwife and a doctor's supervision.
- **1980s:** The term "global warming" first comes into common usage when NASA scientists report to Congress that the probable cause for the rising temperature is the greenhouse effect, with carbon dioxide and other gasses trapping the sun's rays within the atmosphere.

  Today: Although it is still refuted by some, the danger of global warming is recognized by most credible scientific institutions.

1960s and 1970s, new theories of patients' rights led to tougher standards against holding people against their will. Those who were deemed not dangerous to themselves were deinstitutionalized and sent out into the world to fend for themselves. Many were unable to cope, even with economic assistance, and ended up living on the streets.

In earlier times of economic difficulty during the twentieth century, the U. S. government had enacted policies to help the underprivileged. During the depression of the 1930s, President Franklin D. Roosevelt backed the New Deal, an assemblage of economic bills that, among other things, provided government loans to farmers and homeowners and created government jobs to keep people working. During the 1960s, President Lyndon B. Johnson pressed for a program called the Great Society, with the stated goal of eliminating poverty in America. When Ronald Reagan took office in 1981, though, it was with a campaign based on reducing the size of the federal government, not expanding it. That year, Reagan signed the deepest tax cut in American history, following an economic theory that held that the economy would prosper with less government involvement and that this prosperous society would willingly take care of the needy within it. His theory was called "trickle-down economics" because it counted on prosperity to eventually reach those at the bottom of the economic ladder. Before that could happen, though, there had to be painful cuts in government services that some saw as aggravating the homeless problem. Government programs such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children and the Department of Housing and Urban Development saw their budgets slashed by more than half, just as the problem of homelessness was growing. It did not help that Reagan was reluctant to discuss homelessness or that when he did, he characterized it as a lifestyle decision that had been made by the homeless people.

As the problem grew, it became one of the political issues that defined the decade. Political activists organized massive protests and activities to draw the public's attention to the problem and to

the government's lack of response to it. In many urban areas, people donated their time and money to building and maintaining shelters. One of the most famous advocates of the rights of the homeless was Mitch Snyder, a former advertising executive who drew national attention to the problem with a 1994 hunger strike and who led 250,000 people in a march for affordable housing in Washington in 1989. In 1986, six million people participated in Hands Across America, a televised event that aimed to form a chain of people holding hands that would stretch from coast to coast to bring public attention to homelessness. These high-profile efforts brought little governmental assistance. Perhaps the greatest success was the 1987 Homeless Assistance Act, intended to provide job training, emergency shelter funds, and the Interagency Council on the Homeless to coordinate federal efforts; of one billion dollars budgeted for the act, Congress only provided $600 million. America's economic prosperity since the early 1990s has given the government revenues to address the homeless problem, making it less conspicuous, but at the time that Merwin wrote this poem, the question of who could afford the privilege of living indoors was still a compelling social issue.

Critical Overview

Merwin's poetry has been almost universally praised by critics since the start of his career, with the publication of his first book in 1952, *A Mask for Janus*. Then, he was recognized as a master of the traditional forms, showing the influence of the poet Robert Graves (whom he worked for, tutoring Graves's children) and of the medieval poetry that he was translating for a living. It has always been considered one of Merwin's graces not to stay confined to any particular style, however. As Edward J. Brunner put it in 1991, he "appears to have no style at all, or to take on whatever style suites the moment." For Brunner, this "transparency" is what makes Merwin's poetry effective, although he does think that changing so often made the poet "underestimated by reviewers: they have perennially lagged one book behind him, expecting the latest volume to continue the tendencies of the one before."

Although Merwin's growth may have baffled reviewers, it has generally been met with critical approval. In the 1960s, he made his most dramatic change, expanding beyond formal poetry and striking out with the free verse style that he has used ever since. Critics kept pace with his stylistic changes, and reviews still stayed on his side, even as his writing took on a more personal form than they had known. Merwin won the Pulitzer Prize in 1970 for *The Carrier of Ladders*.

It would be a mistake, however, to call the freedom he has exercised in his poetry of the last several decades a signature style, for within the wide open terrain of free verse Merwin has exhibited many different styles, using a new one for each new volume of poetry he has produced. When *The Rain In the Trees* was published, critics accepted the fact that he was a poet always reinventing himself and that most of his new styles were successful. He was not as directly influential with that book as he had been in 1967, when his book *The Lice* spurred a wave of younger poets to directly imitate his style, but instead his influence was felt on the range of styles practiced by a newer generation of poets. As Mark Jarman said in the *Hudson Review*:

> [T]he current factions of poetry are reflected in the range of his accomplishments. For the new formalist, the neo-narrative poet, the language poet, the writer of free verse lyric, for each of these there is a Merwin and it would be good to come to terms with him.

Now, at age 73, Merwin's reputation is beyond reproach. In a recent overview of the poet's life in the *Los Angeles Times*, Tony Perry captured the esteem fellow poets hold for Merwin this way: "In fact, he's important enough that there is a joke in literary circles that if Merwin has not won a particular prize, it obviously is not worth winning." His poems are still frequently published, especially in the *Atlantic Monthly*, which has had a long-standing relationship with him for the past twenty-five years, and the *New Yorker*, one of the most respected publications in the country to print the works of poets.

Criticism

David Kelly

Kelly is an adjunct professor of creative writing and literature at Oakton Community College and an associate professor of literature and creative writing at College of Lake County and has written extensively for academic publishers. In this essay, Kelly examines how the concept of an echo is more than just a symbol in Merwin's poem, affecting readers' entire perception of the poem's message.

Somewhere between these two, the solid and the mobile, the echoer and the echoed, lies the secret to the ancient mystery of rooms."

Science is the pursuit of rational explanations, but sometimes scientific rationality does not come close enough to human experience to ring true. A good example of this is the case of echoes. Echoes can be scientifically measured and explained, but even the most complete theory does little to ease the strange feeling of hearing something once and then hearing it again, seconds later, from a different direction. A poet writing about echoes does not have to deal with what causes them but with that they feel like and with the other places in life where that feeling turns up.

W. S. Merwin's poem "The Horizons of Rooms" is not a poem about echoes, but it uses the idea of them to make its point clear. The poem's main focus is, of course, rooms, specifically how rooms keep humanity separated from nature. To study this point seriously means showing how rooms echo the natural world. "The Horizons of Rooms" tells its readers that people can see their existence only in terms of rooms and that they yearn for the natural world, but the relationship between these two is left unexplained. The relationship occurs, like a natural phenomenon, for readers to encounter and reach their own conclusions. The poem itself, though, is not a thing of nature. It is seeded with hints, like its emphasis on echoes, which help readers understand its position.

For the most part, Merwin avoids using specific poetic techniques. The point of "The Horizons of Rooms" is to look at nature, to examine the problem of humanity forcing its will on natural patterns. For the poet to impose a strict pattern on his words would be a direct violation of what the words are trying to express. The closest thing to formal style is the fact that all of the poem's stanzas have the same number of lines, two each. Superficially, they bear a slight resemblance to couplets, an ancient technique derived from the oral tradition that preceded written poetry. Couplets, however, have more to bind the two sequential lines together than mere proximity. The traditional couplet has two lines of the same length, with the same number of syllables following the same rhythm pattern (for example, "Whose woods are these? I think I know / His house is in the village, though"). Most often, the two lines end with rhyming words, which is in itself a device of echoing one sound with another. If "The Horizons of Rooms" is trying to make a subtle point about echoes resonating throughout human history, rhyming every two lines would probably overemphasize that point to death.

There cannot be a strict formal structure, not if the poem intends to explore truths beyond conventional thought, cutting through the misconceptions that human minds have developed and accepted as reality. Strict adherence to form would be just as confining as limiting life itself to rooms. Letting each stanza find its own rhythm mirrors the poem's spirit of intellectual freedom, whereas maintaining the consistency of two-line stanzas at least gives readers some feel for the balance and harmony found in nature.

The poem has no structural elements other than the consistency of two lines per stanza. It would be over-ambitious for a critic to make too much of this, to say that the pairings of these lines is meant to represent a duality of nature, such as sound and echo. Poets usually fail when they use elements of poetry as if they are sending coded messages. It is not, however, too exaggerated to look at how these pairs of lines neatly hold pairs of ideas together: In this case, the "two-ness" of the lines is not the message; it just happens to give a visual effect to the poem's balance of images. Each stanza sets the poem's main idea, that of "rooms," against one other idea of equal force that helps compliment or contrast it, so that, as each stanza passes, readers get a clearer sense of the meaning of rooms within this poem.

Together, the words "room" and "rooms" appear twenty-one times within the thirty-four lines of the poem, showing up at least once in each stanza and twice in two of them. One frantic stanza near the end uses "room" three times, a quarter of its total word count. The use of short two-line stanzas allows this word to be counterbalanced with other ideas that are of equal importance in the short term. For example, in the first stanza, the word "rain" is the only other significant noun. In the second, it is "snow"; in the third, "sky." Subsequent stanzas pair "room" with ideas that would not be as noticeable in a poem rich in description or in one with a heavy poetic style to distract its readers' attention. Other

pairings include "room / tree," "mountain / room," "room / wall of ice," and "room / ceiling." The pattern that emerges is that there are other things that are as important as the concept of rooms, but, as the poem's second line explains, people have been trained to see these other things only as they relate to rooms. The overall movement of the poem is to move these paired words away from the familiar, so that the final stanzas introduce "the final uplands," "something," and "good fortune," abstract concepts that remind readers of how little they know.

The effect of balancing images like the sky and mountains against a hollow, vague, open concept like "room" is close to the effect that an echo has when it takes a real-life sound and copies it with a haunting imitation. The echo is, in fact, the most important image in this poem. One clue of this comes from simple arithmetic: In a poem that makes such infrequent reference to tangible objects, the echoing wall of ice shows up twice. It is a powerful image, rich with associations and imagination. When it is first mentioned, the wall of ice echoes a heartbeat, small and gentle, that would barely be audible under usual circumstance but is raised to a significant echo through poetic exaggeration. This is the time when the echoing wall is in a cave that has given an early human sanctity, signifying the origin of the "room" concept. The second time the echo is mentioned, it appears in a modern context, actually echoing its earlier appearance in the poem. Here, in the twelfth stanza, the poem gives emphasis to the wall of ice by splitting its description at the line break, leaving "of ice" to stand adrift on its own, conspicuously. Doing so highlights the difference between nature's cold, hard immobility and the "hands and voices" that create the sounds that echo off it. Somewhere between these two, the solid and the mobile, the echoer and the echoed, lies the secret to the ancient mystery of rooms.

The constant repetition of the hollow "oo" sound in "room" brings up the feeling of an echo. The powerful and complex image presented by the noises of life bouncing off walls of ice certainly raises the idea of an echo. In addition to these is Merwin's free-form play with the concept of time, which he has bouncing around like sound waves off the walls, from ancient to modern, from earlier to right now. Time is a concept that is always tied to echoes, since the present is always an echo of the past.

The linear sense of time that readers take for granted is fractured, bent, and examined from dif-

What Do I Read Next?

- To help readers become familiar with Merwin's earlier career, Copper Canyon Press published a thrift edition entitled *The First Four Books of Poems*, which contains "A Mask for Janus," "The Dancing Bears," "Green with Beasts," and "The Drunk in the Furnace." The same press has also published *The Second Four Books of Poems*, which includes "The Moving Target," "The Life," "The Carrier of Ladders," and "Writings to an Unfinished Accompaniment."
- One of the strongest influences on Merwin was John Berryman, with whom he studied at Princeton. Berryman's 1964 collection *77 Dream Songs*, for which he won the Pulitzer Prize, is considered one of the great books of twentieth-century poetry. It is available as *The Dream Songs*, published by Noonday Press and released in 1982.
- Maurice Manning is the most recent winner of the Yale Series of Younger Poets Award, for which Merwin is the judge. His collection of poems, *Lawrence Booth's Book of Visions*, was published by Yale University Press in 2001.
- Even readers who are not familiar with the *Purgatorio* of fourteenth-century poet Dante Alighieri will be able to identify some of Merwin's verbal touches in his 2000 translation from the Italian, available from Knopf. It is the most recent of the great works of literature that Merwin has translated, and one of his most acclaimed.
- Another poet who dealt with humanity's complex relationship with nature was Theodore Roethke, who was from the generation before Merwin's. Roethke's best work is now available in *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke*, published by Anchor Press in 1975.
- Gary Snyder is a poet who is often associated with Merwin—they are from the same generation and studied under the same Zen master. Students who appreciate Merwin's poetry often appreciate Snyder's. His poetry is collected in *No Nature: New and Selected Poems*, published by Pantheon Books in 1993.

ferent angles, with the net effect of making readers start all over with their expectations. Starting in the first stanza, the poem twists the idea of time around from ordinary expectations. Under normal circumstances, the idea of the room would be considered an ancient one, a standard of civilization that has been with humanity throughout history and is therefore, unquestionably, quite old. This poem takes an even wider look at history, however, reminding readers of the fact that humans and their history are actually quite new, measured in tens of thousands of years as opposed to about twenty billion years or so since the big bang.

Other instances of time in this poem serve to continually rearrange readers' expectations. They range from the localized situations that could take place within a contemporary lifetime, such as sitting up late or meeting other people, to the prehistoric scene of the first person to inhabit a room and the isolation that resulted. Because the poem's sense of time is dealt with unevenly, with past and present woven together without a straight chronological ordering, it is able to examine what humanity is and, simultaneously, how it came to be that way. The present may be an echo of the past, but, according to the way the poem has used the word "echo" and presented the idea of it, the meaning of this relationship is much more complex than just noting that one thing follows the other.

There are two significant cases that present this poem's sense of time. One has to do with the image of the echoing well of ice, and it takes place across stanzas 10 through 12. Stanza 10 begins a line of thought that does not follow logically from the one that came before it, breaking away from the previous idea with the word "but," a weak way to obscure the change in direction. This stanza tells of a situation from the childhood of a typical person, experiencing the world from a crib or bassinet, looking up at hands, voices, and a ceiling; stanza 11 tells of a situation later in life; stanza 12 takes the same life and ties it to the primitive life from centuries past by calling the wall of the contemporary room a "wall of ice." The forward progress of one person's story is quickly transferred to the story of the species, bound together by the presence of the echo.

The other significant trick of time in this poem is verbal. In line 18, discussing people who think of a room when they think of childhood, Merwin explains the room that comes to mind is one "in which the person they were is thinking of a forest." There is seldom a case in which "were" and "is" belong together, and it takes a skillful poet to construct a phrase in which they can exist comfortably side by side. The conflict of putting past and present together like this, almost making them one, is what the poem is all about. It is also the basic principle of the echo, when what happened a few moments ago is happening now.

The one place where "The Horizons of Rooms" does not imply an echo is its title. No echo comes from the horizon, which is too flat and distant to bounce sound back. This is the poem's deepest contradiction: The horizon is everything that a room is not, and vice versa. This may be Merwin's ultimate point, that rooms lack the freedom that a true horizon holds forth. It isn't just a freedom from walls that rooms prohibit, but freedom from the echoes of the near and distant past.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on "The Horizons of Rooms," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Wendy Perkins

Perkins teaches American and British literature and film. In this essay, Perkins explores the poem's statement on the modern separation between nature and humanity.

In his article on W. S. Merwin for the *Yale Review*, Laurence Lieberman writes that Merwin's poetry often "pronounces a judgment against modern men," in that they have "betrayed [that which] had power to save us." One such redemptive force that Merwin identifies in his poetry is nature, which, Lieberman notes, the poet insists can save us from "a moral vacuity that is absolute and irrevocable." In many of his poems, Merwin condemns the modern impulse to ignore and separate ourselves from nature. In "Horizons of Rooms," he illustrates this theme in an exploration of our alienation from the natural world and the sense of nothingness that results.

In his review of Merwin's *The Rain in the Trees*, Mark Jarman determines that the "presiding metaphor" of the poems in that volume "is that of a lost language." In "Horizons of Rooms," a sense of language lost is evident throughout the poem in its spare verse, devoid of interior and exterior details. This sparsity suggests that the consequence of one's alienation from nature is a universe stripped of color and meaning.

The poem reinforces its sense of alienation as it engrosses one in the thresholds between past and present. Merwin moves readers back and forth through time, from a period when humans enjoyed a communion with nature to the modern age, when people have placed themselves in rooms that sep-

arate them from the natural world, a world that people have now come to ignore. The title suggests that the spaces in which people presently exist have become their entire world; the boundaries of these rooms combine into an artificial horizon that people cannot see beyond.

The speaker notes that even though "there have been rooms for such a short time," people are no longer aware of what exists in the physical world outside the room, "unless it is raining or snowing." Nature no longer has any relevance to people, unless it interferes with their daily lives, and so they dismiss it. Yet, modern spaces do not provide for people the sense of connection and comfort they experience in nature. Modern spaces instead reinforce a sense of spiritual void. The poem begins its articulation of this type of meaninglessness in its descriptions of each of individuals inhabiting modern rooms that are "dark," the only adjective Merwin uses in the poem to describe these man-made spaces.

In the beginning of time, there were no rooms, only a sky that "many have forgotten." As humans developed, they created natural rooms consisting "of stone and ice and a fallen tree." The speaker defines these rooms as living spaces, where the beating of hearts was echoed off of the walls of ice. These shelters where hearts were born resulted in a dynamic unification of humans with nature, all merging into the landscape of the universe.

In the modern world, people have alienated themselves from this comforting union with a landscape that echoes the barrenness at the core of our lives. Now, "the echoing wall of ice" remains empty. Now, people have only childhood memories of a communion with nature, moments when they remember "thinking of a forest." People view the landscape "between moments of remembering a room at another time." The "first hands and voices" of the past existed in the spaces of nature; yet as people confine themselves in man-made rooms, the natural spaces become empty, with no sound to echo off the walls of ice. People catch glimpses of the mountains now only as they pass between rooms; the mountains are seen but not known or appreciated.

Modern rooms refuse to offer the same kind of shelter as did the natural spaces. The walls do not echo people's spirits, and therefore people do not have a real connection with them. The rooms remain "dark," stripped of meaning, alien. People's senses do not become engaged in these rooms that lack any distinctive features. As a result, people are left feeling incomplete.

The individuals left in the rooms refuse to acknowledge the blankness of their experience in their artificial spaces and the subsequent spiritual void that results."

When the speaker notes, "we meet in a room and go on from room to room," Merwin suggests that modern lives consist of meaningless movements in and out of these spaces, artificial boundaries people construct to provide themselves with a sense of order and completion. As a result, people have turned their backs on anything that exists outside those boundaries, including the natural world that presents them with a constant source of vitality and wonder. The speaker describes the natural rooms as being imbued with a creative and life-sustaining force. Nature creates its own shapes that can be adapted through the imagination of the inhabitant into a sheltering space where beating hearts are echoed off of living walls, and where people communicate with nature and with each other through their hands and voices.

Today, people's lack of perspective and imagination becomes reflected in the passivity they exhibit as they "go on living" in their dark, characterless rooms, absent of any distinguishing details. The only activity conducted in these rooms is sleeping and passing from room to room, suggesting the somnambulant state of the inhabitants as they face the meaninglessness of their artificial worlds.

In his descriptions of the sleeping inhabitants of the rooms, Merwin suggests that people's self-imposed alienation from nature results in the death of the soul. The "products" of these rooms, those individuals who are surrounded and cut off by the blankness that characterizes these artificial spaces, are carried to their "final uplands" near the end of the poem. Yet, even with the threat of this spiritual death, people continue to "go on from room to room," acknowledging that "there was something before," but unable to articulate what that something was. People's focus is solely on what the room has "become by good fortune," for these

modern rooms are the only spaces that they now value.

Ironically, this anticlimactic ending refuses to focus on the death of the soul, represented by the individuals carried to the final uplands. It instead ends with the false note of accomplishment, that the goal of attaining the perfect space has been achieved. Thus the break with the natural world has been made complete. The individuals left in the rooms refuse to acknowledge the blankness of their experience in their artificial spaces and the subsequent spiritual void that results.

Edwin Folsom in his article for *Shenandoah* notes that Merwin's poetry shares a similar subject to that of the poetry of Walt Whitman in its exploration of American values. Merwin's themes, however, as well as his distinctive poetic style, contradicts Whitman's nineteenth-century romanticism. Folsom writes that Merwin's poetry "often implicitly and sometimes explicitly responds to Whitman; his twentieth century sparsity and soberness … answer, temper, Whitman's nineteenth century expansiveness and exuberance—his enthusiasm over the American creation."

Merwin's poetic technique in "Horizons of Rooms" helps to illustrate and reinforce his thematic focus. The discordant rhythms of his free verse lines reflect the destructive separation of the self from the natural world. Each stanza consists of two lines, but they do not become traditional couplets, refusing to maintain a consistent meter or rime.

The sense of abrupt separation is reinforced by the seemingly arbitrary line breaks. Lines end not at the end of a thought, but in the middle of one, suggesting a sense of disorder. The breaks, however, have been planned carefully to highlight the poem's subject. Ten lines end with the word "room." The sense of disorder that emerges from the broken thoughts coupled with the focus on the rooms reinforces Merwin's commentary on the destructiveness of these unnatural spaces. The poem's lack of punctuation illustrates the title's dominant image: the series of empty images represented by the succession of rooms merge to become an endless horizon of artificial spaces that prevent from experiencing the natural world beyond its borders.

The imagery of the poem displays an elemental surrealism that suggests the artificiality of the modern constructed spaces and the individual's subconscious response to them. The rooms themselves, as well as the movement in and out of them, express an unconscious realm of experience, reinforced by the lack of descriptive details. The only room the inhabitants appear to express a conscious appreciation of it is nature's "room," where beating hearts echo off of walls, and hands and voices emerge. When the speaker shifts the focus to modern rooms, the inhabitants appear in a dream-like state, moving from room to room without purpose and without noting any differentiating qualities. The only activity that occurs in these rooms is sleeping, again reinforcing the unconscious nature of the experience within them. These surrealist elements reinforce the sense of nothingness experienced by the characters in the modern world, who have constructed spaces that isolate them from nature.

Edward J. Brunner, in his book on Merwin, notes that humans strive to shape their world through the construction of "stable orders," but Merwin's poetry insists that the natural world "will endure and persist while what we shape over and against it is subject to loss and decay." In "Horizons of Rooms," Merwin expresses his disdain for people's ignorance of and subsequent separation from nature and acknowledges the destructive sense of alienation that results.

Source: Wendy Perkins, Critical Essay on "The Horizons of Rooms," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

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This book examines the works of Merwin, Wendell Berry, A. R. Ammons, and Gary Snyder and the relationship between poetry and the environment. It contains some difficult philosophy that students might find a little challenging.

The Lady of Shalott

Alfred, Lord Tennyson

1842

"The Lady of Shalott" tells the story of a woman who lives in a tower in Shalott, which is an island on a river that runs, along with the road beside it, to Camelot, the setting of the legends about King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. Every day, the woman weaves a tapestry picture of the landscape that is visible from her window, including Camelot. There is, however, a curse on her; the woman does not know the cause of the curse, but she knows that she cannot look directly out of the window, so she views the subjects of her artwork through a mirror that is beside her. The woman is happy to weave, but is tired of looking at life only as a reflection. One day, Sir Lancelot rides by, looking bold and handsome in his shining armor, and singing. The woman goes to the window to look directly out of it, and the moment she does, she knows that the curse is upon her. So she leaves the tower, finds a boat at the side of the river, writes "The Lady of Shalott" on the side of the boat, and floats off down the river toward Camelot. As she drifts along, singing and observing all of the sights that were forbidden to her before, she dies. The boat floats past Camelot, and all of the knights make the sign of the cross upon seeing a corpse go by, but Lancelot, seeing her for the first time, notes, "She has a lovely face."

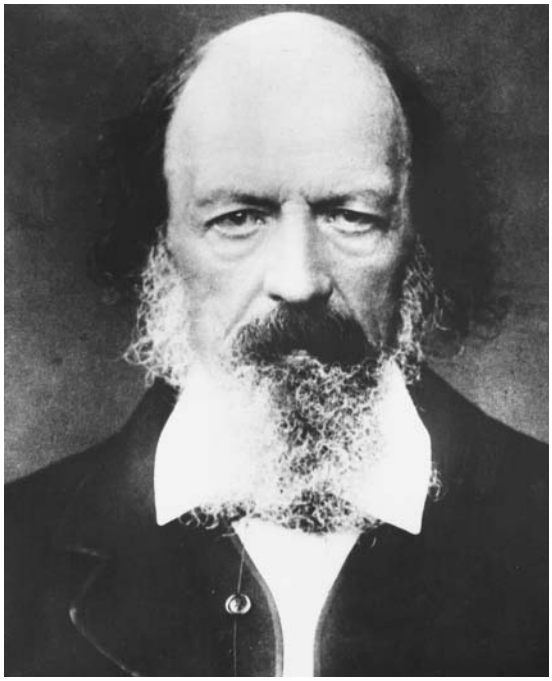
This poem was first published in 1832, when Tennyson was 23 years old, in a volume called *Poems*. Up to that point, Tennyson had received great critical acclaim, and had won national awards, but the critics savagely attacked the 1832 book, mostly

because of poems such as "The Lady of Shalott" that dealt with fantasy situations instead of realistic ones. The next year, 1833, Tennyson's best friend died, which affected the poet as greatly as would anything in his life. For a long time, during a period that later came to be known as "the ten years' silence," nothing of Tennyson's was published. In 1842, a new volume, also called *Poems*, was published, to great critical acclaim. The new book had a slightly revised version of "The Lady of Shalott," and this version is the one that is studied today.

Author Biography

Tennyson was born August 6, 1809, in Somersby, Lincolnshire, England. The fourth of twelve children, he was the son of a clergyman who maintained his office grudgingly after his younger brother had been named heir to their father's wealthy estate. According to biographers, Tennyson's father, a man of violent temper, responded to his virtual disinheritance by indulging in drugs and alcohol. Each of the Tennyson children later suffered through some period of drug addiction or mental and physical illness, prompting the family's grim speculation on the "black blood" of the Tennysons. Biographers surmise that the general melancholy expressed in much of Tennyson's verse is rooted in the unhappy environment at Somersby.

Tennyson enrolled at Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1827. There he met Arthur Hallam, a brilliant undergraduate who became Tennyson's closest friend and ardent admirer of his poetry. Hallam's enthusiasm was welcomed by Tennyson, whose personal circumstances had led to a growing despondency: his father died in 1831, leaving Tennyson's family in debt and forcing his early departure from school; one of Tennyson's brothers suffered a mental breakdown and required institutionalization; and Tennyson himself was morbidly fearful of falling victim to epilepsy or madness. Hallam's untimely death in 1833, which prompted the series of elegies later comprising *In Memoriam*, contributed greatly to Tennyson's despair. In describing this period, he wrote: "I suffered what seemed to me to shatter all my life so that I desired to die rather than to live." For nearly a decade after Hallam's death, Tennyson published no poetry. During this time, he became engaged to Emily Sellwood, but financial difficulties and Tennyson's persistent anxiety over the condition of his health



Lord Tennyson

resulted in their separation. In 1842, an unsuccessful financial venture cost Tennyson nearly everything he owned, causing him to succumb to a deep depression that required medical treatment. Tennyson later resumed his courtship of Sellwood, and they were married in 1850. The timely success of *In Memoriam*, published that same year, ensured Tennyson's appointment as Poet Laureate, succeeding William Wordsworth. In 1883, Tennyson accepted a peerage, the first poet to be so honored strictly on the basis of literary achievement. Tennyson died October 6, 1892, and was interred in Poet's Corner of Westminister Abbey.

Poem Text

I

On either side the river lie
Long fields of barley and of rye,
That clothe the wold and meet the sky;
And thro' the field the road runs by
    To many-tower'd Camelot;
And up and down the people go,
Gazing where the lilies blow
Round an island there below,
    The island of Shalott.

Willows whiten, aspens quiver,
Little breezes dusk and shiver
Thro' the wave that runs for ever
By the island in the river
    Flowing down to Camelot.
Four grey walls, and four grey towers,
Overlook a space of flowers,
And the silent isle imbowers
    The Lady of Shalott.

By the margin, willow veil'd,
Slide the heavy barges trail'd
By slow horses; and unhail'd
The shallop flitteth silken-sail'd
    Skimming down to Camelot:
But who hath seen her wave her hand?
Or at the casement seen her stand?
Or is she known in all the land,
    The Lady of Shalott?

Only reapers, reaping early
In among the bearded barley,
Hear a song that echoes cheerly
From the river winding clearly,
    Down to tower'd Camelot:
And by the moon the reaper weary,
Piling sheaves in uplands airy,
Listening, whispers "'Tis the fairy
    Lady of Shalott."

II

There she weaves by night and day
A magic web with colors gay.
She has heard a whisper say,
A curse is on her if she stay
    To look down to Camelot.
She knows not what the curse may be,
And so she weaveth steadily,
And little other care hath she,
    The Lady of Shalott.

And moving thro' a mirror clear
That hangs before her all the year,
Shadows of the world appear.
There she sees the highway near
    Winding down to Camelot:
There the river eddy whirls.
And there the surly village-churls
And the red cloaks of market girls,
    Pass onward from Shalott.

Sometimes a troop of damsels glad,
An abbot on an ambling pad,
Sometimes a curly shepherd-lad,
Or long-hair'd page in crimson clad
    Goes by to tower'd Camelot;
And sometimes thro' the mirror blue
The knights come riding two and two:
She hath no loyal knight and true,
    The Lady of Shalott.

But in her web she still delights
To weave the mirror's magic sights,
For often thro' the silent nights
A funeral, with plumes and lights
    And music, went to Camelot:
Or when the moon was overhead,
Came two young lovers lately wed;
"I am half sick of shadows," said
    The Lady of Shalott.

III

A bow-shot from her bower-eaves,
He rode between the barley-sheaves,
The sun came dazzling through the leaves,
And flamed upon the brazen greaves
    Of bold Sir Lancelot.
A red-cross knight for ever kneel'd
To a lady in his shield,
That sparkled on the yellow field,
    Beside remote Shalott.

The gemmy bridle glitter'd free,
Like to some branch of stars we see
Hung in the golden Galaxy.
The bridle bells rang merrily
    As he rode down to Camelot:
And from his blazoned baldric slung
A mighty silver bugle hung,
And as he rode his armour rung,
    Beside remote Shalott.

All in the blue unclouded weather
Thick-jewell'd shone the saddle-leather,
The helmet and the helmet-feather
Burn'd like one burning flame together,
    As he rode down to Camelot.
As often through the purple night,
Below the starry clusters bright,
Some bearded meteor, trailing light,
    Moves over still Shalott.

His broad clear brow in sunlight glow'd;
On burnish'd hooves his war-horse trode;
From underneath his helmet flow'd
His coal-black curls as on he rode,
    As he rode down to Camelot.
From the bank and from the river
He flashed into the crystal mirror,
"Tirra lirra," by the river
    Sang Sir Lancelot.

She left the web, she left the loom,
She made three paces thro' the room,
She saw the water-lily bloom,
She saw the helmet and the plume,
    She looked down to Camelot.
Out flew the web and floated wide;
The mirror cracked from side to side;
"The curse is come upon me," cried
    The Lady of Shalott.

IV

In the stormy east-wind straining,
The pale yellow woods were waning,
The broad stream in his banks complaining,
Heavily the low sky raining
    Over tower'd Camelot;
Down she came and found a boat

Beneath a willow left afloat,
And round about the prow she wrote
The Lady of Shalott.

And down the river's dim expanse
Like some bold seër in a trance,
Seeing all his own mischance—
With a glassy countenance
Did she look to Camelot.
And at the closing of the day
She loosed the chain, and down she lay;
The broad stream bore her far away,
The Lady of Shalott.

Lying, robed in snowy white
That loosely flew to left and right—
The leaves upon her falling light—
Thro' the noises of the night
She floated down to Camelot:
And as the boat-head wound along
The willowy hills and fields among,
They heard her singing her last song,
The Lady of Shalott.

Heard a carol, mournful, holy,
Chanted loudly, chanted lowly,
Till her blood was frozen slowly,
And her eyes were darkened wholly,
Turned to tower'd Camelot.
For ere she reach'd upon the tide
The first house by the water-side,
Singing in her song she died,
The Lady of Shalott.

Under tower and balcony,
By garden-wall and gallery,
A gleaming shape she floated by,
Dead-pale between the houses high,
Silent into Camelot.
Out upon the wharfs they came,
Knight and burgher, lord and dame,
And round the prow they read her name,
The Lady of Shalott.

Who is this? and what is here?
And in the lighted palace near
Died the sound of royal cheer;
And they cross'd themselves for fear,
All the knights at Camelot:
But Lancelot mused a little space;
He said, "She has a lovely face;
God in His mercy lend her grace,
The Lady of Shalott."

Poem Summary

Lines 1–9

This poem starts off by giving a visual overview of the situation. The reader is shown the river and the road, and, far in the distance, the towers of Camelot. The people mentioned in this section are not given specific identities, rather, they

Media Adaptations

- A 1995 videocassette entitled "*The Lady of Shalott": A Poem and Its Readers* is available from Films for the Humanities & Sciences. It features a reading of the poem and responses by a variety of interested people.
- Encyclopedia Britannica Films produced a 16 mm. film in 1970 called *The Lady of Shalott*, with Cecil Bellamy reading the poem, plus a variety of music and visuals related to it.
- "The Lady of Shalott" is included on a Caedmon recording of *The Poetry of Tennyson*, read by Dame Sybil Thorndike and Sir Lewis Casson. It was recorded in 1972 and is also available on audiocassette.
- A four-album set released by Allyn & Bacon in 1955, *Master Recordings in English Literature*, includes this poem. V. C. Clinton-Baddeley reads.
- A two-album set, *Narrative Poetry*, part of the *London Library of Recorded English* series, includes this poem. It was released by Columbia in 1980, with selections read by Cecil Trouncer, Julian Randall, John Laurie, and V. C. Clinton-Baddeley.
- The second entry in the Argo series, *The English Poets from Chaucer to Yeats*, is devoted to Tennyson. This recording, *Alfred, Lord Tennyson*, made in association with the British Council and Oxford University Press, includes selections from Tennyson read by Frank Duncan, Michael Horndurn, and David King.
- "The Lady of Shalott" is depicted in a fantasy painting by John William Waterhouse in 1875. The painting became commercially available as a poster from Shorewood Fine Arts Reproductions in 1999.

are common people going about their daily business. It is from their perspective that the poem first shows Shalott, an island in the river.

Lines 10–18

The imagery here is of nature, of freedom, of movement. This is contrasted with the inflexible, colorless walls and towers of Camelot in line 15. The flowers in the next line are not described by their colors or even by their motion in the breeze, but are "overlooked" by the grey walls, as if they are held prisoner. This tone of severity in the middle of nature's healthy activity prepares the reader for the introduction of the Lady of Shalott in line 18.

Lines 19–27

Lines 19–23 focus again on the human activity going on around the island: small river barges pass with heavy loads, small, quick boats called "shallops" skim past the shore around the tower, referred to here as a "margin." With all of this activity, the poem asks who has seen the woman who lives in the tower, implying that she is mysterious, unknown, "veiled."

Lines 28–36

In the fourth stanza of Section I, the imagery changes from relying on the senses of sight and touch (as implied by the plants' motions in the wind in stanza 2) to the sense of sound. The poem tells us that the lady who lives in the tower has not been seen, and is known only to the farmers who hear her singing while they work in their fields so early in the morning that the moon is still out. Because they never see her but only hear her singing, the reapers think of the Lady of Shalott as a spirit, a "fairy." Up to this point, the reader has not been introduced to her either, and knows only as much about her as those outside of the tower know.

Lines 37–45

The Lady seems to be happy where she is: her songs echo "cheerly" (line 30) and she weaves her picture in happy, gay colors (line 38) and she has no care in the world other than weaving (line 44). In this stanza, though, the reader finds out that the Lady will have a curse visited on her if she looks at Camelot. This idea combines many familiar themes: readers generally recognize the maiden trapped in the tower from the tale of Rapunzel or the maiden placed under a spell from the story of Sleeping Beauty; in addition, according to Greek myth, Penelope, the wife of Ulysses, avoided men who wanted to court her while her husband was away by constantly weaving, but then unravelling her work at night so that she would never be done. This is an appropriate allusion because both Penelope and the Lady of Shalott use their craft as a substitute for human involvement. Strangely, the Lady does not know why she has to avoid direct interaction, nor does she seem to care.

Lines 46–54

Not able to look directly at the world out of her window, the Lady observes it through a mirror. This stanza describes a few of the things she sees in that mirror. The images she sees are described as "shadows." According to the Greek philosopher Plato, we experience life like a person would who was chained up inside of the mouth of a cave: he cannot see out, he can only see the shadows of people passing the cave flickering on the wall and he thinks that the shadows are reality. In that same way we all, according to Plato, mistake images of reality for actual reality, which we cannot see. For the Lady of Shalott, reality is not the broad landscape but the images (Tennyson calls them "shadows") she sees in the mirror.

Lines 55–63

The people in this stanza are in motion, going about their busy lives while hers is solitary and static. Reflected in her mirror she sees a group of happy girls, a clergyman, a page, and, sometimes, the knights of Camelot, riding in columns.

Lines 64–72

The action of the poem begins in this stanza, where the Lady's attitude changes: in line 55, she is delighted with the picture she is weaving of the outside world, but, in line 71, the first time she speaks, she says she is unhappy with her situation. In between the two, she observes people participating in events—a funeral is mentioned first, then a wedding—that make her aware of how lonely it is to be unable to participate.

Lines 73–81

The image of Sir Lancelot shoots into the Lady's mirror with the force of an arrow fired from the roof just outside of her bedroom window. The description that Tennyson gives of the knight mixes his bold, powerful look with his chivalrous actions. Sunlight glints on his shiny armor, making him look as if he is on fire, and the speaker of the poem also tells us that he is the type of knight who always, even if dressed for battle, took time to kneel when he encountered a lady. His knighthood confirms that he is a man of the highest honor and nobility.

Lines 82–90

This second stanza of Section III shifts the description of Lancelot from the visual to the audible. The bells of his bridle ring "merrily" as he rides, his armor rings as well, and in his equipment belt, the "baldric," is a "mighty bugle"; the musical notes of which communicate the situation at hand.

Lines 91–99

This stanza, in which Sir Lancelot is likened to a meteor, glowing as if he were on fire, splendid in his armor and "trailing light," serves to emphasize what an impressive sight he was as he rode toward Camelot.

Lines 100–108

After the intricate description that the reader has been given of Lancelot, it is in this stanza, in line 106, that the Lady is able to see him for the first time. Tennyson says that he "flashed into the crystal mirror," which is fitting because his shining armor seems to flash everywhere he goes, but it is especially appropriate because the Lady earlier referred to the images in her mirror as "shadows" (line 71), which are of course dark and dull.

Also of significance is that Sir Lancelot sings. The immediate cause of the Lady's attraction to him, the thing that prompts her to look out of the window, is not visual, but audible; here Tennyson suggests the fullness of life that the Lady cannot avoid any longer. Lancelot sings a traditional folk refrain, which would be historically accurate and would invoke a sense of nostalgia in readers of Tennyson's time.

Lines 109–117

Although it is Sir Lancelot's singing that makes the Lady tempt fate by going to the window and looking out, she never actually sees him, just his helmet and the feather upon it. The irony of this is buried, however, within the rush of mystical occurrences which indicate that the curse the Lady mentioned in line 40 is indeed real; the mirror cracks, the tapestry unravels. This could also be given a psychological interpretation, with the events that are presented as "actually" happening being explained as symbols of what is going on in the Lady's head: in this interpretation, the moment the woman becomes involved in the outside world her sense of self (the mirror) and of her accomplishments (the tapestry) comes apart, as if social interaction is a curse to the ego.

Lines 118–126

The season has changed—earlier in the poem, when the barley was being harvested (lines 28–29), the setting was late summer; line 119 describes an autumn scene (the falling leaves of line 138 support this). Although the time described does not seem to allow for a change of seasons, the magical element (most obvious in the unexplained source of the Lady's curse) creates an atmosphere where this compression of time is not unreasonable. It is significant that the Lady takes the time to write her name on the side of the boat: if one accepts the interpretation that the mirror symbolizes self-knowledge, then she is a woman whose identity has been "shattered" at this point of the poem. She has no name to sign, just a title ("Lady") and a location ("Shalott").

Lines 127–135

"Mischance" means misfortune or bad luck—the Lady understands that she is doomed as she looks toward Camelot, which had been so attractive to her that it (in the person of Sir Lancelot) forced her to look, sealing her fate. Earlier, she looked at Camelot through a mirror, seeing it where her own reflection would normally be; in line 130 the look on her face ("countenance") is described as glassy, which suggests the mirror, but does not reflect.

Lines 136–144

"They" mentioned in line 143 are the reapers who earlier in the poem were so charmed by the Lady's voice.

Lines 145–153

The death of the Lady of Shalott is surrounded with standard death images: cold, darkness, and mournful singing, among others. This is a transitional stanza, connecting the dying woman's departure with the dead woman's arrival at Camelot.

Lines 154–162

The Lady's corpse is described as "dead-pale" and "gleaming," providing a stark visual contrast to the night as she floats past Camelot. Tennyson lists the occupants of the castle in line 160, as they are probably becoming aware of the Lady's existence for the first time, although she was very aware of theirs. They are described as curious, going out of their houses and onto the wharf to look, walking around to read the front of the boat. This stanza ends leaving the reader to anticipate what effect the sight will have on the people of Camelot.

- Read about the presidential administration of John F. Kennedy. Why was it called "Camelot"? Find particular figures from the Arthurian myths that correspond to figures in U.S. politics. In particular, who would you say is most like the Lady of Shalott?
- The Lady of Shalott could only look at the world through a mirror, but mirrors were quite different in Tennyson's time than they are now. Research the history of how mirrors are made and explain how that would affect what she saw.
- Write a poem or a short story that explains how the Lady of Shalott came to have this curse put on her.
- This poem has been put to music several times. Adapt it to your favorite type of music, cutting out parts that you think are unnecessary. Explain your choices.
- The Lady of Shalott weaves a picture of what she sees outside her window. Research tapestries from the Middle Ages and report on what kinds of images they present and what kinds of stories they tell.
- Assume that the Lady of Shalott is not under a curse at all, that she cannot go outside because of psychological inhibitions. Report on what treatments are currently available for someone in her situation.

Lines 163–171

In the first five lines of this stanza, the initial curiosity of the people of Camelot turns to fear, the primitive fear of seeing a dead person, and the way these Christian people respond in order to protect themselves when frightened is to make the sign of the cross. Tennyson brings this entire long poem to a climax at this point: the Lady of Shalott was so enchanted with the idea of Camelot that she eventually was forced to look out of the window to see it herself, and in these lines she produces an emotional effect that is almost equally as strong. But Lancelot, whose stunning presence affected the Lady so personally that it ultimately drew her to her death, looks at her, thinks for "a little space," and finally, dispassionately, remarks that she is pretty. Tennyson makes Lancelot's next line a standard benediction of the time that might have been said over anyone, whether friend or stranger.

Themes

Deprivation

In this poem, the main character exists under a spell without knowing what its origin is or why it has been put on her and without thinking of how she can remove it. She seems to accept it as her fate: "And so she weaveth steadily, / And little other care has she," the poem explains. The one stipulation of this mysterious curse is that she cannot look out her window at the panorama of nature and humanity that is so clearly outlined in the poem's first section. She does not seem to care that she is deprived of direct contact with the world. She does not question why she has been cursed like this. Tennyson does not provide an explanation for the curse; he does not offer a reason why this woman is denied the immediate pleasures and problems of real life. Perhaps the poet wanted the psychology behind her captivity to be open-ended and to invite readers to apply various interpretations to her situation and behavior. The important point is that she is isolated, forced to observe the world indirectly through a mirror, and she does not seem to object to this deprivation until her interest in handsome Lancelot overcomes her initial detachment.

Art and Artifice

The Lady of Shalott's view of reality depends on the reflection she perceives in her mirror. Mirrors may be thought of as devices that accurately duplicate the scene they reflect, but images in mirrors are different than reality. They reverse the subject and relegate it to two dimensions. Moreover, the objects reflected in this mirror cannot hurt the Lady of Shalott the same way objects viewed directly can. The reflected scenes of the Camelot countryside are further altered by her artistic imagination, as she incorporates them into her tapestry: it is her delight "[t]o weave the mirror's magic sights." The Lady is thus presented as an artist, more involved in her creative version of her indirect experience than with life experience itself. Indeed, she represents the nineteenth-century em-

phasis on the problems and issues connected to the artist's subjectivity. Reality as she knows it is flat but gives the sense of depth; she transforms that reality imaginatively with her bright threads, yet she also renders it two-dimensional. When she faces actual reality by looking out the window, it breaks the mirror that she no longer needs to see through and also destroys her handiwork. Reality makes the art she has created vanish.

Infatuation

Quite a few critics suggest that the Lady of Shalott dies of a broken heart because she is suddenly infatuated with the dazzlingly beautiful Lancelot and he does not return her affection. This reading applies to the traditional tale that is the source for the piece; in the story of Elaine of Astolat, Elaine does indeed suffer from rejection. The Lady of Shalott, however, is a variation on that character, different in several ways. Tennyson changed the setting from Astolat to Shalott, an ancient variation of the name. In his poem, the Lady and Lancelot never meet: when he does see her for the first time, dead in her boat, he expresses belated interest.

Readers are told of Lancelot's physical appeal well before the Lady knows anything about it. He is described as having a broad, clear brow; his shield bares a picture of a knight kneeling to a lady and his saddle is decked with jewels. But what draws the Lady to look out the window is the sound of his beautiful singing. As soon as she sees him, her weaving literally flies out the window, and her mirror cracks. "The curse is come upon me," she says.

This reaction can be seen as symbolic. Being distracted by Lancelot brings the curse upon her. The curse may be understood as the loss of her creative perception of the world. Stated differently, she loses her way of keeping her mind occupied with work. In turn, the mirror's cracking suggests the idea that she can no longer focus only on artwork once her interest in another person draws her into the world at large. She is not "rejected" by Lancelot because, in this version, he is unaware of her until the end; still, she finds herself so drawn to him that she takes her life into her own hands, just to see the face that goes with that voice.

Liberation

After she realizes that the curse has come upon her, the Lady of Shalott does not die immediately. Her exposure to the real world, even though it means her death, also means that she can express herself directly in the world. She leaves the tower, finds a boat, and writes her title on it before lying in it and casting off. Her trip down the river is her passive entry into the world of action. Or it could be understood as her acquiescence to her feelings. Curiously, even though it is Lancelot who distracts her from her weaving and thus seals her fate, her final action does not focus on him. She lets the river take her where it will, past all of the people and places she only has intuited partially in the mirror, and she sings, expressing herself in this moment to the world around her.

Style

"The Lady of Shalott" is a ballad. There is no standard structure for a ballad, but the term refers to a poem or a song that tells the story of a person or people, usually with details that give them qualities that are larger than life.

The poem is divided into four numbered sections, with each section, like a story, rising to a climax before it ends. This structure helps capture the reader's interest, enticing the reader to find out what will happen next. Each section is broken down, not quite equally, into stanzas, which are sections in poetry similar to paragraphs in prose. There are four stanzas in Parts I and II, five stanzas in Part III, and six in Part IV. Keeping the early sections shorter allows the poet to hold the reader's attention.

The stanzas all contain the same basic structure: there are nine lines, with a rhyme scheme of *aaaabcccb*. This means that in each stanza the final sounds of the first four lines (coded as the *a* sound) are similar; Lines 5 and 9 rhyme (the *b* sound); and lines 6, 7, and 8 rhyme with each other. Unlike some poets, who try to de-emphasize or conceal rhymes, Tennyson brings attention to rhymes by making most of the lines end-stopped—the flow of words is brought to a halt by punctuation. This strong emphasis on rhymes helps to give the poem the feeling of an ancient tale, since it resembles poems from the time before printing was developed, when news was carried from town to town by word of mouth and rhyming aided memorization.

The lines of this poem are written in iambic tetrameter. An "iamb" is a unit of poetry (referred to as a "poetic foot") that has an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable—in the first line, for example, the syllables "eith" "side" "riv" and

"lie" are accented more heavily than the syllables that come before them. Iambic poetry closely follows the up-and-down pattern of English speech, making the poem's structure hardly noticeable. Tetrameter means that there are four feet to each line ("tetra" is the Greek word for "four"), for a total of eight syllables to each line.

Historical Context

Arthurian Legend

The character Tennyson calls the Lady of Shalott is based on Elaine of Astolat, one of the figures from the legend of King Arthur. Traditionally, she was identified only as "demoiselle d'escalot," the fair maid of Astolat. It was Sir Thomas Malory who gave her the name "Elaine" in his 1485 book *Le Morte d'Arthur*. Tennyson wrote about her as Elaine, the Lilly Maid of Astolat, in *The Idylls of the King* published in 1885, but in his poem, "The Lady of Shalott" he has taken liberties, leaving her without a name and changing "Astolat" to the archaic "Shalott." In both versions, the character dies of unrequited love for Sir Lancelot and floats down the river in a barge, to be wondered about by the common people who are going about their daily concerns.

The legends of King Arthur and his knights are mythical, although many researchers have put forth theories about the actual historical existence of the people they describe. The legends began appearing during the Middle Ages, between the fifth and fifteenth centuries. The earliest record of a King Arthur is in a seventh-century Welsh text. Arthurian stories were told all over Europe, particularly in France. The first continuous narrative of the legend, with most of the knights and supporting characters and specific episodes that readers know in the twenty-first century, appeared in the *Historia Regum Britainne* ("History of the Kings of Britain") by the English writer Geoffrey of Monmouth, published in or around 1139. It was this book that identified the Arthur of Camelot as the sixth-century king, son of Uther Pendragon, who kept council with his court of knights at a round table and was married to Guinevere. Other historians have guessed that there were other kings named Arthur who could have inspired the legends.

Lancelot, the bold knight who is mentioned in this poem, is not mentioned in the earlier legends. He first appears in the late twelfth century, in *Le Chevalier de Charette* by Chrétien de Troyes and *Lanzelot* by Ulrich von Zatzikhofen. This character quickly became an integral part of the myth, a favorite character because he embodies the qualities of courage and chivalry that befit the tales.

According to legend, Lancelot is born "Galahad" but has his name changed early in life when his family is killed by a fire (he later has a son named Galahad with Elaine of Corbenic, who is different than Elaine of Astolat). He is raised by "The Lady of the Lake," a mystical character who is said to have given Arthur the sword, Excalibur, which establishes him as king. It is her influence that establishes Lancelot on his eighteenth birthday as a knight of the Round Table. There, he proves to be the most valiant knight, but he also becomes treacherous: he and Arthur's wife, Guinevere, fall in love and have an affair.

It is their sexual relationship that destroys the court at Camelot. When Arthur finds out about it, he orders Guinevere to be executed for treason. Lancelot and his army attack, spiriting the queen away and killing many knights. Guinevere is returned to Arthur, and Lancelot goes to France, where he establishes a rival court. In later years, the animosity between the two men cools, and Lancelot returns to Camelot before Arthur's death to ask his forgiveness. He then retires to live a secluded, monkish life at his castle.

Romanticism

In terms of literary movements, Tennyson is most closely associated with the Victorian era. Queen Victoria liked his work and appointed him Poet Laureate of Britain, a post he held from 1850 to 1892. The first version of this poem appeared in 1833, though, when Tennyson was in his twenties. Its sensibilities reveal a closer attachment to the Romantic movement, which was at its peak at that time.

No category can capture the sensibilities of all of the artists who worked in a particular time, but it is sometimes helpful to name philosophical movements and to group thinkers with similar ideas in order to get a sense of the prevailing mood of an era. Romanticism was the prevailing mood at the end of the eighteenth century and well into the nineteenth. It is a reaction against the previous mood, which is called the Enlightenment, so named because it emphasized rationality, which led to the drive for political equality as the most rational way for states to govern. Two thinkers associated with the Enlightenment are Thomas Jefferson and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, both of whom were instrumen-

Compare & Contrast

- **1842:** An important source of entertainment is books and magazines. More middle-class people are familiar with the mythic stories as they have been preserved in literature for generations.

  Today: There is still some familiarity with King Arthur's Court, but most people know it as it is depicted in movies or in theme park recreations.

- **1842:** The English countryside is more open and unpolluted. Cities, particularly London, are crowded and polluted, but people who have been to the country can easily imagine the landscape that Tennyson describes.

  Today: For the most part, the English countryside is divided into walled-off fields and farm tracks. Since coal burning is illegal in cities, urban air pollution is reduced.

- **1842:** Alfred Tennyson was a young, struggling poet who had to quit writing for a time because he could not pay his bills.

  Today: Alfred, Lord Tennyson, is considered an important writer and his works are studied in English literature courses.

- **1842:** Scientists do not understand microbiological causes for death, which makes it more mysterious; thus, poets explore rich metaphorical possibilities for explaining what causes sudden death.

  Today: Microbiology explains many symptoms to be caused by viruses and fungi, and science measures correlations between physical health and longevity and psychological and emotional well-being.

tal in encouraging the cause of democracy over the rule of monarchs, and their writings contributed to the motivations behind the American and French Revolutions. The Enlightenment produced intellectual philosophers, and the art of the period was called Neo-Classical because it incorporated the logic, order, and balance of classical Greek art. (Neo-Classicism co-occurs with explorations of Greek and Roman ruins in Greece and Italy.)

Many historians recognize the start of the Romantic Period as occurring about 1800, when William Wordsworth set forth a new theory of poetry in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. The Preface summarizes some important traits of Romanticism: an emphasis on feeling as the source of creativity, a preference for subjectivity, an overall devotion to nature as a symbolic code for spiritual truth, and a desire to give voice to oppressed and rustic people. Poetry, Wordsworth said, "is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings . . . recollected in tranquility." Poetry, then, is the expression of human feeling as it is remembered and continues to be felt. In the shadow of the French Revolution, English writers like William Blake and Samuel Coleridge expressed similar sensibilities.

The second phase of Romanticism, from 1805 to the 1830s, produced other writers associated with the term, the most famous of whom are John Keats, Percy Shelley, and Lord Byron (born George Gordon). In addition to stressing feeling, writers continued an earlier interest in national history and folklore. Sir Walter Scott wrote historical novels about legendary English characters; John Keats (as well as many others) rewrote the Robin Hood legends; and Tennyson focused on the tales of the Knights of the Round Table. Another relevant element is an interest in the occult and in morbidity; Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's *Frankenstein* is an example as are the nightmarish visions in the poetry of the U.S. writer Edgar Allan Poe.

Critical Overview

Tennyson's early poems are not often analyzed by twentieth-century critics because his later pieces are considered much more thought provoking: as early as 1895, George Saintsbury noted that " 'The Lady of Shalott' does not count among the poems

that established Tennyson's title to the first rank of English poets." Still, to the same critic, it is one of the poet's "happiest" pieces, not because of the subject matter—after all, a curse kills the Lady in the end—but because of Tennyson's skillful use of words. "There is such a latent charm in mere words, cunning collocations, and in the voice ringing in them," famed poet Walt Whitman wrote, "which [Tennyson] caught and has brought out, beyond all others." Among the poems that he goes on to list as examples of this is "The Lady of Shalott."

Though its subject matter is considered by scholars to be light, there has been no denying that it was influential in its time and is probably responsible for other works of art with similar themes. Critic John D. Jump noted in his 1974 book about Tennyson that " 'The Lady of Shalott' shows how readily [Tennyson's language] can give access to that medieval dream world which attracted so many nineteenth-century writers and painters." Arthur Noyse noted that "his early Arthurian poems practically founded the pre-Raphaelite school in England." Whatever impression the modern reader has of Camelot and the age of chivalry, it probably bears some influence from Tennyson and the stunning pictures of that long-ago time that he painted with his words.

Criticism

David Kelly

Kelly is an adjunct professor of creative writing and literature at Oakton Community College and an associate professor of literature and creative writing at College of Lake County and has written extensively for academic publishers. In this essay, Kelly examines how the differences between the 1833 and 1842 published versions of "The Lady of Shalott" helped focus readers' attention on the psychological point Tennyson was trying to make.

The story told in Alfred, Lord Tennyson's poem "The Lady of Shalott" obviously lacks a key narrative element, making it, at least in theory, a flawed attempt at storytelling. Handled less skillfully, it might easily have been rejected by readers and literary critics as a weak attempt to use powerful language to make up for its storytelling deficiencies. The poem concerns a damsel who lives in a stone tower, threatened by a curse that she knows, somehow, will kill her if she looks out her window at the world that surrounds her. The curse is real; she does look, and she dies. The basic question that must go through the mind of anyone who reads this poem is how the curse came to be. Tennyson could not have failed to notice what an important aspect of the story he left out.

Assuming, then, that Tennyson left this crucial information out on purpose, it is very likely that he had that same purpose in mind while making changes to the poem between the first and second published versions, dated, respectively, 1833 and 1842. Neither version could have been written with the goal of writing a clear story, not with that glaring omission, and the revision does nothing to fill in the missing details. But adding up all of these oddities draws a line to Tennyson's true purpose. A comparison between the two versions shows more than just corrections or adjustments in the 1842 revision. The later version is even more mysterious than the original, which, unexpectedly, makes it more human.

The main reason that this poem is able to successfully present a magic spell without explaining why or how that spell occurred is its setting. The story takes place in Camelot, a mythical land that, if it ever actually existed, certainly was not the kingdom that the ancient stories present. Popular imagination has attached itself to the historical facts, adding stories about Merlin the sorcerer, the Lady of the Lake, and the magical Sword in the Stone, Excalibur, that could only be handled by a person who was good and wise. Because magic is, by its very definition, outside of the ordinary laws of nature, there is a tendency to accept it as unknowable and to leave issues of magic unexamined.

But it is wrong to assume that magic has no rules at all. Like the myths of ancient Greece and Rome, the medieval stories of the Knights of the Round Table used magic to pass judgements on morality. For example, Odysseus's ten-year journey home from the Trojan War was said to have been caused by his failing to properly offer a homage to the god Poseidon. Similarly, Lancelot, Camelot's bravest and most chivalrous knight, is not able to find the coveted Holy Grail because of his affair with Arthur's wife, Guinevere. Thus the honor of finding the Grail is passed to Lancelot's son. The major difference is that the Greek myths were based on religious customs, while the magic involved in the Arthurian legends affirmed Christian principles. Saying that the curse on the Lady of Shalott is "magical" does not remove the need for a cause, even if it helps to dampen readers' curiosity.

In both versions of this poem, Tennyson worked against natural human curiosity, tweaking it without satisfying it. Doing so tells readers that the details surrounding the curse are really not important to his message. In some ways, Tennyson's method anticipates Modernism, which did not actually develop until the 1920s. The First World War (1914–1918) was so catastrophic that it changed many systems of thought, including literary theory. The Modernist poetry that resulted did more than just dictate poetic information to readers and invite them to appreciate the poet's verbal skill: it acknowledged that readers are aware that they are reading a poem that somebody wrote. "The Lady of Shalott" counts on its readers to be aware of its author's existence and to wonder about the thought process that led him to leave out critical information. The only sensible explanation that readers can arrive at is that he means to downplay the mystical aspect of this myth and to focus attention on the psychology of the character who is the poem's focus.

There are only a few differences between the version of the poem published in 1833 and Tennyson's 1842 revision, but, surprisingly, they serve to make the setting and the character even more obscure. Usually, poetry tries to render a vivid experience, and so an author's changes often serve to make the visual experience clearer, not hazier. Again, the assumption must be that Tennyson is trying to push the irrelevant aspects deeper into the background, with the hope that readers will focus more on personality than on situation.

The 1833 version of the poem tells readers what the Lady of Shalott looks like in two extended passages. The first is in the poem's fourth stanza, at the end of the first section. Details bring her to life, giving her an actual, physical presence. "A pearlgarland winds her head," the poem explains: "She leaneth on a velvet bed, / Fully royally appareled, / The Lady of Shalott." At this point the revision, which follows the same general shape, describes the reaper in the field, listening to her song, rather than describing her looks. This brings in more a sense of the surrounding world, less a sense of the Lady.

The earlier version also has an entire stanza of physical description that Tennyson later removed. After the first stanza of the fourth section, after she has already come out of the castle, written her name on the boat, and climbed into it to float down river, the original poem says:

> A cloudwhite crown of pearl she dight,
> All raimented in snowy wight
> That loosely flew, (her zone in sight,
> Clasped with one blinding diamond bright,)
> Though the squally eastwind keenly
> Blew, with folded arms serenely
> By the water stood the queenly
> Lady of Shalott.

"A comparison between the two versions shows more than just corrections or adjustments in the 1842 revision. The later version is even more mysterious than the original, which, unexpectedly, makes it more human."

This version is specific about her clothes, her posture, and her general demeanor. The 1842 version is not only less descriptive about her looks, but it removes any detail about her visual presence altogether.

Another part that changed from one version to the next was the poem's initial emphasis on death. The early version is much more graphic; in the stanza before the last it includes the lines, "A pale, pale corpse she floated by, / Deadcold, between the houses high, / Dead toward Camelot." The corresponding lines in the revised version read, "A gleaming shape she floated by, / Dead-pale between the houses high, / Silent into Camelot." The revised poem does mention death, indicating that Tennyson's intention remained to be clear that she dies. Yet the emphasis on death in the newer version is softened, which shifts its emphasis from spectacle to meditation.

W. David Shaw, in a 1976 essay for the Cornell University Press, noted that the two versions highlight the ways in which Tennyson "wavers between the impulse to write poems of pure sensation . . . and his impulse to test and enlarge his poetry." Shaw uses this difference to show differences in poetic theory from the Romantic period and the Victorian period (Queen Victoria took the throne

What Do I Read Next?

- Edgar Allan Poe's poem "Annabel Lee" deals with the sudden death of a woman the speaker has loved, "many many years ago, in a kingdom by the sea." Poe's poetic music matches Tennyson's. Originally published in 1845, it is available in *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*, published by Vintage Books in 1995.
- Sir Thomas Malory's version of the legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, titled *Le Morte D'Arthur*, was published in 1485 by William Caxton and is still one of the most influential sources used today for information about the myth. It is available in an unabridged edition, a reprint of the Caxton original, from Sterling Publications, copyright 2000.
- John Steinbeck, the twentieth-century author who is best known for his realistic novels such as *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, wrote one of the best updated versions of the Arthurian legend in his *Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights*, available from Noonday Press, 1993.
- Tennyson included a poem entitled "Lancelot and Elaine," which stays truer to the traditional legends about the relationship between the Round Table knight and Elaine of Astolat, in his book *Idylls of the King*, which is all about the legends associated with King Arthur. Portions of the book were published between 1859 and 1885, when the first complete edition appeared.
- Patricia A. McKillip's novel *The Tower at Stony Wood*, published in 2000 by Berkley/Ace, is based on the story of "The Lady of Shalott." The imagery gives a strong sense of the world that Tennyson discusses in this poem, although much of the story is different.
- Readers can see how a nineteenth-century U.S. writer imagined coping with being among the knights of the Round Table in Mark Twain's satiric novel *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, his response to reading Malory's version of the legends. Originally published in 1889, this novel is available from Bantam Classics in a 1994 edition.
- Nineteenth-century poet and novelist, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, covers the subject of this poem several times, most notably in her poem "Elaine and Elaine," written in 1885 and published in the 1891 collection *Songs of the Silent World*, which is still available through some library systems.

in 1837, right between these two versions). Without even considering the significance to literary history of these two versions of the poem, it is still interesting to consider the two motives that Shaw attributes to Tennyson: the earlier version, the one that emphasizes death and the maiden's looks, is the one that he calls poetry written for "pure sensation," and in fact it is the one that gives the most chilling sensation.

Ultimately, each version is defined by its final lines. The first time the poem was published, the last stanza focused on the local people, referred to earlier in both versions as the "surly village-churls," who gather around the boat in amazement at the sight of a beautiful dead woman that they do not know. Lancelot may or may not be with them in this earlier form; certainly, the germ of the idea of making him an observer was there because Tennyson mentions a knight in the assembled crowd. This version ends with a quote from the Lady, written on a parchment that rests on her breast: "The web was woven curiously, / The charm is broken utterly, / Draw near and fear not—this is I, / The Lady of Shalott." The version of 1842, of course, has Lancelot approach the boat and presents his words, not hers, in the last few lines. He comments on her lovely face. Instead of the simple pathos of the baffled farm people finding out about her existence from a note that she has pinned to herself in death, something like a suicide note to strangers,

the revision brings the story around to the person who unwittingly caused her death. It is mysterious and somewhat ironic in itself, but the true humanizing element is in the fact that Lancelot is attracted to her, perhaps as much as she was to him, but that neither of them will ever know.

In both versions of this poem, Tennyson managed to skirt the central issue of what it is that kills the Lady of Shallot. For those who take the poem at face value, believing the events as they are given, she is killed by a curse, one that the Lady knows specific details about but that Tennyson does not share with his readers. A cynic who does not believe in magic can read the curse as being symbolic for some psychological state that keeps her from social interaction, one that Lancelot's beautiful singing voice draws her from, but that does little to explain why she would be this way. The most satisfying clues to why Tennyson chose to do it this way come from the changes he made while revising. Removing the most graphic signs of death and corpses gives more leeway for interpreting her "death" as a symbolic consequence for leaving her safe abode. Removing her physical presence takes the poem even further from reality, forcing readers to imagine her, giving the whole situation a more unreal setting, as a drama that plays out in her mind instead of in the physical world. And bringing Lancelot in at the end stresses the conflict between the Lady's view of the world and the world's view of her. In the first reality, she and Camelot exist beside each other with no interaction, but Lancelot's interest in her in the revised view implies an emotional bond that did exist but that was cut down by this mysterious curse. Readers do not need to know what this curse is in order to feel sorry for the Lady of Shalott and for Lancelot, and, by extension, for all of humanity.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on "The Lady of Shalott," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Carl Plasa

In the following essay, Plasa examines contradictory representations of women, their sexuality, and their social roles in "The Lady of Shalott."

Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott" (1842) is often read by critics as a poem centrally concerned with the question of the relation between "art" and "life," conditions respectively symbolized in the worlds of Shalott and "many-towered Camelot." The poem resolves this question, it is usually argued, by the recognition that "life" is inherently antipathetic to the possibility of an ongoing artistic production—an insight taken in turn to be enacted by the death which befalls the Lady who gives the poem its title in the course of her attempted sortie from the one realm of the poem to the other. A paradigmatic formulation of this canonical approach is provided by Walter E. Houghton and G. Robert Stange in their anthology, *Victorian Poetry and Poetics* (1959). According to their notes to the poem, "The Lady of Shalott" suggests

> that the artist must remain in aloof detachment, observing life only in the mirror of the imagination, not mixing in it directly. Once the artist attempts to lead the life of ordinary men his poetic gift, it would seem, dies.

So persistent is this view that Alastair W. Thomson similarly claims, thirty years later, that Tennyson's poem "represents the dilemma of the introspective artist, condemned to a life of shadows, and risking destruction if he turns to reality."

No reading is ideologically innocent, however—least of all a canonical one (which, in these instances, also blithely turns the "she" of the text into the "he" of its readers)—and the ideology of approaches which see "The Lady of Shalott" as a proto-Yeatsian allegory of choice between "Perfection of the life, or of the work," might be described as implicitly "utilitarian": by reading Tennyson's poem as "a myth of the poetic imagination" and concluding that the artist/poet must remain antithetically and irrevocably divorced from "life," the critic simultaneously consigns the text to just that condition of purely aesthetic limbo which largely defines the Lady's plight throughout the poem.

As befits a text whose operations are profoundly equivocal, the landscape into which 'The Lady of Shalott' draws its reader is one precisely ordered in terms of opposition and division. . . ."

What the canonical/utilitarian approach fails to take into account, in other words, is the question of the relation of the poem itself to "life"—its implication, that is, in the specificities of its own historical moment. Hence it remains blind to the existence of a certain conflict between what "The Lady of Shalott" says about the art/life relation and the way in which that relation is instantiated and configured by the text itself. At the level of the symbolic narrative within the poem, art and life would indeed seem to be fatally opposed to one another and the text to offer a reluctant manifesto for the romantically isolated poet. Yet, as Joseph Chadwick has shown, "The Lady of Shalott" itself constitutes an art-work produced and indeed enabled—albeit obliquely—through an active engagement with its own contemporary moment. For Chadwick, "despite the feudal setting of the poem … it is Tennyson's *own social order*, not the one from which he drew the Lady and Lancelot" that creates "the problems of autonomy and privacy [the poem] confronts." In this respect, the dialogue of the poem with its historical context ironically refutes the necessity for aesthetic withdrawal from "life" or history which it appears internally to affirm. Far from being mutually exclusive, what Tennyson's poem conversely demonstrates is that art and life, the aesthetic and the political, are fully interwoven: the involvement in the social world which is symbolically the destination of the Lady in the poem is, from the first, a condition at which the poem has already arrived. As such, "The Lady of Shalott" bears out Alan Sinfield's contention that "even poetry which appears to be remote from political issues is in fact involved in the political life of its society."

One of the concerns at the heart of the political (as well as intellectual, social, and cultural) life of Tennyson's nineteenth-century context is, as criticism generally acknowledges, the "Woman Question." While "The Lady of Shalott" addresses this question, it does so, as will be shown, in a systematically ambivalent manner, at once upholding and dislocating patriarchal assumptions about the issues which the question entails—those of gender, sexuality, the institution of marriage, and the space occupied by women in society.

I

As befits a text whose operations are profoundly equivocal, the landscape into which "The Lady of Shalott" draws its reader is one precisely ordered in terms of opposition and division: "On either side the river lie / Long fields of barley and of rye." Yet the opening description of place includes a detail whose effect is to disrupt the coherence of another opposition—between illusion and reality—which is central to the organization of symbolic space within the poem as a whole. While firmly divided from one another, Tennyson's "fields," we are told, nonetheless "meet the sky" fashioning a conjunction which, as Edgar F. Shannon, Jr. points out, is purely the result of an optical illusion. Though the text seeks to confine the presence of illusions solely to "The island of Shallot", it is evident from the outset that they exist in realms beyond its boundaries. Even before the opposition between "the silent isle" and Camelot can develop into an opposition between "the region of shadows [and] that of realities," the latter opposition is itself being skeptically revealed as illusory, problematic, in some way flawed.

Tensions between the setting up and upsetting of distinctions are operative not only in terms of the relation between illusion and reality but also at the level of the representation of gender difference in the poem, raising—as such—the question of its sexual politics. Feminist criticism maintains that the categories of gender (as opposed to sex)—"masculinity" and "femininity"—are not naturally or self-evidently given but instead ideologically produced by society and culture. Insofar as these categories are at the same time hierarchically organized in favor of men, the ground of their production is, as feminism also argues, a patriarchal one. The ideological sleight-of-hand by which patriarchy mystifies or tropes the cultural as the natural (thus preserving its dominion) is neatly summarized by Griselda Pollock:

> Patriarchy does not refer to the static, oppressive domination by one sex over another, but to a web of psycho-social relationships which institute a socially significant difference on the axis of sex which is so deeply located in our very sense of lived, sexual, identity that it appears to us as natural and unalterable.

The way in which the relations between the sexes, which constitute power-relations also, are ideally woven for and by patriarchy is itself graphically outlined in a passage from Tennyson's *The Princess: A Medley*, published in 1847, five years after the appearance of the revised version of "The Lady of Shalott":

> Man for the field and woman for the hearth:
> Man for the sword and for the needle she:
> Man with the head and woman with the heart:
> Man to command and woman to obey;
> All else confusion.

These lines return us, by contrast, to "The Lady of Shalott," a text whose stance toward patriarchal ideology is substantially less didactic than that propounded by the old king—the Prince's father—who is their speaker.

At first glance, however, it would appear that, despite the medievalism of the poem, the disposition of social space in "The Lady of Shalott" accurately replicates, as the citation from Chadwick implies, the gender conventions informing Victorian society. On the one hand, the Lady is consigned to a private and socially peripheral space of "Four gray walls, and four gray towers," located on the far side of a "margin, willow-veiled", while on the other, the public realm of Camelot is inhabited by "bold Sir Lancelot": mythic past conforms to socio-historic present, as private and public spaces are respectively identified with "femininity" and "masculinity" in both.

Considered as a response to the patriarchal norms embodied in the Shalott/Camelot opposition, the inclination of Tennyson's poem appears—from the perspective of narrative structure—to be to support and maintain them. While the central action in the text concerns the Lady's attempted performance of a crossing from private/"feminine" to public/"masculine" worlds, this movement is one which, strictly speaking, goes uncompleted, or is permitted to occur only posthumously:

> For ere she reached upon the tide
> The first house by the water-side,
> Singing in her song she died,
> The Lady of Shalott.

Intercepting the Lady's crossing by means of death, the narrative of the poem registers its own resistance to the transgression of gender divisions—and hence the possibility of political change—of which that crossing is the sign.

As the index of resistance to such a possibility, the death which the text eventually imposes upon the Lady is only the formal or explicit culmination of a process which commences much earlier. This process works, through a series of strategies, to transform the future toward which the Lady travels into a repetition of the past she seeks to escape, thus creating the illusion that the patriarchally subversive crossing from Shalott to Camelot is itself illusory, since a future that repeats a past effectively erases the present that ordinarily facilitates the passage from one to the other. The first of these strategies occurs precisely at the point, in fact, at which the Lady prepares to leave Shalott: "She left the web, she left the loom, / She made three paces through the room." If these lines retard even the motion they describe—the Lady's crossing of her studio—through syntactic repetition, arresting "paces" into stasis, they are similarly and secondly followed by the typographical effacement of the larger crossing from Shalott to Camelot in the shape of the blank space between the third and fourth sections of the poem. The Lady's emergence on the other side of this space is accompanied by a sudden shift in seasons—from "the blue unclouded weather" of summer to autumn:

> In the stormy east-wind straining,
> The pale yellow woods were waning,
> The broad stream in his banks complaining,
> Heavily the low sky raining
> Over towered Camelot;
> Down she came and found a boat.

With this shift, as Chadwick notes, the Lady "finds a world just as gray as the one she has left", as the future again repeats the past.

The pattern of temporal inversion and elision we are outlining constitutes, to recapitulate, a kind of proleptic supplement to that resistance to the (ideologically disruptive) crossing from Shalott to Camelot which is made textually explicit with the Lady's death at lines 150–153. This pattern extends to include a further detail. Though, at line 115, the Lady's mirror is dramatically "cracked from side to side," it would appear, at line 130, to have been uncannily restored, in the figuration of her face—newly directed toward Camelot—as a "*glassy* countenance" (emphasis added). The effect of this detail—like that of those noted above—is implicitly to invert the Lady's *voyage d'amour*, slyly fold it back upon itself. Not only blocking the transition from Shalott to Camelot with death but also signaling its resistance to the subversion of patriarchal values which that action connotes through a range of subliminal gestures, "The Lady of Shalott" thus fairly lucidly confirms Arthur Hallam's definition of the contemporary poetic impulse as "a check acting for conservation against a propulsion toward change".

But the paradox which appears to render the strategies of resistance in the poem superfluous is that while the movement from Shalott to Camelot, "feminine" to "masculine" spaces, is symbolically transgressive, the desire which initially prompts it would seem, at the end of the second section of the poem, to be entirely compatible with patriarchal norms:

> But in her web she still delights
> To weave the mirror's magic sights,
> For often through the silent nights

A funeral, with plumes and lights
And music, went to Camelot:
Or when the moon was overhead,
Came two young lovers lately wed;
'I am half sick of shadows,' said
The Lady of Shalott.

The "natural" reading of the last four lines of this stanza (alleged by Hallam Tennyson to contain "the key to this tale of 'magic symbolism'" is one which turns the Lady's cry, "'I am half sick of shadows,'" in the direction of an unequivocally confessional desire to substitute participation in the lived reality of marital love for the contemplation of its image. Even as the Lady's movement from Shalott to Camelot figures the deregulation of patriarchal gender codes and is variously resisted by the text, the desire which propels it—being for marriage—seems to work to reestablish the text in a relation of continuity with the patriarchal status quo.

Yet to define the Lady's discontent with the conditions of her existence as stemming from the self-conscious recognition of marriage as the telos of her desire is to mask the inscription of a subversive counter-meaning beneath the conformities of the textual surface of the poem, converting it into an instance of the Barthesian text of *plaisir* "that comes from culture and does not break with it, [and] is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading." As frequently noted, it is possible to translate the predicament described in "The Lady of Shalott" into the terms of a neo-Platonic allegory. Just as in the tenth book of Plato's *Republic*, the work of art duplicates a reality itself only the copy of a higher realm of "essences," so the labor of the female artist in Tennyson's text is the weaving of the "magic web" out of the images which appear in her mirror as "shadows of the world", the reality of Camelot. But this is by no means to exhaust the allegorical potential of Tennyson's poem. As the site of the production of images—one of which is that of the newlyweds—which effectively are reality for the one whom they entrap, the Lady's "mirror clear" is not only analogous to the Platonic realm of "appearances" (figured, in *Republic* Book 7, as the wall of a cave on which the shadows of the absolute manifest themselves) but also to the mediation of experience by the processes of ideological re-presentation. In the contest of the construction of gender, these processes operate, as Pollock puts it,

> by means of winning our identification with the versions of masculinity and femininity which are represented to us…. binding us into a particular—but always unstable—regime of sexual difference.

"All else confusion." To view the Lady's mirror from this perspective, seeing its "magic sights" as the mesmeric products of ideology, is equally to lead her cry in a different—indeed antithetical—direction to that which the "natural" reading comfortably assigns to it. Far from signaling a desire for marriage, the declaration "'I am half sick of shadows'" comes to seem symptomatic of a suggestive—and subversive—demystification of the institution of marriage as adequately expressive of female desire, sexual or otherwise. In the same way that the Lady's mirror hosts a panoply of images which significantly does not include her own, so Tennyson's poem covertly suggests its heroine's failure to identify herself with the patriarchal ideology which precisely posits marriage as integral to the completion of the destinies of women within Victorian society. Appropriately, the non-accommodation of the female subject to the narrative of an orthodox "femininity" occurs "when the moon [is] overhead," a moment symbolically associated, through the moon's own culturally defined link with menstruation, with one of the aspects of womanhood which Victorian definitions of "femininity" tend to repress.

Signifying as much the rejection of as the desire for marriage-as-telos, the Lady's utterance discloses a "key" which aporetically turns—like the poem as a whole—in two directions at the same time, both toward and away from patriarchy. If, as Tennyson instructs Boyd Carpenter, "the thought within the image is much more than any one interpretation", the effect of the subtextual excess at this point is subversively to expose a certain disjunction between the female subject and the construction or interpellation of that subject as "feminine" by patriarchal ideology. In so doing it also discloses the rationale which governs those apparently supererogatory strategies of resistance to the transition from Shalott to Camelot discussed above.

II

Gestures toward the subversion of the gender positions which patriarchal ideology seeks to promote, in Pollock's phrase, as "natural and unalterable" are additionally inscribed throughout the text in a number of ways, the first of which occurs at the end of the opening section of the poem:

But who hath seen her wave her hand?
Or at the casement seen her stand?
Or is she known in all the land,
The Lady of Shalott?

> Only reapers, reaping early
> In among the bearded barley,
> Hear a song that echoes cheerly
> From the river winding clearly,
> Down to towered Camelot:
> And by the moon the reaper weary,
> Piling sheaves in uplands airy,
> Listening, whispers 'Tis the fairy
> Lady of Shalott.'

As Herbert F. Tucker points out (following Lionel Stevenson), Tennyson's image of the Lady as an invisible singer defines her as a figure for the Romantic poet derived from Shelley's "To a Skylark" and particularly from the Shelleyan comparison of the "blithe Spirit" his poem eulogizes to a "high-born maiden / In a palace-tower." But, as Tucker also notes, the lines cited above simultaneously incorporate an allusion to Wordsworth and "The Solitary Reaper." Thus alluding to Shelley and Wordsworth, Tennyson's poem is itself as much "a song that echoes" as that produced by the disembodied voice within it. But the Tennysonian echo of Wordsworth is an echo with what turns out to be a sexual difference, closer in fact to a kind of intertextual mirroring or simultaneous play of reflection and inversion. In Wordsworth's poem it is the male poet who listens—effectively transfixed—to the song of a female reaper, but in "The Lady of Shalott" we encounter a male reaper who hearkens, equally spellbound, to the song of a female poet, "'the fairy/Lady of Shalott'" Tennyson's poem reproduces the Wordsworthian poet/reaper configuration but inverts it at the level of gender, placing the poet on the female side of the opposition and the reaper on the male side. The transgression of gender boundaries which "The Lady of Shalott" both symbolizes and blocks is discretely carried out by means of allusion as the poem unsettles the ideological fixities it vies equally to sustain.

Subversiveness of allusion is complemented in the penultimate stanza of the third section of the poem by a subversiveness of refrain. Prior to this point, and for the most part beyond it, the refrains of the poem are consistently organized in terms of strict gender distinctions. In each stanza the first refrain, located at its center, is reserved for references either to Camelot or Lancelot, while the second, located at the end or "margin" of the stanza, is given over to Shalott and the Lady. While the distribution of refrains in the poem could itself be said to be patriarchal (identifying the "masculine" as central and marginalizing the "feminine"), the customary pattern is significantly and symbolically usurped at this juncture, since it is a reference to Lancelot that appears in the space traditionally allocated to the "feminine":

> From the bank and from the river
> He flashed into the crystal mirror,
> 'Tirra lirra,' by the river
> Sang Sir Lancelot.

Though Lancelot lacks the "sword" essential to the conception of manhood outlined by the old king in *The Princess*, he is nonetheless constantly defined through images of phallic power. Distanced from the Lady's "bower-eaves" by a "bow-shot," he rides a "war-horse" that suggestively parts the "barley-sheaves", he possesses a "blazoned baldric" and "mighty silver bugle", his "helmet and … helmet-feather" burn "like one burning flame together", and he is likened to a "bearded meteor, trailing light." Yet despite the emphatically phallic terms in which the person of Lancelot is represented, he is here transferred to a space the refrain-structure of the poem defines as "feminine." As with the allusion to Wordsworth, "The Lady of Shalott" obliquely accomplishes, in terms of refrain, that re-inscription of gender boundaries which it both threatens and thwarts at the level of its symbolic narrative. Moreover, the resituating of Lancelot—his crossing from one side of the gender line operative at the level of the refrain to the other—is preceded by the utterance "'Tirra lirra.'" While the context from which it is taken (Autolycus' song in *The Winter's Tale* 4.3) endows it with the connotations of a promiscuous male sexuality, the shape of the utterance—being that of a "feminine" rhyme—has the precisely subversive counter-effect of unmanning the singer. As with Lancelot, so with the Lady who parallels and indeed surpasses his movement into the space the structure of the poem reserves for the "feminine" with her own threefold penetration ("She looked down to Camelot," "Did she look to Camelot," "She floated down to Camelot," into that which it ordinarily sets aside for all things "masculine."

The strategies by which the text might thus be said to "loose the chain" that binds men and women to the fixity of patriarchally conceived gender divisions ("a particular—but always unstable—regime of sexual difference") take an alternative form at lines: if Lancelot is "feminized" by refrain (and rhyme) the Lady is here analogously "masculinized" by the simile which likens her to "some bold seër in a trance / Seeing all *his own* mischance" (emphasis added), an effect underscored by the transposition of an epithet previously applied to Lancelot ("bold") to the visionary to whom she is compared.

In his essay-review of Tennyson's first published volume of poetry, Hallam praises the poet as one who (unlike Keats and Shelley) "comes before the public, unconnected with any political party, or peculiar system of opinions." But if the notion of "coming before the public" creates a curiously prophetic identification between the poet of *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* (1830) and the eponymous heroine of "The Lady of Shalott" (originally published in 1832), the Lady in turn suggests herself to be a figure for the politics—particularly the sexual politics—of the poem in which she is located. Just as the Lady makes an enigmatic debut before her public, "A gleaming shape she floated by, / Dead-pale between the houses high, / Silent into Camelot", so Tennyson's poem finds itself negotiating opposed political impulses—reaction and subversion, the weaving and the unthreading of the "web" of patriarchal ideology.

III

One of the most significant ways in which "The Lady of Shalott" manifests its politically self-divided stance toward the values of patriarchal ideology—colluding with and critiquing them at once—is by means of what might be called a discourse of the gaze. For patriarchy the difference between "masculine" and "feminine" sexuality is articulated in terms of a difference between activity and passivity. These differences are in turn rehearsed at the scopic level where the gaze—the act of looking—is identified with a "masculine" (rather than "necessarily male") subject-position while women come, as the silent and passive objects of the gaze (and the "masculine" desire of which it is the sign), to occupy the site of the "feminine" and are as such denied the possibility of experiencing themselves as actively desiring subjects.

Tennyson's poem begins its reflections on the gaze and the question of sexual power-relations to which it gives rise in the opening stanza:

> And up and down the people go,
> Gazing where the lilies blow
> Round an island there below,
> The island of Shalott.

Though the "Gazing" described here appears not to be gender-specific (it is collectively the practice of "people"), the poem nonetheless already suggests that the relation between gaze and object within its mythic realm is ordered in terms of a conventionally patriarchal logic, since the object of the popular gaze is "where the lilies blow …/ The island of Shalott," locus of the central—if obscure—female figure of the poem. The complementary identification of the gaze with a "masculine" subject-position which this implies is made explicit in the next stanza:

> Four gray walls, and four gray towers,
> Overlook a space of flowers,
> And the silent isle imbowers
> The Lady of Shalott.

Displaced onto "Four gray walls, and four gray towers" that "Overlook a space of flowers," the gaze begins to emerge as a form of phallic surveillance of the female subject (or object) for which the "space of flowers" functions as a metonymy.

While the text thus appears to validate patriarchal structures by mapping the gaze/object relation in terms of an opposition between "masculine" and "feminine," it also subversively exposes the ideologically constructed nature of the "feminine," thereby circumscribing the claims for mastery—both erotic and epistemological—which men make over women. While the action of Tennyson's phallically gazing towers is to "Overlook" the field of their vision in the sense of surveying it from a higher position, they seem equally not to be all-seeing, to "Overlook" being not only to survey but also to fail to apprehend or recognize. The doubleness of the language of the poem shows the "masculine" gaze to be in a significant sense a blind or "castrated" one. The implication is that the way in which men like to see women—viewing and representing them, for example, as "feminine" objects of desire—is indistinguishable from a process of not seeing them, imprisoning the female within a set of culturally constructed images from which, paradoxically, it will always already have escaped: "woman," as Julia Kristeva argues, constitutes "something that cannot be represented, something that is not said, something above and beyond nomenclatures and ideologies."

The question of the (non)representation of women is quite literally posed by the lines already cited from the third stanza of the poem:

> But who hath seen her wave her hand?
> Or at the casement seen her stand?
> Or is she known in all the land,
> The Lady of Shalott?

In the context of the blindness of the "masculine" gaze toward the female subject—which it typically chooses to see as a "feminine" object—the Lady's literal and particular failure to appear "at the casement" constitutes the ironic symbol of the generalized respect in which "woman," in the Kristevan sense, can only appear, as opposed to being

ever plainly manifest or knowable, either within the space of representation for which the casement is a figure or on the horizon of the patriarchal gaze that frames her.

But if she is an unseen presence (as "woman" for Kristeva is always effaced) Tennyson's Lady is crucially unseeing also, interdicted from assuming the gaze, the "masculine" position of erotically desiring subject, by the threat of a "curse" which, like her mirror indeed, "hangs before her all the year":

> There she weaves by night and day
> A magic web with colours gay.
> She has heard a whisper say,
> A curse is on her if she stay
> To look down to Camelot.
> She knows not what the curse may be,
> And so she weaveth steadily,
> And little other care hath she,
> The Lady of Shalott.

Though the Lady herself is ignorant of the nature of the curse, its meaning and raison d'être are readily enough decipherable from the perspective of the analysis in the poem of the workings of patriarchal ideology. For the Lady to appropriate the gaze would be for her to effect the crossing of the patriarchal gender line from "feminine" to "masculine" and so to precipitate, through an act of female self-empowerment, the "confusion" to which the lines cited from *The Princess* refer and which her own poem both adumbrates and symbolically moves to oppose in causing the attempted transition from Shalott to Camelot to issue only in death, product of the curse.

Under these conditions, indirectly imposed by the anonymous "whisper," the Lady must herself mediate her gaze via the mirror:

> And moving through a mirror clear
> That hangs before her all the year,
> Shadows of the world appear.
> There she sees the highway near
> Winding down to Camelot.

The mirror is not only the site of "shadows" but also of light, that which bestows definition and shape upon objects and, as Isobel Armstrong puts it, "enables perception to occur." It is precisely the quality of light, as much as phallic power, with which Lancelot is associated throughout the third section of the poem—from the moment that the sun flames upon his "brazen greaves" to the brilliant crisis of his double reflection: "From the bank and from the river, / He flashed into the crystal mirror." Thus constituted as a phallic figure of light, Lancelot personifies the very processes of patriarchal ideology, whose labor frames and fashions women (and men).

Though these processes in part entail the positioning of women as silently "other," passive objects to the "masculine" gaze, the poem, at lines 109–117, violently inverts these conditions:

> She left the web, she left the loom,
> She made three paces through the room,
> She *saw* the water-lily bloom,
> She *saw* the helmet and the plume,
> She *looked down* to Camelot.
> Out flew the web and floated wide;
> The mirror cracked from side to side;
> 'The curse is come upon me,' cried
> The Lady of Shalott. (emphases added)

Appropriating the gaze, the Lady enters the position of the desiring subject and so enacts—at the scopic level—the crossing from "feminine" to "masculine" gender positions originally figured in the projected foray from Shalott to Camelot. In this respect her action not only results in cracking the mirror literally, but also embodies an overturning of that for which the mirror is the figure—the ideological status quo. But if the literal mirror is subsequently found to be magically mended in the fantasmatic shape of the Lady's "glassy countenance," to what extent does the text duplicate this process in terms of the mirror-as-figure? How comprehensive, in other words, are its attempts to salvage the patriarchal gender images beyond which the iconoclasm of the Lady's gaze momentarily advances her?

Insofar as it equips her with a "glassy countenance" at all, it would seem that the intent of the text, at the beginning of its fourth and final part, is to restore the ideological mirror, since to "look to Camelot" with eyes of glass is not to see at all and for the Lady to become the precise opposite of what she had previously fleetingly been—not subject but object. Yet if she is thus objectified (and the continuity of the text with patriarchal values therefore reasserted) the Lady nonetheless retains a glimmer of transformative potential, being, at least until "her eyes [are] darkened wholly", an object of a particular kind—a looking-glass in fact, a mirror. As such, the Lady constitutes a reflective surface by dint of which the one who gazes into it (Lancelot) may behold himself in the act of seeing. In this respect she might be said to possess the capacity for inducing in the "masculine" gaze a certain self-consciousness as to its own strategies, a recognition of its own blindness with regard to the female subject and female sexuality and of the truth that the way in which men traditionally view women is critically discrepant from how women see themselves.

To the degree that it contains the elements of a critique of patriarchal ideology, "The Lady of Shalott" seeks, equally, to bring about—for the (male) Victorian reader for whom Lancelot is surrogate—just such an altered vision of the relations between men and women. Within the myth within the text, however, the revolutionary moment is badly missed:

> But Lancelot mused a little space;
> He said, 'She has a lovely face;
> God in his mercy lend her grace,
> The Lady of Shalott.'

Though Lancelot reflects "a little space," perhaps briefly speculating upon the possibility of seeing women other than patriarchally, he evidently does not reflect long enough, going on to re-articulate, with "'She has a lovely face,'" the orthodox perception of women as the object of the "masculine" gaze.

From this vantage it appears that the lazy blessing Lancelot confers upon the Lady at the conclusion of the poem is no better than a disguised version of the curse drawn into operation at the end of the third part of the poem, since the latter is elaborated precisely in terms of her transportation back across the gender line, from "masculine" to "feminine" positions, subject to object of the gaze, "Who" to "what":

> And at the closing of the day
> She loosed the chain and down she lay;
> The broad stream bore her far away,
> The Lady of Shalott.
> Lying, robed in snowy white
> That loosely flew to left and right—
> The leaves upon her falling light—
> Through the noises of the night
> She floated down to Camelot.

No longer the bold "see-er" she once had been, the Lady's course is emphatically re-assimilated to the criteria of the "femininity" she had previously violated—even "her blood," at line 147, is "frozen slowly," in a detail which suggests, amid this poem of moons and curses, a repression of menstruation as "unfeminine." "Lying, robed in snowy white," she becomes the very bride—submissive and virginal, desired not desiring—whose image had traversed her mirror to such equivocal effect at the end of the second section of the poem.

But if this passage seems to avenge female self-empowerment it goes on to counter its own actions. Recollecting lines 64–72, in which the socially symbolic rituals of marriage and death are arbitrarily juxtaposed, the text now transforms the one into the other: groom Lancelot, whose "bridle bells" not only ring, but also merrily pun at line 85 ("bridle"/"bridal") becomes a reaper, the lady her own elegist:

> And as the boat-head wound along
> The willowy hills and fields among,
> They heard her singing her last song,
> The Lady of Shalott.
> Heard a carol, mournful, holy,
> Chanted loudly, chanted lowly,
> Till her blood was frozen slowly,
> And her eyes were darkened wholly,
> Turned to towered Camelot.

In the context of the crossing from Shalott to Camelot, the supervention of death betokens, as we have seen, the reactionary orientation of the text, its resistance to the very questioning of the forms of patriarchal ideology which it seeks, conversely, to provoke at other levels. Yet the fact that the trajectory of death is at this point conflated with that of marriage has the effect of redefining—indeed reversing—the value of death-as-sign within the economy of the sexual politics of the poem. As a figure for marriage, death comes, that is, to re-open the ideologically dissentient potential of the poem by suggesting that marriage, far from entailing the fulfillment of each sex through the other (as in *The Princess*) is tantamount, for women, to a form of self-annihilation.

As a response to the questions which it raises, "The Lady of Shalott" proves itself, in the language of *In Memoriam*, to be "A contradiction on the tongue" from first to last, simultaneously affirming and displacing those patriarchal visions of women and the relations between the sexes which held sway throughout the Victorian period and which are still today predominant. Thus exhibiting a sexual politics which is continually at odds with itself—being neither reactionary nor radical but both at once—Tennyson's poem emerges as no less centrally fractured, or "cracked from side to side," than the mirror within it, precisely unsure in fact as to quite which side of its own covert political and socio-sexual debate it is on—that of patriarchy and reaction or women and subversion.

Source: Carl Plasa, "'Cracked from Side to Side': Sexual Politics in 'The Lady of Shalott,'" in *Victorian Poetry*, Vol. 30, Nos. 3–4, Autumn-Winter 1992, pp. 247–61.

Ann C. Colley

In the following essay, Colley explores Tennyson's attempts to move the poem and the reader past the familiar into an undefined realm.

> A gleaming shape she floated by,
> Dead-pale between the houses high,
> Silent into Camelot.

> Out upon the wharfs they came,
> Knight and burgher, lord and dame,
> And round the prow they read her name,
> *The Lady of Shalott*.

The questions "Who is this and what is here?" that the fearful, dull-witted knights, burghers, lords, and ladies are left pondering are those questions which gaze back at the readers of "The Lady of Shalott" long after its fluent lines have drifted away from the closing of the poem. They place the almost unsuspecting audience among the citizens of Camelot, looking at the inscribed name and wondering what to do with it: Who is the Lady of Shalott, and what is the meaning of her presence in Camelot? These questions and the accompanying unease of possibly being identified among the citizens tempt the reader to separate himself from the curious and unknowing crowd, leave the wharf, and step into the Lady of Shalott's boat—as if to take her part. In this shift, he moves to an understanding, a reading, the impulses of which are similar to those that press the Lady through the poem from the tower, to the river, to Camelot. These impulses reflect the movement from the doubly enclosed, piecemeal images visible from the tower to the more continuous and definite vision of the last section of the poem. There is a desire within the reader to move from a fragmented and metonymic space to a metaphoric landscape in which the Lady becomes continuous with her surroundings. But the metaphoric vision eventually destroys itself and dies with the Lady. In the end, this destruction places the reader closer to Tennyson's dilemma, his difficulty in leaving the world and passing into a "Nameless," shadow-less realm.

To understand the reader's desire to insert himself into a metaphoric relationship with the poem and to comprehend his ultimate undoing, we need to consider the Lady of Shalott's unfolding, for in many ways the two movements are analogous. In the beginning of "The Lady of Shalott," images come and disappear as pieces and shadows of the world proceed through the Lady's mirror. Between these abbreviated images are spaces which syncopate the continuous weaving motion—the winding of the river and the road, the coming and going of the people—that tries to hold the lines of the poem together. These intervals frustrate the almost mechanical advance of the procession, and throughout the early parts of the poem, come to be more visible and compelling than the images, especially when Tennyson marks them in time and in synecdochic forms. For instance, it is only "Sometimes" or at particular times of the day ("when the moon was overhead" that the market girls, the village churls, a shepherd boy, a long-haired page, a knight or two, a funeral, and "two young lovers lately wed" enter and exit from the domain of the mirror. And, when they do, it is the pieces of these images which have separated themselves out that impress the eye and engage the gaze of the Lady. In her passive way, she sees only parts: the red cloaks of the market girls, the curly hair of the shepherd lad, the long hair of the page, and the plumes and lights of the funeral procession. These glide singly and separately through her mirror like the individual pulses of the shuttle sliding through the warp.

> *"They stand powerless to follow the metaphoric impulse and pass into the 'Nameless' and leave images, names, and words, the 'shadows of a shadow-world,' behind. They cannot die with the Lady."*

Surrounding the tower, pieces neither reaching nor touching one another accent the spaces between images. The tower overlooks "a space of flowers." The reader, though, does not have to wait until the second stanza to experience these spaces, for immediately in the opening lines, Tennyson plunges him into a gap which divides the fields and allows him to see that "On either side the river lie / Long fields of barley and of rye," and involves him in the Lady's initial view of a world dominated by separateness and without promise of continuity and wholeness. There is little sense of a mutual dependency, a dialectic of opposites, between the whole and the part. One does not take life from the other. Rather the pieces dislocate the continuity and create a landscape in which there are openings and discontinuities. The fields which are "Long" and "meet the sky" would extend without a break if the river and the road travelling through and dividing them did not interfere. The water itself would flow "for ever" if "Little breezes" did not cut into the waves and create patches of movement. These synecdochic images must necessarily admit beginnings and endings, so a "margin, willow-veiled"

borders and cuts off the river from all that surrounds it; water must separate the Lady, the tower, and the island from the fields. In this land of pieces a shallop skims by and disappears, and the Lady's voice, isolated from her, leaves the tower and comes surrounded by space and silence to the reapers below. The sounds render her presence by echoing her just as the mirror reflects.

In the early verses the vision is metonymic as well as synecdochic, for these single images are always succeeding one another. They do not flow into one another; rather they live for a moment until they are replaced by others—as soon as the shepherd-lad exits, the damsels arrive to occupy the space he had temporarily filled. The verses proceed as a procession. Without succession the cloth of the poem cannot hold. It is as if there were an attempt to weave a poem, though with broken lines and threads. If the Lady of Shalott does not constantly replace one image or thread with another, the tapestry and the poem must fly apart, as the tapestry does.

This synecdochic and metonymic vision is no different when Sir Lancelot enters in Part III. If anything his coming intensifies all that has passed before, for like his double reflection, his presence exaggerates this disjunction of a world dominated by parts and motivated by replacement. Even more distant from the land than the Lady in the tower, Lancelot and the rays of images shining from him seem to dangle and dazzle in open space ("The gemmy bridle glittered free"; "A mighty silver bugle" hangs from his "blazoned baldric"), and like an arrow released from the bow, Lancelot himself flashes by, cut off from all about him ("Some bearded meteor" moving "over still Shalott"). Tennyson's description of Lancelot, however, concentrates not only upon the successive and separated parts of his armor but also upon his movements with which, like the road and the river, he cuts through the fields ("He rode between the barley-sheaves") and divides the landscape. The effect of his action, though, is quite different from that of the road or the river, for Lancelot's brightness when coupled with the sun's brilliance ("The sun came dazzling through the leaves") seems paradoxically both to expand and fill the gaps of his passage. His glistening presence wounds the fields, yet simultaneously fills and heals the scar. One rapid, brilliant piece blends with another and for an instant the collective aura overwhelms all boundaries and divisions: "The helmet and the helmet-feather / Burned like one burning flame together." When Tennyson compares the knight's brilliance to a meteor that is "trailing light", these blended pieces even seem to melt away the frame of the mirror. Now continuity and wholeness seem as possible as the promise of eternal faithfulness depicted on Lancelot's shield (the knight "for ever" kneeling "To a lady." That momentary presence pushes the Lady from her loom, her mirror, from her synecdochic and metonymic space, and urges her and the poem forward.

Once the Lady's perspective shifts, so does the landscape. In the first three parts, images move horizontally across her static, vertical world; now, because she turns away and comes down, she moves horizontally through static, vertical structures. With that change come other inversions: instead of passively watching images move through her mirror, she becomes the image which passes through. Over becomes under as she glides into towered Camelot "Under tower and balcony." Echoes swell to full sounds; the fairy name takes on form and becomes the inscribed name; once empty skies and placid river swell with the rain. Action, fullness, and inscription replace passivity, emptiness, echoes, whispers, and rumour. The Lady emerges as a Lancelot: she gleams, she reflects, she is the one who is paradoxically to cut through and to remind the onlookers of the absence of wholeness, but she does it in a different manner. Of course, the analogy cannot be exact, for Lancelot's initial dazzling, doubly-reflected presence brings at best a promise and at worst an illusion of the Lady's metaphoric vision. At the end he is not in the Lady's vessel but somewhere apart by "a little space" from both her and the citizens. His isolation, his continuing the creation of spaces between images, suggests that there is something hypocritical, even Satanic, about him. This hint of evil is not, as some would have it, because he is indifferent to the Lady but because he has knowledge of her and her metaphoric vision which he chooses to avoid. It is as if in remaining apart on the wharf, he stood beside Tennyson who could never quite let himself completely enter the Lady's vessel even though the impulse toward the mystical and non-representational was strong within him.

The Lady is different from Lancelot because when she leaves the tower, inscribes her name on the prow of the boat, and floats down the river to Camelot, she turns her back on the vision of her past and inserts herself into a metaphoric relationship with her surroundings and her self. With this shift, she moves into the spaces between the fields and the people and fills them with her form: her name and her body. No longer is there a silence be-

tween her name and her body, a pause between her singing and the audible echoes. The true weaving and mingling of threads of experience take place, so that vertical and horizontal structures merge. The static tower blends with the moving, horizontal boat. When the Lady is in the boat that moves through the gaps between the fields, she closes the spaces, as her voice and her body spill over into the landscape, and, in turn, that landscape bends to meet her. Her white robe "loosely" flies "to left and right" and the leaves from the willows lining the bank fall lightly upon that robe. The sky reaches the earth; the inside, the outside; and together they eradicate the "as if" of the previous separateness. This separateness, dependent upon gaps, makes everything into an "as if"; but in Part IV there is rarely a gap between the image and its context. Tennyson relies little on simile. In fact, in revising the 1832 version of the poem he chooses to rid the lines of similes. The Lady herself becomes a metaphor. She is not "like" a brilliant meteor but is "A gleaming shape." With her "glassy countenance" she becomes both mirror, seer, and object.

As in the metaphoric landscape described above there is a yoking, a *glissement*, rather than an interrupting. Now it is the Lady who catches the others' gaze. It is she, not Lancelot, whom the people view and through whom they recognize the limitations of their own vision. When the citizens of Camelot regard her, understandably they are fearful because they fear to see a reflection of their own lack and emptiness. Although her name appears upon her boat, and her body is as an image, her coming tells of a world which does not have to depend upon image and name. As their questions reveal, the citizens are dependent upon such tangible tokens and are trapped, as the Lady once was, in a landscape of successive, unconnected images framed by "who" and "what." Theirs is not a place to admit transcendence or a unifying vision. The Lady's, however, is: Edgar F. Shannon, Jr., is correct—the Lady has moved to "insight." But that insight does not have to be regarded in a Christian mystical context, for her movement is not necessarily to a vision which exists beyond the image. Rather it is a journey to a pre-imagistic understanding which negates image and recaptures a condition that does not require representation. In her recovery of a pre-imagistic state, she participates in the metaphoric impulse, for, even though metaphor begins in the concrete and seems initially to depend upon the conjunction of representations, the tension between that yoking scatters the objects and discards them, and seems finally to strain to retrieve a knowledge which is not at all linked to representation. The metaphor seems to wish to forget image. It is, therefore, understandable that in the poem, all that remains for the citizens is that scattering—her dead body and her inscribed name.

When the Lady inserts herself into the spaces of the landscape and thereby acknowledges the possibility for continuity and similarity in experience, she also places herself within a context which recognizes differences and otherness. As metaphor teaches, similarity is impossible without difference. The Lady's act of writing her name is an important aspect of her involvement with metaphor. It is as if the name were an abbreviated metaphor. The written name brings with it hopes of continuity because it is a fixed designator; it also admits differences because the very act of naming acknowledges the presence of the Other and the necessity for that presence to break away from a metonymic relationship with her parent, the land of Shalott (she is, after all, the Lady of Shalott), and create her own identity.

In the early parts of the poem, the Lady's name seems indefinite, some arbitrary identifier imposed on her by the reapers. She is neither conscious of her name nor desirous to use it. She has "little care." It is only when she leaves the tower that she cares. Then by taking on the name (baptising herself if you like) and inscribing it on the very vessel of her mediation into her surroundings, she goes to Camelot. (It is interesting to note that when Tennyson revised the 1832 version of the poem, he moved the name forward from the stern of the boat to the prow.) This inscribed name, the mediator, becomes a mirror through which she can see and present herself as being distinct from others and allow them to discover how they in their imagistic-dependent world are different from her. It also becomes a means by which she, as Tennyson did on occasion when he would repeat his name to reach a higher plane, can separate herself from a world ironically enslaved to naming objects.

However, because she does write her name, death and wounding are also inevitable. On the one hand she escapes the limits of metonymy, but on the other hand she faces the experience of loss, for naming is also a form of mourning, like the mournful carol she sings at the end. To name is to experience closure. It is as Claude Lévi-Strauss writes, "as far as one can go." Naming involves death also because it aspires to the ultimate, to fix the margin. However, in attempting to fix the margin the

name grows more conscious of the absence of the ultimate, that is of the difference between the fixed reference and the idea. As Walter Benjamin suggests, names are the incomplete and inadequate mirrors of meaning. They are the fact of knowledge; not knowledge itself. Names name the death of oneness and are dependent upon representation.

Because there is a sense of loss accompanying naming, when the Lady of Shalott asserts her name into the consciousness of Camelot, she wounds and ruptures the synecdochic order of the dull-witted society and exposes its emptiness. When the citizens gaze at her name, they feel an absence to which their only responses are questions tying them more tightly to their dependency upon representation and pulling them further away from the presence of the Lady's metaphoric vision, a vision which could heal the wounding of their consciousness by her name. Theirs is not a place from which they can travel beyond the rupturing of consciousness into the salvation of metaphor.

The citizens on shore cannot participate in the Lady's metaphoric world; consequently, they also cannot go where metaphor leads and follow her into the final stage of her journey—her death and the death of metaphor. Just as she reaches "The first house by the water-side", her blood freezes, her eyes darken "wholly," and her singing ends. With her death and the coming of darkness and silence, she moves into a realm where the elements—light, time, space, and place—which form and bind words, sounds, and images are neither present nor absent. Perhaps beyond the audible reverberations of the poem, her death takes her where metaphor reaches and reclaims what metaphor paradoxically aspires to grasp, but cannot: a state not linked to representation—hence, a state previous to itself, an accomplishment which ironically causes the death of metaphor by foreclosing its characteristic impulse which is a desire to undo itself as well as others' desire for it.

In the end, then, the Lady is relieved of the burden of the metaphoric impulse to reach for what it cannot grasp, a burden which stares back at those left on shore. While the citizens stand gaping, struggling with their limitations and their dependency upon image and name, she enters a nameless, imageless realm which exists prior to the assumption of metaphor, name or the "symbolic." But now that there is a glimmer, a suggestion, of that realm, her presence for others is more than the challenge of her metaphoric vision; it is also a reminder of the pre-symbolic, raw state which because of its very nature resists and irritates metaphor and increases its burden. Her death, therefore, offers a strange reversal, for it reveals vividly the limitations of the representational world, even those of that world's most integrative act—the metaphor—an act which when well done undoes itself. Her death frustrates whatever impulses there might have been for others to leave the metonymic space behind, recover and participate in the metaphoric, and, thereby, heal their wounded consciousness.

The Lady's journey to a metaphoric landscape and her release from that burden is important in itself, but it also needs to be reconsidered briefly in terms of the reader's movement through the poem. When the reader first encounters the poem he is separated from it, imprisoned in his own tower into which flash words, phrases, sounds, rhythms, and rhymes. These succeed each other as he moves from line to line—forgetting, losing, and replacing. He waits for some word, some rhythm, some figure of sound to catch and hold him and remind him, like the picture of eternal reverence on Lancelot's shield, that there is something which unites the spaces between images and words. Eventually the reader inserts himself into these spaces and, like the Lady of Shalott, becomes more aware of both the differences and similarities working with and against each other. Once he has entered the metaphoric relationship with the poem, the reader's impulse is to sustain that relationship and find salvation in its integrating act. But this impulse involves bearing the burden and treachery of metaphor.

If in becoming the agent for metaphor, the reader attempts not only to integrate one image, space, and word with others and create some sense of wholeness, but also to follow the desire of the metaphor to reach a pre-imagistic or pre-symbolic state, the reader courts his own undoing and discomfort, and faces his own duplicity. The reader tempts disaster, for at the moment of integration when there appears to be an understanding of the text, a feeling of reaching the "truth," the metaphor pushes on. Momentarily it goes where its impulses take it and bursts open to expose a prior, raw, non-representational "truth." That revelation (the death of the metaphor) destroys the promise of salvation which the reader thought he had found in metaphor. Now he is caught between image and non-image, between the symbolic and the raw, in a space between areas for which there is no integrating act. No longer can he rest; he has been trapped by the very act which supported him. In the end, he stands between the citizens and the

Lady, belonging to neither world. Frustrated, the reader joins Lancelot and, perhaps, Tennyson on the wharf. Together poet and reader momentarily resemble and anticipate the doubters in "The Ancient Sage" (1885) who, in metonymic time measured by "'Thens'" and "'Whens,'" "creep from thought to thought." They stand powerless to follow the metaphoric impulse and pass into the "Nameless" and leave images, names, and words, the "shadows of a shadow-world," behind. They cannot die with the Lady. Neither can they be the ancient sage who, when he sits alone, "revolving in" himself, finds:

> The mortal limit of the Self was loosed,
> And past into the Nameless, as a cloud
> Melts into Heaven.

"The Lady of Shalott" is a poem that acknowledges the poet's and the reader's dilemma. It is as if Tennyson were attempting to use the poem as a vessel to rescue himself and his reader from an enclosed and image-bound landscape and move into a recognition of the non-representational. But, as much as he repeats the Lady's name, allows the sounds of the refrain to resound, and, in the manner of the ancient sage, lets the poem revolve in itself, he cannot push the poem into a "Nameless" state. The poem, like the Lady's boat, remains to stare back and remind Tennyson and the reader of their bondage to "mortal limits"—rhyme and words. Like the swallow on the lake "That sees and stirs the surface-shadow there", the most that the poem, Tennyson, and the reader can do is dip "into the abysm" beneath the rhyming shadow world.

It is difficult to refrain from reconsidering Tennyson's conclusion from the point of view of a later poet who entered the same lists, but attempted to achieve another outcome. In "Sunday Morning" Wallace Stevens acknowledges our dependency on detail (the "old dependency of day and night"), yet suggests that it is those very fleeting particulars which consummate our "dreams" and "desires." As for death, it is in fact death itself that engenders meaning ("Death is the mother of beauty,"). If Stevens is right, the poet and reader do not in the end have to fear "the immense disorder of truths" ("Connoisseur of Chaos"), but can stand beside that "pensive man" who is the "connoisseur of Chaos," and see "that eagle float / For which the intricate Alps are a single nest."

Source: Ann C. Colley, "The Quest for the 'Nameless' in Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott,'" in *Victorian Poetry*, Vol. 23, No. 3, Autumn 1985, pp. 369–78.

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Further Reading

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Students who find scholarly work hard to follow will appreciate Amis's brief examination of Tennyson's life and importance. Amis, who could be one of the funniest novelists of the twentieth century, seems an unlikely choice for introducing Tennyson's poetry, but his essay is reverent and warm.

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Part biography and part criticism, this book gives some insight into Tennyson's psychological state as he wrote this poem.

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Foakes does not specifically talk about Tennyson, but he does talk about how Romanticism affected poetry that came after it. Readers can draw conclusions about where Tennyson fits into the scheme Foakes proposes.

Hollander, John, "Tennyson's Melody," in *Alfred Lord Tennyson*, edited by Harold Bloom, Chelsea House Publishers, 1985, pp. 103–26.

Hollander's examination of the sound of Tennyson's poems, including "The Lady of Shalott," is rich and full of details.

The Lake Isle of Innisfree

William Butler Yeats

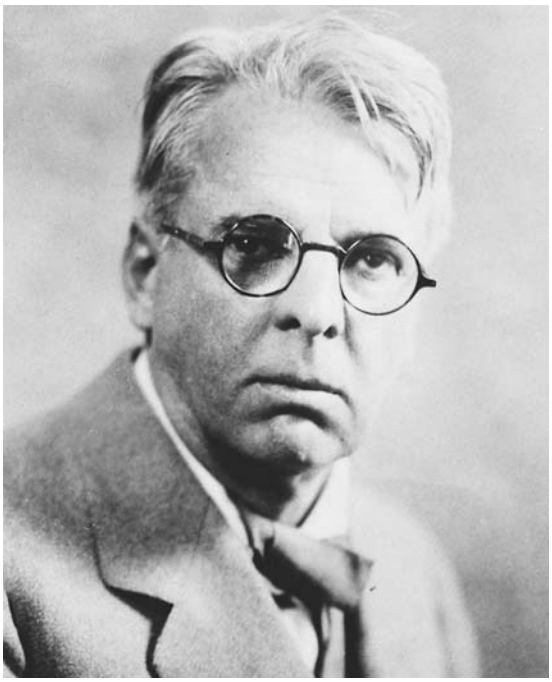
1893

First published in the collection *The Rose* in 1893, "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" is an example of Yeats's earlier lyric poems. Throughout the three short quatrains the poem explores the speaker's longing for the peace and tranquility of his boyhood haunt, Innisfree.

"The Lake Isle of Innisfree" suggests that a life of simplicity in nature will bring peace to the troubled speaker. However, the poem is the speaker's recollection of Innisfree, and therefore the journey is an emotional and spiritual escape rather than an actual one. Innisfree may be a symbol for the speaker's passed youth, which the speaker is unable to return to in the "real," or physical, world. Emotionally, the speaker can return again and again to the tranquility of Innisfree.

Author Biography

Born June 13, 1865, in Sandymount, Ireland, to John Butler Yeats, a lawyer turned portrait painter, and Susan Mary Pollexfen, daughter of a well-to-do shipping family, William Butler Yeats was raised in London and Dublin, attending schools in both cities. Though passionate about art, Yeats turned to writing after reading Irish poets Samuel Ferguson and James Clarence Mangan. His own interest in all things Irish can be seen in poems such as his popular and early poem,"The Lake Isle of Innisfree," in which he expresses his longing to return to



William Butler Yeats

County Sligo in western Ireland, where he spent much of his youth. Yeats's chief influences included his father; John O'Leary (1830–1907), an Irish nationalist and activist; and Maud Gonne, a fiery Irish revolutionary with whom the poet fell in love and maintained a long correspondence. Yeats celebrated Gonne's beauty in verse and plays throughout his life, though the two never married. A writer who was inspired by mysticism and occult philosophy as much as Irish literature and folklore, Yeats was deeply involved in organizations such as the Hermetic Students of the Golden Dawn and the Theosophical Society, the latter founded by Madam Blavatsky, a controversial mystic. A lifelong student of philosophy and literature, Yeats was well read in writers such as Plato, Dante, Shakespeare, Ben Johnson, John Donne, Jonathan Swift, William Blake, Immanuel Kant, and Friedrich Nietzsche.

A shy youth, Yeats grew into a charismatic figure, championing Irish heritage and resisting the cultural influence of English rule. A playwright as well as a poet, Yeats, along with a patron, Lady Gregory of Coole Park, founded the Irish Theatre, which became the Abbey Theatre. He served as the Abbey's lead playwright and later was joined by John Synge, author of *The Playboy of the Western World*. Many of Yeats's plays drew on Irish legends and include *The Countess Cathleen* (1892); *The Land of Heart's Desire* (1894); *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902); *The King's Threshold* (1904); and *Deirdre* (1907). His poetry collections include *The Wanderings of Oisin* (1889); *The Celtic Twilight* (1893); *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899); *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1917); and *The Tower* (1928). Yeats was elected to a seat in the Irish Free Senate in 1922 and awarded the Nobel Prize in 1923. He died January 29, 1939, in Roquebrune, France. In 1948, his remains were re-interred in Drumcliff, Sligo. He is widely considered one of the greatest poets of the twentieth century.

Poem Text

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made:
Nine bean-rows I will have there, a hive for the honey-bee,
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;
There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
And evening full of the linnet's wings.

I will arise and go now, for always night and day.
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,
I hear it in the deep heart's core.

Poem Summary

Line 1

In this line Yeats establishes the opening tone as well as the refrain of the poem. The poem focuses on Innisfree as a place of escape for the speaker.

Lines 2–4

Here the speaker describes Innisfree as a simple, natural environment where he will build a cabin and live alone. Note the rich description in these lines. The language is specific. The speaker does not merely mention that he will build a cabin, but also that it will be made of "clay and wattles." The speaker also specifies that he will have "nine bean-rows," instead of simply a "garden." These

Media Adaptations

- As part of their Caedmon Treasury of Poets, Harper Audio has published an audiocassette of poets reading their own poems. Poets include e. e. cummings, W. H. Auden, and Yeats reading "The Lake Isle of Innisfree." The tape is 155 minutes in length.
- Yeats reads "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" and "Song of the Old Mother" on *In Their Own Voices* (1996), on the Rhino Word Beat label.
- Judy Collins sings "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" on her 1971 album *Judy Collins: Living*. Hamilton Camp wrote the music for the song.
- John Aschenbrenner's song cycle *To an Isle in the Water* (1998) comprises settings of Yeats's poems including "The Lake Isle of Innisfree." The album is published by Isle Enterprises.
- In the video *The Poetry of William Butler Yeats* actors Stephanie Beacham, Gabriel Byrne, Julian Sands, Minnie Driver and others read Yeats's poems and discuss his life.
- The Yeats Society of New York, online at http://www.yeatssociety.org/yeatsny.html, contains a wealth of information about the poet and links to other Yeats sites on the web.
- In 1953, Audio-Forum released an audiocassette of poet Stephen Spender reading Yeats's poems. The title is *W. B. Yeats*. The tape can be purchased from Jeffrey Norton Publishers, 96 Broad St., Guilford, CT 06437.
- The video *Yeats Country* (1965) juxtaposes Yeats's poetry with scenes of the Ireland he wrote about. It is distributed by International Film Bureau.
- Insight Video distributes the documentary *Yeats Remembered*, a biographical film using period photographs and interviews with the poet and his family. It can be purchased from Insight Media, 2162 Broadway, NY, NY 10024.

are images that conjure up in the mind of the reader concrete visual features of Yeats's poetic fantasy. Notice also the particularly interesting image of the "bee-loud glade." This image invests Innisfree with a magical air.

Lines 5–6

In these lines Yeats introduces the connection between peace and Innisfree in the speaker's mind. The first line of the second stanza repeats the same meter employed in the first line of the first stanza. The reader can sense a refrain developing. The line "And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow" is composed almost entirely of iambic feet. This means that one unaccented syllable is followed by an accented syllable. The iambs are interrupted in the middle of the line by an amphibrach with the phrase "some peace there." An amphibrach is composed of two unaccented syllables sandwiching an accented one. It is used for emphasis. The amphibraic foot in the fifth line corresponds with the similar foot in the first line. This may be used to emphasize the metaphor that Innisfree represents escape for the speaker. Line six contains a good example of figurative language. Yeats wants to explain that the abstract idea of "peace" is abundant from morning until night in Innisfree, but instead of relying on that cliche, he transforms morning into the image of veils from which peace falls. Night has also been transformed into "where the cricket sings."

Lines 7–8

Here Yeats continues with transforming midnight and noon into almost eerie images. Evening becomes a dark image of the sky filled with the wings of birds.

Lines 9–12

In the last lines of the poem, the speaker stands in the street surrounded by gray pavement. This image, which is hard and silent, contrasts with the soothing, soft image of the water. The speaker continues to hear the sounds of nature even in the city. The peace of Innisfree is able to transcend the urban environment because it resides in a completely natural one, that of the speaker himself.

Themes

Nature

"The Lake Isle of Innisfree" expresses the idea that nature provides an inherently restorative place

to which human beings can go to escape the chaos and corrupting influences of civilization. In his autobiography, Yeats writes that his poem was influenced by his reading of American writer Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), which describes Thoreau's experiment of living alone in a small hut in the woods on Walden Pond, outside Concord, Massachusetts. Thoreau lived in his one-room house from 1845–1847, gardening, writing, and studying natural history. Thoreau championed the solitary, self-sufficient life lived in harmony with nature, considering it more authentic than a life spent balancing ledgers or working for someone else. He disdained the ways working for a living and acquiring material goods can control one's life. Explaining his motivation for the experiment, Thoreau writes in *Walden*:

> I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary.

Yeats also expresses this sentiment when he writes of building a small cabin "of clay and wattles" and living alone "in the bee-loud glade" of Innisfree. Yeats seems to refer to *Walden* when he writes of the "Nine bean-rows I will have there," and he underscores the contrast between rural and urban lifestyle in the last lines, when he places himself "on the roadway, or on the pavements grey." Both of these images symbolize the destructive, joy-deadening forces of modern life. Yeats emphasizes the authenticity of the desire to live close to nature, writing that he hears the call to go to Innisfree "in the heart's deep core."

Imagination

A primary feature of Romantic poetry is the idea of the imagination as a faculty that can generate alternate realities. The speaker of "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" exercises this faculty by daydreaming about life in the country. The entire poem describes a life that he "will" live, not one he is currently living. The detail of his fantasy suggests that the speaker has entertained this desire previously. Readers can clearly picture the haven the speaker imagines. He enumerates the bean-rows he will have, describes the building materials of his cabin, and lists particular creatures he will hear, i.e., bees, crickets, linnets.

Ever since William Wordsworth's lyric poems about nature's beauty and power helped define Romantic verse, poets have used their imaginations to conjure worlds in which they would be more content and where their "true" selves could find peace. But for Yeats, this imagined world remained a fantasy: unlike Thoreau, Yeats never lived the rural life. Rather, he was an urban man of letters, an Irish senator, and a Nobel laureate. Moreover, his later poems never exhibited the degree or kind of romanticism shown in "The Lake Isle of Innisfree."

Topics for Further Study

- Parodies are imitations of another work, written to deflate the subject matter of the original. Read Ezra Pound's poem "The Lake Isle," then write an essay explaining what his poem says about "The Lake Isle of Innisfree."
- Write a detailed description of the place you would most like to call home, both the geographical location (e.g., New York City, French Riviera, etc.) and the kind of structure (e.g., a palace, a log cabin, a hut, etc.). What are the qualities of the home? What do these qualities say about your own values?
- Get together with your classmates and brainstorm ideas for your ideal house. If possible, sketch a floor plan. How does your idea of an ideal home differ from those of your classmates?
- What are some of the sights, smells, sounds that remind you of pleasant experiences in your life? When do they occur, and how do you respond when you encounter them?
- Yeats's poem was influenced by his reading of Thoreau's *Walden*. Make a list of books that have most influenced your own way of thinking, then write a short essay explaining how they have done so.
- Poll your classmates, asking them what place they most remember from childhood. Then categorize their responses. What do these places have in common? Why are they memorable? What does this tell you about your relationship to childhood?

Nostalgia

Less than a hundred years before Yeats penned "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," William Wordsworth wrote in a sonnet that "the world is too much with us," meaning that the human mind and heart are too preoccupied by the material or worldly seductions of urban living. Yeats experienced the urge to return to a simpler, more familiar life as a kind of homesickness which expressed itself as a desire to "return" to Innisfree, a small island at the eastern end of Lough Gill in County Sligo. The poet regularly visited Sligo while growing up, and the inspiration for the poem came when Yeats was living in London and walking Fleet Street, a busy commercial section of the city. The sound of a fountain's water reminded him of the Sligo lake, and the poem was born. Two other early poems by Yeats which deal with nostalgia and escape are "The Stolen Child" and "To an Isle in the Water."

Style

"The Lake Isle of Innisfree" is written with an *abab* rhyme scheme corresponding to each of the three quatrains in the poem, which are defined as a stanza composed of four lines which may or may not have a set line length. Also prevalent is the use of alliteration and assonance, both of which emphasize the musical tone and rhythm of the piece.

When a stanza in a poem has a pattern of rhymes it is called a "rhyme scheme." "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" utilizes end rhyme in an *abab* rhyme scheme. This means that the end of the first line of a stanza rhymes with the end of the third line, and the end of the second line of a stanza rhymes with the end of the fourth line. All three of the quatrains in "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" display an *abab* rhyme scheme.

"The Lake Isle of Innisfree" uses "alliteration" and "assonance" to emphasize the sound and mood of the poem. Alliteration is the repetition of certain consonants in a poem which are often used in order to stress a word or phrase. Notice the sound of the consonants 'l' and 's' in the following line:

"I hear lake water lapping with the low sounds by the shore." Read the line aloud and notice the emphasis on the words "lapping," "low," and "shore." Assonance occurs when the vowel sounds attached to different consonants are repeated in a poem. Notice the sound of the vowels 'i' and 'o' in the following line:

"I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree." Assonance is less clear than either rhyme or alliteration, but its use is similar. It links important words or phrases in the poem together.

Historical Context

In the 1880s, when Yeats wrote "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," Ireland was in economic and political turmoil, and Yeats and his family were struggling financially. It is not surprising that the sound of a water fountain on a bustling London street would remind him of the lapping water of Lough Gill and stir the boyhood dream he had of living on Innisfree, unencumbered by the demands of modern urban life.

Ireland was an agricultural country in the nineteenth century, but British landlords controlled many farms. Farmers had fought for almost three centuries for greater say in their livelihood. In the 1880s, they finally achieved some success. The leader for Irish land reform and Home Rule (i.e., a subordinate parliament for Ireland) was Charles Steward Parnell (1846–1891), often referred to as the "uncrowned King of Ireland." Parnell, a wealthy Protestant landlord who empathized with the plight of the Irish, was elected to Parliament in 1875 and became head of the Irish Party.

With the backing of Parnell, along with Catholic labor activist Michael Davitt (1846–1906), liberal British Prime Minister Gladstone enacted the Land Act of 1881, which guaranteed tenant farmers fair rent, protection against eviction, and the freedom to sell or transfer the lease on their farm. Parliament also passed a "franchise act," adding some 500,000 new voters to the rolls, most of whom were middle-class and poor Catholics who supported Parnell. Still, a Home Rule Bill was defeated in Commons in 1886, and in 1890, Parnell was disgraced when a court revealed he had been "living in sin" with the wife of William Henry O'Shea, a politician and fellow member of the Irish Party.

A second Home Rule Bill was introduced in 1893 but also defeated, this time in the House of Lords. After this defeat, many Irish nationalists, such as Yeats, turned their attention to developing a greater sense of Ireland's contributions to culture and the arts. For example, Douglas Hyde, who later became president of the Irish Free State, founded the Gaelic League in 1893. The League spear-

Compare & Contrast

- **1880s:** Unionists and Catholics are locked in battle over the sovereignty of Ireland. Scores of people die in riots.

  Today: Despite progress in talks, violence continues between Unionists and Catholics in Northern Ireland, with numerous casualties on both sides.

- **1880s:** Groups advocating occultism and magic gain a high degree of popularity in England and Ireland. Yeats himself participates in a number of these groups, including the Theosophical Society and the Hermetic Students of the Golden Dawn.

  Today: The western world experiences a renewed interest in occultism and various forms of magic. The Order of the Golden Dawn remains in existence and now has its own web site.

- **1880s:** The Celtic Revival, a movement against the cultural influences of English rule in Ireland, seeks to promote the spirit of Ireland's native heritage.

  Today: Irish Americans flock to Ireland to explore their ethnic roots and cultural heritage.

headed efforts to revive pride in Irish ethnic and national identity, supporting various initiatives to publicize Gaelic language and culture. The "Irish Ireland" movement also included organizations such as The Gaelic Athletic Association, formed to promote traditional Irish sports such as hurling and football.

Almost as soon as the Yeats family moved to London in 1887, Yeats became homesick. The new home, a dark squalid row house in a lower-middle-class neighborhood of Kensington, depressed the entire family, and Yeats often dreamt of returning to Ireland. However, Yeats finally found a measure of solace in the literary scene in London. Not more than a mile from the Yeats's house lived William Morris, poet and father of the Arts and Crafts movement, whose large house and stables were a meeting ground for writers and artists. Morris befriended Yeats, and the poet wrote for Morris's socialist magazine, *Commonweal*.

Yeats returned to Ireland in mid-August, 1887, and stayed there through the end of the year. During this time, he wrote his first major poem, "The Wanderings of Oisin," crafted from Irish folklore. When Yeats returned to London in 1888, he deepened his associations with London's writers, including Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw. A few years later, along with Ernest Rhys, Yeats formed the Rhymers Club, founded to help young poets get their start. From this group, Yeats became involved with the Irish National Literary Society, whose members he sparred with on and off in the coming years. Yeats was also involved during this time with Madame Blavatsky's Theosophical Society and later with the Hermetic Students of the Golden Dawn. Blavatsky was an occultist and major figure in England and Ireland in the late nineteenth century; her book, *The Occult World*, was wildly popular among artists and writers. Blavatsky held séances, practiced magic, and encouraged followers to pursue "union with the absolute." Her emphasis on the spiritual aspects of existence resonated with Yeats's own anti-materialist sentiments.

Critical Overview

"The Lake Isle of Innisfree" is one of Yeats's earlier poems and also one of his best known. It is perhaps so widely known due to its universal subject matter, that of the conflict between youth and aging, and the longing for emotional escape. Author William York Tindall, in his book *W. B. Yeats*, terms "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" "a vision of escape." However, some find the poem overly sentimental and prefer Yeats's later poems. F. R. Leavis,

in his book *New Bearings in English Poetry: A Study of the Contemporary Situation*, cites a statement by Yeats regarding his early poetry:

> I tried after the publication of *The Wanderings of Oisin* to write of nothing but emotion, and in the simplest language, and now I have had to go through it all, cutting out or altering passages that are sentimental from lack of thought.

Edmund Wilson, in his book *Alex's Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930*, explores the conflict between Yeats's world of imagination in his poetry and the world of reality:

> The world of imagination is shown us in Yeats's early poetry as something infinitely delightful, infinitely seductive, as something to which one becomes delirious and drunken—and as something which is somehow incompatible with, and fatal to, the good life of that actual world which is so full of weeping and from which it is so sweet to withdraw.

Criticism

Chris Semansky

Semansky is an instructor of English literature and composition whose essays, poems, and stories regularly appear in journals and magazines. In this essay, Semansky considers the relationship between self-image and daydreaming in Yeats's poem.

Yeats's poem is perhaps most interesting for what it does not say. Although the speaker expresses the desire to arise and "go to Innisfree," he never explicitly states what it is that motivates this desire. This absence asks readers to infer what compels the speaker to be other than where he is. People often daydream when they are dissatisfied with their lives. They fantasize about how circumstances might be different and how new surroundings would make them more content, perhaps even how such a change would make them different persons. They see themselves in daydreams differently than they see themselves in their "waking" life. By examining the speaker's daydream closely, readers can deduce the speaker's current situation and speculate about his inspiration for writing the poem.

The opening line of the poem, repeated as the first line in the last stanza, tells readers what the speaker "will" do: "I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree." Echoing the parable of the prodigal son in the New Testament (Luke: 15:18), which begins, "I will arise and go to my father," Yeats, consciously or not, infuses his poem with religious weight. This choice suggests that the person Yeats would like to be is the one who returns home, fulfills his familial duties as a son, and yet nonetheless achieves his own separate identity as a poet. Yeats spent much of his youth in County Sligo, home to his mother's family, but they were not particularly happy years. By picturing himself on Innisfree, an island on Lake Gill in Sligo, Yeats can, imaginatively, both return to the place of his childhood, effecting a kind of redemption, and yet remain separate from it.

In his biography of Yeats, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks*, Richard Ellmann notes that Yeats was in London when he wrote "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," and that despite the robust literary scene there, felt shy and out of place. Ellmann writes, "To a poor Irishman . . . it seemed alien and hostile. . . . Yeats often dreamed of beating a retreat to Sligo." Ellmann sees Yeats's homesickness as an unbearable desire, writing that Yeats

> filled his poems and stories with dim, pale things, and longed to return to an island like Innisfree, where his "old care will cease" because an island was neither mainland nor water but something of both, and because the return to Sligo, though he knew it now to be impossible, would be a return to the prepubertal stage when his consciousness had not yet been split in two.

Some critics go as far as seeing the poem as a kind of death wish. Henry Merritt, for example, in his essay, "Rising and Going: The 'Nature' of Yeats's 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree,'" argues that Sligo is closely linked with failure in Yeats's imagination because it is home to Yeats's maternal family, the Pollexfens of Sligo, who largely disliked the poet. A return to Sligo marked a surrender to the stodgy, provincial values of the Pollexfens, Merritt argues.

But Yeats never went to Innisfree; the poem remained at the level of a daydream, albeit one with specific benefits for the young poet. One of these is that he was able to grapple with the kind of person he was becoming by imagining the kind of person he might be. The imagery in the first stanza alludes to the life that Thoreau made for himself at Walden Pond. It is not only the kind of life that Thoreau lived, however, that Yeats is drawn to but also the kind of person Thoreau was. An American transcendentalist who championed civil liberties, Thoreau was known as much for his politics as he was for his nature writing. Yeats's fantasy of living in a Walden-like hut, in Walden-like surroundings, then, is also a fantasy of being the kind of person who could bring about such a dream—

strong, self-reliant, full of conviction and initiative. It is significant that Yeats wrote the poem in his early twenties, a time when most people are still struggling to carve out a place for themselves in the world.

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud claims that the purpose of creative writing is to fulfill both the author's fantasies *and* the reader's. Poets and fiction writers—those who traffic in fantasies, daydreams, and the world of the imagination—perform a kind of regulatory function for society, in that they give voice to fantasies that readers sometimes do not even know they have. "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" remains one of Yeats's most popular poems because of this very fact. Readers vicariously participate in Yeat's fantasy because it is such a popular and generic one. Although not everyone necessarily desires to live alone in a small cabin, the wish to live close to nature and away from the distractions of modern life is common, as is the wish to see one's own self in the best possible light. Compared to Yeats's later more modern poetry, the poem is sentimental and conventional, but these facts have also helped its popularity, as those very features make "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" accessible to more readers, meeting their expectations of what poetry should do.

Yeats moves from simply wishing he were elsewhere to coming up with a concrete plan for being there. The details in the first stanza read as a kind of blueprint for his Eden-like cabin. He imagines himself as a steward of the land and all the life on it. The second stanza, however, paints a more impressionistic scene. In addition to the cabin and "bee-loud glade," the speaker will also find peace, "Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings." Such emphasis on quiet and solitude tells readers something about what the speaker's current life must be like: crowded, hectic, noisy. Living alone on an island in the midst of a lake is about as far away from those circumstances as possible. The imagery and figurative language of the second stanza also underscore the dreamy nature of the speaker's fantasy, highlighting the distinction between the real and the imaginary, the present and the future, the city and the country.

Sights, sounds, touches, smells are often catalysts for memories, and the sound of fountain water on a busy London street has evoked the memory of Yeats's childhood for him. The consuming nature of the speaker's desire to leave his present situation and return to the setting of his childhood is evident in the last stanza, when he says, "for always night and day / I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore." Such an aural hallucination underscores the intensity of Yeats's memory of Lake Gill and what that memory now represents for him. It is significant that in his autobiography Yeats says the poem is the first he had written with anything of his "own music" in it, for it represents a maturing, both poetically and emotionally, of the poet's relationship to his past and his own self image.

Although not everyone necessarily desires to live in a small cabin, the wish to live close to nature and away from the distractions of modern life is common, as is the wish to see one's own self in the best possible light."

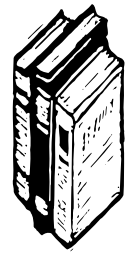
Source: Chris Semansky, Critical Essay on "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

C. Stuart Hunter

In the following essay, Hunter examines what Innisfree symbolizes to Yeats as a poet.

In an attempt to explain the nature of the attraction he feels toward the Devon farm he calls Thorncombe, the protagonist of John Fowles' *Daniel Martin* refers to a passage in Restif de la Bretonne's eighteenth-century romanced autobiography, *Monsieur Nicholas*, in which the speaker describes the feeling of total peace and joy found in a remote, lush, hidden valley in the Burgundian hills. Fowles' protagonist, after pointing out that the Frenchman "baptized the place simply *la bonne vaux*: the valley of abundance, the sacred combe," goes on to describe the general nature of such places as "outside the normal world, intensely private and enclosed, intensely green and fertile, numinous, haunted and haunting, dominated by a sense of magic that is also a sense of a mysterious yet profound parity in all existence." In the context of Fowles' novel, this section serves to illustrate

What Do I Read Next?



- Yeats was a playwright as well as a poet. To sample some of Yeats's plays, read *The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W. B. Yeats* (1966), edited by Russell K. Alspach.
- In *Yeats at Work* (1965), Bradford Curtis examines selected manuscripts of Yeats, showing the progression of various poems through numerous revisions.
- Mario D'Avanzo compares "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" with "The Song of Solomon" in his 1971 essay in *The McNeese Review*.
- Susan Johnston Graf's 2000 study entitled *W. B. Yeats: Twentieth-Century Magus* examines Yeats's membership in the Order of the Golden Dawn, an occultist group. Graf also documents Yeats's magical practices and their relation to his work.
- To learn more about Innisfree itself, read Tadhg Kilgannon's 1926 book, *Sligo and Its Surroundings: A Descriptive and Pictorial Guide to the History, Scenery, Antiquities and Places of Interest in and around Sligo*.
- Bernard G. Krimm's *W. B. Yeats and the Emergence of the Irish Free State, 1918–1939: Living in the Explosion* (1981) examines Yeats's writing and career in relation to Ireland's drive to free itself of British control at the beginning of the twentieth century.
- Tom Mulvany's essay entitled "The Genesis of a Lyric: Yeats's 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree'" explores how Yeats came to write the poem. It is part of the Winter 1965 volume of *Texas Quarterly*, pp. 160–64.
- Maire and Conor Cruise O'Brien's *Ireland: A Concise History* (1972) presents a compact and unbiased history of Ireland, complete with informative photographs. Maire O'Brien is the daughter of Sean Mac Entee, veteran of the Rising of 1916 and former Irish politician.
- Many poets have parodied Yeats's poem. One of the best-known parodies is Ezra Pound's 1916 poem entitled "The Lake Isle."
- A. G. Stock's 1961 book from Cambridge University Press, *W. B. Yeats: His Poetry and Thought*, is one of the more useful and accessible critical introductions to the writer's work.
- Oliver Stonor's 1933 essay "Three Men of the West," published in *John o' London's Weekly*, recounts the author's trip to Innisfree to get a first-hand view of what inspired Yeats's poem.
- In *Builders and Makers: Occasional Studies* (1944), Gilbert Thomas argues that Yeats never built a cabin on Innisfree because he was better off living the life of the imagination.
- Yeats was much influenced by Thoreau's book *Walden*, originally published in 1854, and he alludes to a passage from the book in "The Lake Isle of Innisfree." Students would benefit from comparing Thoreau's ideas on nature and the solitary life with those of Yeats.
- J. B. Yeats's *Letters to his Son W. B. Yeats and Others* (1944) provides an intimate portrait in letters of the close friendship between Yeats and his father.

both the necessity for the artist to find a place of retreat and the fact that such places exist for him, as an artist and human being, not simply as geographic locations but also, and more importantly, as symbolic settings. *La bonne vaux*, while a physical place, is more importantly a state of mind in which the individual is linked by the significant details of his surrounding to a symbolic world that stretches beyond the boundaries of human time and space. In his description of the lake isle of Innisfree, W. B. Yeats presents his version of *la bonne vaux*, an ostensibly nostalgic description of a specific geographic location that, through the particular physical details and the symbolic force of those

details, is transformed into a symbolic landscape. Like Daniel Martin's Thorncombe and Monsieur Nicholas' *bonne vaux*, Yeats' lake isle is private and enclosed, in this case by the waters of Lough Gill. It is fertile, as the beans and bees clearly indicate. It is numinous, in that it is both a physical island and a state of mind created by that island. It is haunted by the mythical Tuatha da Danaan and is haunting to the speaker of the poem, as the last stanza clearly reveals. In fact, Yeat's view of the island in his youth was dominated by the magical and mysterious story about the Tuatha da Danaan and the Danaan Quicken tree:

> I planned to live some day in a cottage on a little island called Innisfree . . . I should live, as Thoreau lived, seeking wisdom. There was a story in the county history of a tree that had once grown upon that island guarded by some terrible monster and borne the food of the gods. A young girl pined for the fruit and told her lover to kill the monster and carry the fruit away. He did as he had been told, but tasted the fruit; and when he reached the mainland where she had waited for him, was dying of its powerful virtue. And from sorrow and from remorse she too ate of it and died. I do not remember whether I chose the island [as the proposed place of retreat] because of its beauty or for the story's sake, but I was twenty-two or three before I gave up the dream.

Yeats' attitude to the lake isle of Innisfree, then, is markedly similar to the attitude described by Fowles' narrator in *Daniel Martin*. The importance of Yeats' poem "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," a work often dismissed as a youthful, nostalgic, derivatively romantic lyric, lies in the very qualities that make the physical setting numinous for the author as young artist. Through a careful examination of the precise details and specific symbolism of the poem, one comes to see that, for the young Yeats, the retreat to the island of Innisfree is a journey in search of poetic wisdom and spiritual peace, a journey prompted by supernatural urgings, a journey in quest of identity within a tradition. The wisdom and peace that are the goal of the quest can only be realized through a poetic and spiritual grasp of the parity and even identity that exists between the legendary past of the Celtic world and the present, and of the presence of that past in the mind and spirit of the artist attuned to the numinous qualities of his particular *bonne vaux*.

Of the genesis of the poem and of its relationship to Yeats' development as a poet we know a great deal. By the time the poem began to take shape, some time late in 1888, the young poet had already published *Poems and Ballads of Young Ireland* (Dublin, 1888), and *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (Dublin, 1888), and was about to publish his first major volume of verse based on the Irish legends he had heard and learned during his frequent visits with his mother's parents in Sligo, *The Wanderings of Oisin and other Poems* (London, 1889). Although his thorough involvement in the Celtic Renaissance would not bear significant poetic fruit until the latter part of the 1890s, it is clear from the poems written in the early part of the decade, and indeed in the latter 1880s, that Yeats was fully aware of the poetic potential of the Celtic legends of Ireland and of his relationship, as poet, to the Celtic tradition. The specific background of "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" is made clear for us both by the commentaries of Jeffares and Alspach and by Yeats' own autobiographical comments. His familiarity with the connection between the Tuatha da Danaan and the island of Innisfree is clear from the passage from the *Autobiographies* cited above. Yeats had gleaned the legend of the Danaan Quicken tree from William Gregory Wood-Martin's *History of Sligo* (1882) and seems to have used the idea of a plant or tree sacred to the Celtic gods not only as the basis for the poem "The Danaan Quicken Tree" but also, with some transformation, in the bean rows of the poem under examination here. The early version of the poem, sent to Katharine Tynan in 1888, contains the text of the first two stanzas, including the details of the dwelling of clay and wattles, the bee hives and bean rows, and mention of the sounds and colours of the island. It lacks, however, the final stanza, the stanza that pulls the poem together and gives it its specific context and direction. Yeats tells us about the genesis of the final stanza—if not the entire poem—in the *Autobiographies:*

. . . for the young Yeats, the retreat to the island of Innisfree is a journey in search of poetic wisdom and spiritual peace, a journey prompted by supernatural urgings, a journey in quest of identity within a tradition."

> I had still the ambition, formed in Sligo in my teens, of living in imitation of Thoreau on Innisfree, a little island in Lough Gill, and when walking through Fleet Street very homesick I heard a little tinkle of water and saw a fountain in a shop-window which balanced a little ball upon its jet, and began to remember lake water. From the sudden remembrance came my poem "Innisfree," my first lyric with anything in its rhythm of my own music.

The first printed version of the work appeared in *The National Observer* for 13 December, 1890, and the poem was then reprinted in *The Book of the Rhymers' Club* (London, 1892), and *The Countess Kathleen and Various Legends and Lyrics* (London, 1892), without substantive changes. Yeats then included the poem in more than twenty collections of his works published between 1892 and the time of his death, again without substantive changes. Given that Yeats was constantly—and not always productively—revising his early work, it is significant that this poem was left virtually untouched through almost fifty years in which it could have been altered. This lack of tampering or revising seems to argue for its being one of the few early poems that Yeats considered to have achieved, in his eyes, its perfect expression at an early point in his poetic development. It is also significant to note that, with the exception of its inclusion in the first two collections, it does not appear in any of the works that Yeats organized around a particular thematic principle. Rather, it stands as a single, isolated work, a world unto itself, which seems to argue for its being considered a central statement in his poetic development. Interesting though the genesis and printing history of the poem might be, however, it is in the content of the poem, in the rich symbolic and mythic matrices for the work, that its major importance lies.

Stylistically speaking, the poem is not remarkable. It clearly shows, in its fascination with detail, the influence of the Pre-Raphaelitism of the Rhymers' Club, and also demonstrates, in its succession of three fairly regular quatrains, the influence of the lyrics of the Romantics. The first stanza, after describing the basic motivation of the speaker, goes on to give details of the habitation he will build in his retreat. The second stanza then details the benefits that he will derive from his solitary existence. The final stanza then adds urgency by contrasting the images of the rural retreat with the bustle of urban life, thereby strengthening the motivation behind the resolution expressed in the first line. In form, then, the poem is a simple nostalgic lyric expressing the speaker's desire to find a kind of peace in a place of rural solitude he has known in his youth. Aside from some minor metrical effects, there is nothing in the form and structure of the poem to indicate a departure from tradition in the work. The music of which Yeats speaks in the *Autobiographies* is heard not through the form of the poem but rather through the symbolic dimensions of the imagery, and one of those dimensions is seen in the role of the speaker. The speaker in the poem is presented as a seeker or questor. The initial line, with its ironic echo of the prodigal son's resolution, strengthens this notion, as does the double mention of the roadway in line 11. The actual location described in the first two stanzas of the poem, both in terms of the times mentioned and the specific details of geographical location, strengthens the idea that the speaker is seeking something more than a place in which to relax. The particular physical details that are provided in the first two stanzas describe not only an actual place but also a state of mind achieved because of the place. The description of time in the second stanza, with its double mention of evening and midnight, also stresses that the place is one in which mental and not physical vision is the important factor. The poem is presented, furthermore, through a first-person speaker. The air of immediacy created through the use of this kind of narrative voice amplifies the subjectivity of the utterance and stresses the importance of the dream or vision to the speaker himself. The retreat to Innisfree will be a solitary retreat; but it will be one that links the speaker, through the visions described, with his natural and, from what we know about the mythic significance of the island, supernatural world. The simplicity of rhetorical devices in the poem has, at once, a charm and yet an archaic air. The simplicity serves to stress the romantic nostalgia of the poem, but the deliberate archaisms—archaisms that, although he later repudiated them, Yeats did not choose to change—link the poem to the past, to the traditions of a day gone by and yet still present in the setting described. It is in the imagery and the allusions of the poem, though, more than in the type of speaker, choice of verse form, or particular rhetorical techniques, that Yeats makes his strongest statement, a statement that links the subjective speaker of the poem to a tradition that, because it stretches back to the Celtic vision both of the significance of the lake isle of Innisfree and of the role of the poet/hermit, objectifies the experience at the core of the work.

One of the central allusions in the poem, however, seems initially to have little to do with the Celtic. In describing the crops of the island, Yeats specifically mentions two things: honey and beans.

Although the latter may seem out of place, when one remembers the two passages in the *Autobiographies* that refer directly to the poem, one notes that, in both cases, Yeats mentions Thoreau, the bean-cultivating hermit of Walden pond. Yeats' youthful desire was to live "in imitation of Thoreau on Innisfree", "to live, as Thoreau did, seeking wisdom." Thoreau tells us that, when he went to Walden Pond, he was "determined to know beans." As Thoreau's editor points out, "A common expression in New England is 'He doesn't know beans,' meaning the person is ignorant." To put it another way, to know beans is to be wise. Hence one can see that it is possible for Yeats to have equated, tropologically, Thoreau's cultivation of beans with his pursuit of wisdom. In speaking of Walden Pond, Thoreau comments on the memories he has of a childhood visit there, of his awareness of those who dwelt there in the past, of his awareness of the birds and animals there, of the fact that gardening has long been a venerated occupation of intelligent men, and of the connection between gardening and ritual, of the connection between farming and the making of a better mankind. Familiar with Thoreau's work, the young Yeats was also familiar with the way in which Thoreau saw the retreat to a childhood-visited rural setting and the occupation of oneself in gardening as tropes for the poetic retreat in search of wisdom. In his nostalgic lyric description of Innisfree, Yeats carefully points out his awareness of the birds there, of the speaker's occupation as a gardener, and of the peace that comes from such an occupation in such a place. To connect the retreat to Innisfree with Thoreau's retreat to Walden in search of wisdom, Yeats carefully includes not only the mention of the honeybee, traditionally a symbol of industry, culture, and wisdom, but also the bean plant. Through this latter image, one sees a connection between Yeats' retreat and Thoreau's that places the former's retreat into a particular symbolic context. Through the references to Thoreau in the *Autobiographies*, then, and through the image of the bean in the first stanza, one sees a close connection between the nature and objectives of the hermit of Walden Pond and the speaker in Yeats' poem. Yet the context of the retreat to Innisfree is more specifically defined through the connections that the location has with particular aspects of Celtic folklore, another branch of the tree of knowledge with which Yeats was quite familiar.

Writing in *The Speaker* in 1893, Yeats remarked that "Folklore is at once the Bible, the Thirty-nine articles, and the Book of Common Prayer, as well nigh all the great poets have lived by its light, Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Shakespeare, and even Dante, Goethe, and Keats, were little more than folk-lorists with musical tongues." Yeats' interest in folk-lore had already led him to publish *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (London, 1888) and to use the material of Irish folk mythology as the basis of many of the selections in *Poems and Ballads of Young Ireland* (Dublin, 1888) and *The Wanderings of Oisin and Other Poems* (London, 1889). As Daniel Hoffman remarks in his recent study of Yeats, Graves, and Muir—three poets who developed from their awareness of folk-lore a particularly coherent and compelling personal mythology that links the individual to the tradition—:

> Not only ballad tradition but folk beliefs in the supernatural and the body of myths and legends from the Irish Heroic Age contributed subjects to [Yeats'] poems and plays. His firsthand observation, when a youth, of the folklore beliefs in the West of Ireland comprised his initial experience of the spiritual reality denied by the deterministic philosophy of the day . . . Critics have little heeded Yeats' tenacity in holding and remolding the folk beliefs with which he started out. Much though he remade his style and changed his attitudes toward life, he did not repudiate this first area of his experience and research. Instead he found ways to change his use of it to conform with the evolution of his art and of his thought.

Yeats' awareness of folk belief is connected with his desire to retreat to Innisfree, as the *Autobiographies* show. After recounting the legend of the Danaan Quicken Tree, he remarks: "I do not remember whether I chose the island [of Innisfree for my retreat] because of its beauty or for the story's sake . . . " Although the former may be sufficient reason in itself, the latter is more pressing in terms of the symbolism of the poem. The dominance of the Tuatha da Danaan in Yeats' poetic imagination forms a link between the young poet, the folk mythologies, and the island of Innisfree that stretches throughout Yeats' verse. The Tuatha da Danaan, as one folklorist points out, were early invaders of Ireland, closely schooled in the Druidic mysteries. Defeated by the Sons of Míl, they made a deal with the Gaels whereby the Gaels were left to control the upper or human world and the Tuatha da Danaan were left to rule the world under ground, from which world they controlled magic and led a life largely independent of human society. They are creatures of the 'other world.' "Theirs is an idealised, magic counterpart of the natural world into which mortal men rarely intrude except by invitation or by accident." "The

Hosting of the Sidhe," the first poem in Yeats' *The Wind Among the Reeds* (London, 1899), has a lengthy headnote in which Yeats gives a lengthy description of the Tuatha da Danaan, or "the Sidhe . . . the people of the Faery Hills." In that headnote Yeats comments, in a passage that deals with the contact between the human world and the world of the Tuatha da Danaan, that "If any one becomes too much interested in them [the people of the Sidhe, the Tuatha da Danaan], and sees them over much, he loses all interest in ordinary things. I shall write a great deal elsewhere about such enchanted persons . . . " As we shall see in a moment, the speaker in "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" may very well be one of those "enchanted persons," but to grasp the full significance of the enchantment and its connection with the artist's pursuit of wisdom and peace, we must look further into the origins of the Tuatha da Danaan.

Robert Graves remarks in *The White Goddess*, that "According to legend, the Danaans had come to Britain [and to Ireland] from Greece by way of Denmark to which they had given the name of their goddess . . . " At another point in his discussion of their origins, Graves describes the Tuatha da Danaan as "Bronze Age Pelasgians expelled from Greece in the middle of the second millenium . . . " He further identifies Danu, their goddess, with the pre-Achean goddess Danaë of Argos, a figure he sees as one of the many embodiments of the White Goddess. Yeats remarks, when speaking of Danu and her followers, that "The old Gaelic literature is full of appeals of the Tribes of the goddess Danu to . . . mortals whom they would bring into their country . . . " It would appear, then, that the Tuatha da Danaan exist as a tribe of fairy people intimately connected with the legendary history of Ireland, who still inhabit the land, and who are interested, from time to time, in luring those mortals interested in them into their enchanted faery otherworld. The enchantment that the speaker in "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" feels may indeed be seen as a form in that lure. Yeats says in the *Autobiographies* that he recalled Innisfree when he heard the water in the fountain. The speaker in the poem, on the other hand, hears the insistent lapping sound of lake water, a sound that is closely connected with the Tuatha da Danaan:

> To this day the Tribes of the goddess Danu that are in the waters beckon to men . . . The people of the waters have been in all ages beautiful and changeable and lascivious, or beautiful and wise and lonely, for water is everywhere the signature of the fruitfulness of the body and of the fruitfulness of dreams.

The call felt by the speaker in "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" may indeed, given the symbolic contexts of the poem, by a call from the fairy people to whom Innisfree was once a holy place, because of the Danaan Quicken tree. In his headnote to the discarded poem "The Danaan Quicken Tree", a poem published originally in *The Bookman* in 1893, Yeats mentions the tree that he speaks of at greater length in his recounting of the legend of the tree in the *Autobiographies*. Yeats' knowledge of Irish folklore in general, then, and his particular awareness of the connection between the Tuatha da Danaan and the lake isle of Innisfree, would argue for a close connection in his mind between the luring habits of the Tuatha da Danaan and the island itself. The peace that comes to the person who inhabits the island, then, is a peace that derives from a poetic, a spiritual grasp of the tradition and the traditional powers of the ancient fairy people to whom the island was once a sacred spot. The vegetation of the island, furthermore, is of particular importance to its sacred nature. The retreat to the lake isle of Innisfree, then, is not only a poetic retreat in pursuit of wisdom but also a retreat in search of and possibly in response to the urgings of the goddess Danu. The direct link between wisdom, Innisfree, and the Tuatha da Danaan becomes quite clear when one examines closely the detailed description that the poet provides of the habitation his speaker will build there and of the particular horticultural pursuits in which he will engage.

In the first stanza of the poem, the speaker argues that he will build himself a small cabin out of clay and wattles in a setting that has echoes of Eden, of Thoreau's hermitage at Walden Pond, and of the sacred combe of Restif de la Bretonne's *Monsieur Nicholas*. In the description of the building materials to be used for the cabin one sees not just the traditional building materials of the rural peasant but also a connection between the world of man and the world of the Tuatha da Danaan. The cabin is to be built of clay and wattles. Clay, being a material linked symbolically with man, needs no explication. The wattles, on the other hand, carry with them a symbolic association that links them with Celtic mythology and specifically with the *Aes Sidhe*, the Tuatha da Danaan. It was the people of the sidhe who were responsible for building the circular hill forts known as raths or Dane Raths, the basic component of which structures was wattles from the hazel tree. Robert Graves points out that, in Celtic mythology, "the hazel was the *Bile Ratha*, 'the venerated tree of the rath'—the rath in which the poetic *Aes Sidhe* lived". He also indicates,

though, that "with the ancient Irish the tree of eloquence and wisdom was the hazel." Hence it appears that the type of cabin that Yeats' speaker plans to build is closely linked both to the "poetic *Aes Sidhe*" and to the matters of eloquence and wisdom. Yeats' choice of particular detail in this case directs the reader to a specific connection between the apparently simple descriptive surface and the actual symbolic depth of the poem. The connection between the *Aes Sidhe* and the speaker in "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" is further elaborated when one considers the horticultural aspect of the Innisfree garden or grove. The "hive for the honeybee" draws in the traditional symbolism of the bee as a figure associated with sweetness and light, with culture and wisdom; but the key reference in the third line is to the "Nine bean-rows."

Critics have puzzled for some time over the precision of detail in this reference and over the particular significance both of the number used and the bean itself. One critic explains the precise detail in terms of Yeats' stylistic affinities at the time the poem was written:

> Another poem of Yeats which seems to imitate a Pre-Raphaelite painting is 'She Dwelt among the Sycamores,' . . . Here it is the insistence upon 'precision' of coloring and number, and upon a microscopic focus in general which marks the tell-tale Pre-Raphaelite objective of 'truth to nature.' The single 'ash-grey feather'; the 'six feet / lapped in the lemon daffodils'; the 'four eyes'—all these represent the practice of artistic principles which began with the seven stars of the Blessed Damozel's crown and reached as far as the 'nine bean rows' of the Lake Isle.

Though Eddins may be correct about the stylistic source of the precision in the lines, he does not answer the question about the reasons for Yeats' choice of the plant or the number of rows. Alspach suggests a reason in a somewhat facetious fashion when he states that "one clever Yeats Freudian-critic has said of the nine bean-rows of the third line of 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree': that undoubtedly they symbolize the nine months of pregnancy." A deeper searching of the Celtic mythology that plays such a large part in Yeats' poetry reveals a much more plausable reason for the use both of the bean and of the number nine. The number can be explained by examining further the reference to the wattles of the cabin. The number nine, Graves remarks, is "traditionally associated with Coll, the hazel, the tree of Wisdom . . . " He further comments that "The letter Coll was used as the Bardic numeral nine—because nine is the number sacred to the Muses and because the hazel fruits after nine years." He also points out the close connection in Celtic mythology between the hazel tree, the number nine, and poetic wisdom:

> The ninth tree is the hazel, in the nutting season. The nut in Celtic legend is always an emblem of concentrated wisdom: something sweet, compact and sustaining enclosed in a small hard shell . . . The Rennes *Dinnshechas* . . . describes a beautiful fountain called Connla's Well, near Tipperary, over which hung the nine hazels of poetic art which produced flowers and fruit (i.e. beauty and wisdom) simultaneously. As the nuts dropped into the well they fed the salmon swimming in it, and whatever number of nuts any of them swallowed, so many bright spots appeared on its body. All the knowledge of the arts and sciences was bound up with the eating of these nuts.

In the poem Yeats has specified the number nine and has already mentioned the "wattles" for which the hazel has been traditionally prized. Since Innisfree was the place on which grew the Danaan Quicken tree, whose fruit was 'able to endow [mortals] with more than mortal powers", since Yeats himself states that the wisdom provided by the Tuatha da Danaan is "the wisdom of the fools of Celtic stories, that is above all the wisdom of the wise", and since the hazel nut is connected with wisdom, it is logical to assume that Yeats' choice of the number nine is a reflection of his awareness of its connection with the numerology of Celtic mythology in general and its connection with wisdom in particular. This argument is supported by Yeats' use of the bean as well. Yeats' speaker does not plant or cultivate hazel trees, but bean rows. Yet the bean, as was mentioned earlier in connection with Thoreau, is also associated with wisdom: to know beans is to be wise. In this context, it would seem that the bean, like the hazel nut something "compact and sustaining" enclosed in a seed pod, is being used as a tropological analogue for the hazel nut. When one realizes that the bean is, as well, connected with poetic wisdom and with magic, the argument gains greater force. The bean has traditionally been associated with magic and with the supernatural: "Pliny in his *Natural History* records the belief that the souls of the dead reside in beans. According to the Scottish poet Montgomerie (1605), witches rode on bean stalks to their sabbaths." The bean is also as Graves further suggests, scared to the White Goddess and therefore associated with poetic wisdom. From this group of folk-lore connections, it would appear that the reason for the choice of the particular detail in the third line of the poem lies in the associations made with the numerological significance of the number

nine—both in classical and Celtic mythology—and with the relationship between beans and poetic wisdom on the one hand and the hazel nut and poetic wisdom on the other. The "peace" that comes "dropping slow", then, is the peace that comes from the wisdom gained from the bean rows. In the *Autobiographies* Yeats argues that he dreamt of returning to Innisfree to "live, as Thoreau lived, seeking wisdom." In the poem under examination here the particular nature of the wisdom sought is clarified when one examines the symbolic and mythological connections and allusions of the first stanza of the poem and realizes that the wisdom that is gained in the "bee-loud glade" is a spiritual wisdom, a wisdom "above all the wisdom of the wise", a wisdom of a poetic character that is gained through an association with the magic and the mystery surrounding the Tuatha da Danaan and the poet who answers the call of the fairy people.

Whereas the first stanza of the poem establishes the general nature of the *bonne vaux* or sacred combe, the second stanza delineates the benefits derived therefrom. The peace that descends on the speaker in the second stanza is not described in explicit detail, but the colouring and tonality of the stanza, as well as the presence of the linnet, suggest that it is more than a sense of physical relaxation. On a superficial level the imagery of the stanza suggests a quiet rural Irish scene, complete with linnets at evening, mist in the morning, and particular colourations in the skies. The presence of the linnet, however, suggests that the peace achieved is more than physical repose. The linnet occurs in only one other poem by Yeats, "A Prayer for my Daughter," written some thirty years after the composition of "The Lake Isle of Innisfree." In the "Prayer" the linnet functions as a symbol for the purity and sweetness Yeats hopes will be his daughter's lot:

> May she become a flourishing hidden tree
> That all her thoughts may like the linnet be,
> And have no business but dispensing round
> Their magnanimities of sound . . .

The linnet, like the bees in the first stanza of "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," is connected with sweetness and beauty. In the second stanza, it is the sound and the sight of the linnet's wings that attracts the speaker, and in this case suggests an analogy of a spiritual nature, drawing on the traditional association of birds with the soul. This would suggest that the peace achieved through intercourse with the *Aes Sidhe* is a peace that transcends the merely physical and stands sharply in contrast with the urban, mundane images of the final stanza of the poem.

In the final stanza we are returned from the speaker's world of reverie to the world of reality. The resolution of the poem's first line is reiterated, but this time with an insistence not present in the somewhat nostalgic initial statement. Instead we find that now the motivation to return to Innisfree is there "Always night and day" because of the sound of lake water. "To this day the Tribes of the goddess Danu that are in the waters beckon to men . . . " Yet the beckoning comes not to the physical ear; instead it is heard by "the deep heart's core." The sound that lures the speaker back to Innisfree is less a sound that is audible to the physical ear than a prompting to the ear of the spirit. The speaker is drawn back to Innisfree by the fairy magic of the tribes of the goddess Danu. In the choice of words and the use of images in the final stanza, Yeats skillfully makes explicit a contrast both between the rural and the urban and between the physical and the spiritual that has been implicit in the first two stanzas. In reading the final stanza the reader comes to see the noumenal nature of Innisfree.

Through an examination of the precise detail and specific symbolism of "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" the reader can come to see that, for Yeats, this small island in Lough Gill, just "opposite Slish Wood", is more than just a physical place and that the desire to return to that spot is more than simply the homesick reaction of a young man far from his native soil. When one stops seeing the speaker as the author, when one stops viewing the poem simply as a nostalgic lyric, when one looks instead at the poem as an expression of the nature of the artist and his relationship to both the physical and symbolic aspects of his nature, land, and tradition, one begins to see that the lake isle of Innisfree is more than a place; like Byzantium, Innisfree is a state of being. Like Daniel Martin's Thorncombe, like the Burgundian valley of *Monsieur Nicholas*, Innisfree is another *bonne vaux*, a valley of abundance, a sacred combe. In that it is an island, and in that it is enchanted, it is beyond the normal world. As an island it is surrounded by the wall of water, and as a magic place it is enclosed by its superstitions. Green and fertile, it clearly is both a physical garden and a garden or nursery of the spirit. As the former site of the Danaan Quicken tree, it is haunted by the children of the goddess Danu and still exercises its haunting power on those few who will listen through the sound of the lake waters that lap its shores. It is thereby dominated not only by a sense of nostalgia but also by a sense

of the magical and mysterious way in which the *Aes Sidhe*, through the wattles of the dwelling, through the nine bean rows, through the power that the Celtic tradition displays, still influence the life of man. For Yeats, the speaker's return to Innisfree is a journey in search of poetic wisdom and spiritual peace, a wisdom and peace that can be realized through a poetic and spiritual grasp of the parity that exists between the legendary past of Ireland and the present day, between the tradition and the mind that the spirit of the poet who is attuned to the numinous qualities of *la bonne vaux*.

Source: C. Stuart Hunter, "Return to *la bonne vaux*: The Symbolic Significance of Innisfree," in *Modern Language Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3, Summer 1984, pp. 70–81.

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The Mystery

Louise Glück

1999

To appreciate fully the meaning of and drive behind Louise Glück's "The Mystery," it is helpful to read the entire collection, *Vita Nova*, in which this poem is included. Published in 1999, *Vita Nova*, which translates into "new life," explores the poet's emergence from the despair and loneliness that plagued her for years after her husband left her. Her previous collection, *Meadowlands* (1996), recounted the deterioration of her marriage and *Vita Nova* picks up where that book left off: Glück's life after divorce, drawing from a mixture of allusions to distraught lovers in Greek mythology and to her own plight as a rejected, sometimes self-pitying, woman. But "The Mystery" can be read and enjoyed as a single poem as well, and it stands on its own as an uplifting testimony to spiritual, emotional, and intellectual rebirth.

Perhaps uncharacteristically for Glück, this poem's extended metaphor is based on mystery writer Rex Stout's series of novels and short stories featuring the renowned detective Nero Wolfe. The rotund, sedentary, and brilliant detective is known for his love of food and orchids as much as his uncanny knack for solving crimes. Glück uses the idea of mystery to describe her rise from the bitter depths of sadness and abandonment, likening the process to one of a person who has emerged from the dark to become "a creature of light." In essence, she is able to find resolution for at least some of her emotional pain and in doing so she has "acquired in some measure / the genius of the master"—in this case, Nero Wolfe.

Author Biography

Louise Glück was born in New York City in 1943 to well-educated and well-to-do parents. Her mother attended Wellesley College, and her father was a successful businessman of Hungarian descent. One of the most profound events of Glück's life happened before she was even born: the death of her older sister, the family's first child. Although Glück never knew her sister, the tragedy of the girl's death inspired themes of grief and loss that pervade much of the poet's work even today.

As a teenager, Glück developed anorexia, and, when her struggle with the condition worsened, her parents withdrew her from her last year in high school to begin sessions of psychoanalysis. The therapy lasted seven years. According to Glück, the sessions not only helped her to overcome anorexia but also taught her to organize her own thoughts with more discipline and rigor. She used her newly acquired thought processing to create poetry, believing that method and control were beneficial in communicating both emotionally and intellectually.

A year after psychoanalysis, Glück enrolled in a poetry workshop at Columbia University where she worked closely with poet and teacher Stanley Kunitz. Glück acknowledges that Kunitz—named the poet laureate of the United States in 2000 at the age of ninety-five—has been a major influence throughout her career. Kunitz received numerous awards over his own lengthy life, including the prestigious Bollingen Prize, awarded every two years by the Yale University Library to an American poet for the best book of recently published poetry, or for lifetime achievement in poetry. Fittingly, Glück received the Bollingen Prize in 2001 for her book *Vita Nova*, which includes the poem "The Mystery."

While her sister's death and her own struggle with anorexia left lifelong imprints on Glück's mind and work, probably the most significant influence in her later life was the break-up of her marriage. With personal loss as a central theme, Glück has produced eight volumes of poetry and a collection of essays discussing the theoretical aspects of poetry. Besides the Bollingen Prize, she has received an Academy of American Poets Prize, a Guggenheim fellowship, the Award in Literature from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, and a Pulitzer Prize, among others. Although Glück never earned a college degree, she has been teaching at universities since 1970. Currently, she makes her home in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and teaches at Williams College.

Louise Glück

Media Adaptations

- In 1989, the Lannan Foundation, in association with Metropolitan Pictures and EZTV, produced a videotape simply titled *Louise Glück.* The tape runs sixty minutes and includes a reading by the poet at the Los Angeles Theatre Center and an interview with her by Lewis MacAdams.
- In 1991, the Lannan Foundation produced a sixty-minute videotape of fifteen major poets reading and discussing their work. The tape is titled *Where Poems Come From* and includes Louise Glück, Joy Harjo, Philip Levine, and Allen Ginsberg, among others.

Poem Summary

Line 1

The first line of Glück's "The Mystery" foretells the poem's outcome. After taking the reader through the trying recollections of depression and loss, the speaker survives the dark side of her life to become "a creature of light." This line would work just as well as a last line, for it serves as the resolution to the speaker's—Glück's, actually—problem.

Lines 2–5

Glück acknowledges that she wrote all the poems collected in *Vita Nova* at a rapid pace, completing a draft of the entire manuscript in only three weeks. She has said that they were written in hotel rooms and elevators, on airplanes, and while she was visiting friends in California. Apparently, "The Mystery" was written in her friend's "driveway in California" where yellow roses bloom nearby. The first stanza is full of references to the bright color, which represents the "light" she feels she has entered into. California is known as the "Golden State," the flowers she sees match the color of bright red fire hydrants, and a baby rolls by in its yellow stroller. The mention of the baby that makes "bubbling fishlike sounds" (as normal babies do) sets up a metaphor later in the poem when Glück compares her own situation to that of a baby in a stroller.

Lines 6–8

Line 6 parallels line 2, but it narrows down the description of where the poet is sitting: "in a folding chair" in the driveway, reading a mystery novel. The fact that she is "reading Nero Wolfe for the twentieth time" is ironic in that one does not usually read the same mystery over and over. After all, the excitement of a "whodunit" is over when the reader knows who committed the crime and how. But that is precisely *why* Glück keeps poring over the book—the mystery has become comforting, or "restful," to her.

Lines 9–11

In these lines, the poet tells why the book is restful. After reading it so many times, she obviously knows "who the innocent are," and she even feels that she has picked up some of the savvy detective's ability to deduce a solution from the available evidence. Her own mind is nearly as "supple," or agile, as that of "the master" because it, too, can envision both the past and the future—in other words, move "in two directions." Note here that Glück does not say she knows who the guilty is (or are), but the innocent. This is another ironic twist since the average reader is more likely to say, "I know who did it now," emphasizing the criminal instead of the victim(s). Innocence plays a bigger role in the poet's emergence from the dark, as she will describe later in the poem.

Lines 12–13

On one hand, these two lines simply refer to the way a good detective solves a crime. His or her mind must be able to move "backward / from the

act to the motive" to understand what made the criminal commit the crime in the first place. Then, the mind needs to move "forward to just resolution" to bring the case to a close. On the other hand, these lines represent Glück's own mind thinking back on why ("the motive") her husband left her ("the act") and then resolving to look to the future ("forward") and leave the past behind.

Lines 14–17

In this stanza, Glück directly addresses her own heart, telling it never to be afraid again. Playing off the idea of becoming "a creature of light," she tells her heart that the only thing that may now bring darkness is the "shadow" of a "narrow [palm]" trying to squeeze it. But she assures her heart that the shadow—most likely her ex-husband's—cannot "enclose you absolutely." The "shadows of the east," meaning the eastern United States, where she and her husband lived and where their marriage ended, had apparently been strong enough to enclose her heart in complete darkness, but she no longer has that fear.

Lines 18–19

These two lines imply a helplessness on the speaker's part, based on the way line 18 is worded. Notice that she does not say, "I went many places in my life," but, instead, speaks of her life as though it is an entity separate from herself: "My *life* took *me* many places" (italics added). She then claims that those places were "very dark," reaffirming the notion that she has now come forth into the light.

Lines 20–23

These lines make up the metaphor referred to earlier regarding the baby in the stroller. Still viewing her life as a separate, free-willed being, she claims that it "took me without my volition"—that is, without her own conscious choice or decision. She compares her life to the person pushing the baby in the yellow stroller. Here, her life is the one "pushing me from behind, / from one world to another," and she is the "fishlike baby" who has no control over where it is going.

Lines 24–25

Lines 24 and 25 seem almost accusatory, as the poet claims her past life pushed her around in an "entirely arbitrary" fashion with no apparent plan or "form" to follow.

Lines 26–28

These three lines again imply the "mystery" metaphor, but here the "threats and questions," "search for justice," and series of delusions that one typically finds in a good detective story are part of the make-up of Glück's former marriage and relationship with her husband. Apparently, *she* was the one who felt the need to search for justice in all that transpired between them, for the end of the poem implies that even though she was the victim in their eventual divorce, she benefited from it as well.

Lines 29–30

Lines 29 and 30 allude to some of the benefits. Her life—or her husband, perhaps—may have pushed her around willy-nilly, but she "saw amazing things" along the way, becoming "almost radiant" toward the end of her journey through marriage, divorce, depression, and, finally, acceptance of it all. Glück again refers to brightness and light, using the word "radiant" to describe her new life, or "vita nova."

Lines 31–33

Referring back to the Nero Wolfe novel, the speaker claims that she carried the book everywhere, "like an eager student." Apparently, she finds the "simple mysteries" comforting—thus, the need for "clinging" to them—because they are much easier to grasp than the puzzle that real life often becomes.

Lines 34–36

Glück ends the poem by revealing her reason for "clinging to these simple mysteries": understanding the simpler riddles, or even crimes, makes it easier for her to stop accusing herself of doing something wrong in her marriage, to stop blaming herself for its failure, and perhaps for the state of depression she fell into afterwards. Line 36 is typical of Glück's style of writing poetry, for she often includes a series of questions and answers as lines or full stanzas in a poem. Generally, the questions and answers represent an inner dialogue, or self-examination, as a means of understanding her emotions and thoughts. The final line of "The Mystery" implies that she feels a need to identify the person she now is and to find a purpose for her new existence as a "creature of light."

Themes

Irony and the "New Life"

In the late thirteenth century, a young Dante Alighieri fell in love. Though he would later be best

Topics for Further Study

- In "The Mystery," Glück spends the fourth and fifth stanzas describing her "dark" past and her sense that she was like a baby in a stroller being shoved from place to place. But then she abruptly claims, "And yet I saw amazing things." What "amazing things" do you think she saw and how could they offset the obvious misery she felt as well?
- Most people's lives have been touched by divorce, either in their own family, or in one they are close to. Consider how your own life, or that of someone close to you, has been affected by the break-up of a marriage and write an essay on how the people involved survived it. You do not need to identify people specifically—only describe their methods of coping and how you may or may not have handled it differently.
- Think of a situation in which you have used inner dialogue as a means for solving an emotional dilemma. Glück claims that asking herself questions and then answering them helps her to gain a better understanding of her feelings. Do you believe this technique has worked for you as well? Why or why not?
- There is a "sad joke" among literary circles that the lives of confessional poets, both male and female, follow a similar pattern: alcoholism, depression, and suicide. Research the confessional poets and write an essay on the possible connection between a high rate of suicide and this genre of poetry. Who are some of the best-known confessional poets? Do they seem to follow this self-destructive pattern? Is this reflected in their poetry?

known as the author of *The Divine Comedy*, he first wrote an account of the woman he loved (but never really knew) in his verse collection, *La Vita Nuova*, or *The New Life*. Though "Beatrice" appears in both books, *La Vita Nuova* describes the course of Dante's intense love for her, his premonition of her death in a dream, her actual death, and his commitment to eulogizing her life in his writing. Historical accounts claim that Dante's romance from afar with Beatrice and the manner in which he presented his lofty idealism in verse influenced love poetry for centuries to come. The phrase "vita nuova" was used by many Italians in the middle ages to imply a new commitment to love and romance. As "The Mystery" suggests, Glück may have borrowed Dante's book title for her own collection, but she left his sentiment on romantic love far behind.

The twentieth-century female American poet puts an ironic twist on the term "new life." Here, a revived, or resurrected, life appears out of the ashes of romance gone wrong. Glück recalls marriage, love, and heartbreak as "the shadows of the east" and describes many of the "places" that romantic life took her as "very dark." She compares a woman in love to a "fishlike baby," sitting helplessly in a stroller with no control over his or her destination. She concludes that her old ideals about love and happiness must have been mere delusions, creating mysteries and puzzles in her personal life that kept her in the dark. Then, the poet emerges into her "vita nova." After finally accepting that her husband is out of her life for good, she trades in romance for more practical emotions, and for the ability to solve a love problem the way a detective solves a crime—with clear thinking, cold reasoning, and rationale. Instead of new life emanating from the thrill of a new relationship, the idea here is that it can begin from the end of a bad one. While it is true that Glück's and Dante's themes are polar opposites, the shared title seems to work for both.

Questions and Answers

In many of Glück's poems, the speaker—usually Glück herself—attempts to find a resolution to a problem through a mental dialogue with herself. The process of asking a question and then answering it stimulates the mind into thinking more carefully about an issue, forcing at least partial settlement through introspection. This theme is particularly relevant to Glück because the method it describes has helped her overcome some of the personal despair and periods of depression that followed the break-up of her marriage. By employing the Nero Wolfe metaphor and some detective lingo in "The Mystery," Glück suggests that even a problem as emotionally upsetting and personally sensitive as the end of a romantic relationship can be worked through by using deductive reasoning. She does not, however, imply that the process leads to

a perfect resolution or a complete change of heart regarding such a tender matter. Sometimes the best solution is an unfinished one, allowing gradual change that seems more realistic than an abrupt turnabout of emotions. In this way, the poet's "vita nova" does not become a volatile burden, but simply a new way of looking at old concerns.

"The Mystery" includes only two questions and they do not come until the end of the poem. In the final line, Glück asks, "*Who are you and what is your purpose?"* These are questions that she asks of herself, and she attempts to answer them with the rest of the poem, before the reader even realizes what the questions are. At first, it may seem strange and out of context for the poet to ask these questions of herself. Does she not already know who she is and what her "purpose" is? Perhaps the best answer is, at this point in her life, maybe not. For years, Glück identified herself as a married woman, secure in a relationship that she thought would last a lifetime. When that relationship was cut short, against her will, her identity was forced to change. In trying to come to terms with that, she goes through different phases of self-identification. Apparently, there was a time in the beginning when "the shadows of the east" caused her heart to "tremble," as she struggled to deal with the loss. There was a time when she could identify with a baby being pushed around in a stroller, helpless and at the mercy of the one pushing. Later, she is "an eager student," learning the ways of sound reasoning and problem solving from a master detective. Finally, she calls herself "a creature of light," having used her new knowledge to find a way out of the darkness of depression and loneliness. By asking the point-blank questions of herself, then, she had to find answers—perhaps not the final ones, but at least some that provide resolution for a while.

Style

Free Verse

Poets who write in contemporary free verse have fairly free rein in the way they choose to put words on paper. Without restrictions on line length, meter, rhyme, or rhythm, this style of poetry lends itself to more individual manipulation than any other style. Glück is considered one of the best at using casual, easily read, straightforward language in her poetry—a simple style, though not an unsophisticated one. In a review of *Vita Nova* for the *Chicago Review*, critic Steven Monte says that:

> Glück's verse entices the reader with stylistic effects familiar to anyone who has leafed through one of her books: pointed rhetorical questions … short sentences whose punch resides in the line breaks . . . rhetorical afterthoughts warding off melodrama … and an even-keeled, expository tone punctured by defensiveness and accusation.

Monte's points are demonstrated in "The Mystery" in the rhetorical questions. No answers are expected, but Glück offers some anyway, at the end of the poem and in the rhetorical afterthought of line 29, "And yet I saw amazing things." This line keeps the previous descriptions of bad times and sad emotions from dipping into sentimentality, or pathos. Note the "even-keeled expository tone" of the lines that begin with the word "I": "I became a creature of light," "I sat in a driveway," "I sat in a folding chair," "I know who the innocent are," "I became almost radiant at the end," "I carried my book everywhere." The meaning of each line is clear and the expression is simple, yet interesting. This is what has made Glück's style so attractive to both scholars and general readers. She writes what people can understand and, often, relate to. What scholars appreciate most is that the readability of her poems is usually deceptive, cleverly masking a profound thought or intriguing idea. Without picking up on every innuendo or every allusion, however, anyone can still follow a Glück poem, aided by her free-verse style that resembles casual conversation as much as pure poetry.

Historical Context

The greatest source of Glück's inspiration derives from personal loss—whether that loss is through death, separation, or divorce. While little is written about the specifics of her own marital problems and eventual break-up, her poetry is filled with tinges of rejection, anger, and bitterness, especially those poems written prior to *Vita Nova*. Her "new life" apparently did not begin until the late 1990s, but the culture of the late 1960s and early 1970s, when she first started writing and publishing poetry, saw a softening of the strictness of the expected behavior of the American family and of women in particular.

After the surge in marriages and childbirth following World War II, commonly called the Baby Boom era, society took a turn toward liberation and individual freedom, as opposed to the constraints of settling into a monogamous relationship, raising

a family, and living life according to traditional gender roles. The high value placed on personal freedom was aided by a growing U.S. economy and by the fact that women had the opportunity to support themselves instead of being provided for by a husband. The availability of birth control and female emancipation also contributed to women not having to marry and form traditional nuclear family structures. As women became more common in the workforce, many of them gravitated away from the traditional "female jobs" as secretaries, nurses, and grade school teachers and into positions geared more toward business and advancement within a company. As a result, both men and women found themselves more committed to their employers than to each other, and the typical family life of previous decades began to fade. So, too, did the number of people getting married at a young age and the number of couples who remained married. For many, being single again simply seemed more attractive.

Today, approximately one marriage out of two will end in divorce. This has been the trend for the past two decades, making the end of a marriage as common as the beginning of one. The old stigma placed on children of divorced parents is unheard of now since as many kids come from broken homes (or from parents who never married in the first place) as are raised in so-called traditional families. Divorce is common in movies and television shows, including children's programming, and it has become more accepted in religious sects, even those in which divorcing a spouse was formerly denounced, if not forbidden.

The increase in the divorce rate has also meant an increase in the poverty rate for women. Even women with professional careers suffer financial burdens after divorce settlements that often stipulate no alimony and little child support. Unemployed women or women with low-paying jobs suffer the most. While many divorced women may feel they have been treated unfairly and blame ex-husbands for their economic hardships, the introduction of the no-fault divorce in the 1960s and the more recent fad of signing prenuptial agreements are perhaps the true root of many inequities in settlements.

During the conservative movements in America in the 1980s and in the late 1990s, society experienced a shift back toward old-fashioned family values, and the marriage rate seemed to increase. Numbers can be deceiving, however, because many of those marriages were actually second or third times around for the men and women involved, and the divorce rate for people who remarry is even higher than the rate for first marriages. In other words, the "newlyweds" of the conservative years had already contributed to divorce statistics, and in their new marriages, the cards were stacked against them from the outset. Statistics, of course, can also err on the side of pessimism, and undoubtedly thousands of happily remarried couples would be willing to attest to it.

Not all youthful women during the 1960s and 1970s celebrated their freedom to remain single and pursue a career as well as a variety of personal relationships. Some, like Glück, opted for matrimony and made plans to spend the rest of their lives with one man. And when the poet's marriage ended sometime around the publication of *Meadowlands* in 1996, she did not initially respond with newfound strength and a determination to carry on with her life in the best way possible. Like many women and men who endure the break-up of a marriage, she felt lost, betrayed, frustrated, and unneeded, eventually slipping into a state of depression. By the time she wrote the poems for *Vita Nova* a few years later, average Americans were still divorcing as often as they were marrying, and the number of Internet web sites dedicated to information surviving divorce rivaled the self-help sections of major bookstores. Glück's recent work indicates that she will survive, too. Marriage and divorce trends will likely continue to seesaw throughout the coming decades, but it is doubtful that American society will ever return to a culture in which broken homes, unwed motherhood, and living single are given much notice, much less frowned upon.

Critical Overview

Louise Glück's work has been well received by critics since the outset of her career. Perhaps to her advantage and to her disadvantage, she has often been compared to such masters of confessional poetry as Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath. While it may be flattering to be placed among this famous (or infamous) company, the trappings of the confessional genre can be as harmful as it is helpful to a writer's career. Poets who are labeled confessional are often criticized for too much self-exposure and too much relation about extremely personal matters. In her book *The Veiled Mirror and the Woman Poet*, critic Elizabeth Dodd says that "Like Plath and Sexton, [Glück] writes with angry bitterness about female sexual or romantic experience in a world where

women remain primarily powerless." That may be the case for many of Glück's poems, but those in *Vita Nova*, including "The Mystery," describe a woman pulling herself up from a failed relationship and dark experiences. Glück also often alludes to mythological figures and events from legends as metaphors for her own life or contemporary life in general. This has been another saving grace for her otherwise confessional work, and it has helped maintain a balance between negative and positive criticism. In *The Muse of Abandonment*, critic Lee Upton writes that "the self in Glück is placed in relation to a larger mythological backdrop but is not overwhelmed by this competing narrative. [It] is used to dignify the self, particularly the female self, which might otherwise be domesticated or trivialized." Thus, in the eyes of some critics, Glück's work tends to supercede that of typical confessional poets. In all, the critical response has been more favorable than unfavorable, particularly toward the later collections. Writing for the *Library Journal*, reviewer Ellen Kaufman sums up the general critical reception to Glück's work: "Abstract without being vague, personal without being maudlin, Glück's exquisitely crafted work continues to astound. For all poetry collections."

Subject matter is only as good as its presentation. Poets can address feelings of helplessness and vulnerability without using the language and images of self-pity."

Criticism

Pamela Steed Hill

Hill is the author of a poetry collection, has published widely in literary journals, and is an editor for a university publications department. In the following essay, Hill contends that Glück's poem begins with an alluring scene and unaffected language but quickly falters into self-pity and sentimentality, robbing the poem of its effectiveness.

The first two stanzas of "The Mystery" draw the reader in with both the scene they describe and the method of their presentation. Glück's simple, declarative sentences ("I became a creature of light," "I sat in a driveway in California," "I sat in a folding chair," and so forth) belie the complexity of emotions that the speaker actually feels. In these first two stanzas, those emotions are held nicely in check by the dry candor, soft tone, and unadorned language with which the poet conveys them. If only she had maintained that control and that honesty throughout the work, it would have been a much stronger poem, carrying high-quality writing from start to finish. As is, however, it drops quickly off the ledge of good poetry into the abyss of cheap sentiment, never regaining its initial foothold.

Whether or not it is fair to place Glück solidly among the ranks of confessional poets is at least debatable—some scholars would not think of placing her anywhere else—but "The Mystery" is a good example of why it may be dubious labeling. The first third of this poem does not bear out the typical drama of personal exposure and the misery of psychological deterioration that most often make up a confessional poem. Instead, it is almost *minimalist*, presenting only the information necessary to let the reader know what is going on. It is as though the poet is operating like the fictional detective she apparently admires, laying out evidence and introducing "just the facts."

The straightforward narrative should not be mistaken for boring recitation or dull description. Rather, the story is intriguing. A woman sits in a likely uncomfortable chair in a bland, at best, location reading a book she has already read nineteen times. Just the setting itself arouses curiosity. The odd situation is made more complex by the glimpse the reader is given into the inner workings of the poet's mind. Glück finds deductive reasoning "restful," claiming that "time moves in two directions" as she ponders both the Nero Wolfe mystery and the mystery of her own life. This is how the poem should continue—soft in tone yet compelling in its intellectual evaluation, personal enough to be accessible yet impersonal enough not to be pathetic. Unfortunately, one needs to savor the poem up to this point because the rest is hardly palatable.

What Do I Read Next?

- Louise Glück edited the edition of the popular series *The Best American Poetry 1993* . She selected poems by thirty poets whose work had not appeared in the series previously, as well as poems by seasoned veterans. John Ashbery, Billy Collins, Tess Gallagher, Denise Levertov, and Gjertrud Schnackenberg were among her choices.
- One of the most well known confessional poets, Anne Sexton was plagued with mental illness most of her life, eventually committing suicide in 1974. Diane Wood Middlebrook's 1991 account of her life and suicide, entitled *Anne Sexton: A Biography*, is a comprehensive look at Sexton from a variety of angles: confessional poet, depressed woman, therapy patient, and elusive wife and mother.
- Rex Stout's mysteries, featuring the eccentric detective Nero Wolfe and his sidekick Archie Goodwin, are some of the most popular tales of that genre. Stout wrote for over four decades, beginning in the 1930s, and his "golden" period is considered by mystery fans to be the early 1960s. Three big sellers from this period include *Too Many Clients* (1960), *A Right to Die* (1964), and *The Doorbell Rang* (1965).
- While there are many versions of Dante Alighieri's *Vita Nuova*, a recent translation by Mark Musa, published in 2000, is one of the most readable for students not already familiar with the work. *Vita Nuova* is a collection of thirty-one poems set alongside a prose narrative celebrating and pondering the subject of love. Musa's translation includes a critical introduction and explanatory notes.

Beginning with the third stanza, Glück falters into complaint and self-pity. The line "Fearless heart, never tremble again" reads as though the poet has suddenly slipped into the Romantic Age, speaking to her own organ of sentimentality and, thereby, drawing upon the most cliché of addresses. The notion of a despairing woman's heart falling under the "shadow" of her lost love's "narrow palm" is trite, imploring the reader to feel as sorry for her as she feels for herself. But the moaning does not end there. While the language of the next stanza at least returns to the twentieth century, the subject remains self-pity, with helplessness thrown in for more dramatic effect. In saying, "My life took me many places, / many of them very dark," Glück implies that *she* was not in control of where her life "took" her. Instead, she went from place to place, or from event to event, "without [her] volition," as though she was unable to make a conscious decision regarding her own life. Lest the reader should still not quite get the point, Glück emphasizes her total helplessness by comparing herself to a baby in a stroller, being pushed "from behind," completely at the mercy of powers other than her own. Or so it seems to the poet, if to no one else.

Not all confessional poets, including Glück, resort to the shallow tune of self-pity in the majority of their work. Most can make their points and let their feelings be known by relating personal events and thoughts with simple, unaffected language and even brutal honesty. Honesty, brutal or otherwise, is preferable to triteness and literary sap. Toward the end of "The Mystery," Glück attempts to regain some composure by watering down the pathos with a sudden change of attitude. She claims abruptly, "And yet I saw amazing things." Instead of comparing herself to a "fishlike baby," she calls herself "an eager student"—a much more compelling description than one that attempts to evoke pity. But the poet does not reveal what "amazing things" she saw, only that they relate metaphorically to Nero Wolfe mystery stories and literally to the puzzles she has encountered in her personal life. This declaration is intriguing, but it is not enough to save the poem. Glück still alludes to her position as "clinging" and to her sentiment as self-accusatory. She seems to *try* to overcome her own helplessness in the end and, yet, she is also still figuring out who she is and what her "purpose" is. The reader, then, is left with the sense that the poet's vulnerability and feebleness are still very much intact and that she is not particularly determined to put them aside. Here, a psychologist's notion of "learned helplessness" is all too attractive to the poet, perhaps gaining her the attention she feels she needs.

The genre of confessional poetry is a delicate one in regard to what constitutes good and bad ex-

amples of this type of verse. On one hand, critics need to keep in mind that the very nature of confessional writing is just that—to *confess* something, and that generally means something personal. With that in mind, is it fair to attack a poet who has had the guts (or gall) to expose deeply personal thoughts, many of which are controversial, embarrassing, sexual, or even shameful? Perhaps the answer lies in looking at the flip side to subject matter: style. Subject matter is only as good as its presentation. Poets can address feelings of helplessness and vulnerability without using the language and images of self-pity. The first two stanzas of "The Mystery," for instance, portray a melancholy scene, one in which the speaker offers straightforward description of her setting that may make the reader feel sorrow or sadness *without being told to*. That's the key. Good presentation paints a vivid picture for the reader to consider and respond to as the writer desires, *if* the picture is not muddied with pathos and sentimentality.

Source: Pamela Steed Hill, Critical Essay on "The Mystery," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Adrian Blevins

Blevins is an essayist and poet who has taught at Hollins University, Sweet Briar College, and in the Virginia Community College System. In this essay, Blevins contends that there is an unfortunate gap between Glück's rhetorical and poetic arguments in her poem.

There is sometimes a noticeable gap between what a poet states to be the truth and what her language indicates to be the truth. This gap has to do with the ability of language to communicate feeling through rhythm and music and can be either an intentional strategy or the result of an actual disconnection between thought and feeling. In some poems, this gap creates ambiguity or irony or both: if a poem tries to express an idea or feeling that its language does not support or *impose*, the reader might experience the pleasure of irony, which is the pleasure of the jolt of a collision of opposites. Such a gap between what a poem *says* it says and what a poem's language *implies* it says might also suggest that the poet means not necessarily what she says, but *more* than she says. This strategy can contribute to a poem's ambiguity, or its ability to live in two opposing worlds simultaneously. Yet, sometimes, a gap between what a poet says and what her language implies she *means* can undermine a poem's power since it suggests that what the mind *thinks* is not exactly what the heart *feels*.

That is, the poem's shape or structure undermines its claim."

"The Mystery" comes toward the end of Louise Glück's eighth book, *Vita Nova*. *Vita Nova* is a sequence about "the painful reconstruction of the self after divorce," as the American poet and critic Kate Daniels says in her 1999 commentary in the *Southern Review*. While much of *Vita Nova* describes the speaker's grief in the wake of the loss of love—a grief she admits in "Aubade," saying she "thought [she] couldn't survive"—many poems in *Vita Nova* try to get at the new life suggested in the book's title by attempting to move away from this emotion toward an expression of pleasure in having survived a seemingly fatal emotion. In the book's last poem (which, like the book's first poem, is called "Vita Nova"), the speaker says, " I thought my life was over and my heart was broken. / Then I moved to Cambridge." Thus concludes Glück's sequence: the speaker, adopting a variety of mythical personas, moves from the unbearable to something like a state of wonder at having lived through the unbearable. Glück's overuse of the declarative sentence and paucity of image and music are more useful to her articulation of the numbness of grief than to her articulation of being "a creature of light" in "The Mystery." That is, there is a gap in "The Mystery" between Glück's rhetorical and poetic arguments that is neither ironic nor pleasantly ambiguous.

First, the poem's structure undermines its rhetorical claim by concentrating too much on the cause of the speaker's grief, rather than on the "light" that comes in its wake. "The Mystery" moves forward by way of a series of loose associations. In the first stanza, the speaker describes herself as "a creature of light," reinforcing this declarative or discursive idea with images of light-colored objects. In the poem's third and forth lines, the poet states, for example, that "the roses [in California] were hydrant-color" and that a "baby rolled by in its yellow stroller." This opening suggests that the speaker has moved away from "the world [that] . . . shattered" in the poem "Formaggio," for just one example: the light-colored

images suggest that the speaker has begun to step into the new life that is the book's pledge. As the poem progresses, Glück moves backward from this notion of vibrant light to a memory of "the very dark" "places" her life took her, and in so doing undermines the poem's main premise.

The speaker tells us in the second stanza that she "sat in a folding chair / reading Nero Wolfe for the twentieth time." This confession suggests that the speaker is occupied with distracting herself, rather than with embracing the new life that is hers to claim. She says that the mystery "has become restful," and then makes an abstract statement about the nature of the innocent that can apply to both the characters in the Nero Wolfe mystery and in *Vita Nova* itself. This focus on the unnamed innocent, and on the idea that "time moves . . . backward / from the act to the motive / and forward to just resolution" might be meant to describe the shape of "The Mystery" itself, but it serves only to point to the idea that someone is innocent and someone is guilty—a notably dark sentiment. In the third stanza, the speaker shifts in point of view, addressing herself when she says: "Fearless heart, never tremble again." This turning point seems promising at first since it suggests that the speaker has realized that her sorrow will no longer attempt to destroy her. But the images that follow—if they can be called images—are far too vague to be convincing. Those images about "the only shadow in the narrow palm's / that cannot enclose you absolutely" that are not "like the shadows of the east" are extremely obscure—they are private references that Glück does not bother to make public.

In the fourth stanza, the speaker says that life is always "pushing from behind, / from one world to another." Again, this image is promising, since it implies that we are moving from grief to another emotional state. The speaker claims in stanza four that this movement "from one world to another, like the fishlike baby" is formless and "entirely arbitrary." Although it's possible that the world is formless and arbitrary, the image of the baby counters this argument, since a baby is a fairly reliable "form" of nature. In other words, stanza four is illogical: it makes a discursive statement that its ornamental image plainly negates.

In stanza five, the speaker realizes that "the passionate threats and questions, / the old search for justice, / must have been entirely deluded." What does it mean to suggest that threats and questions and a search for justice are deluded? Wouldn't it be more accurate to say that the person who makes the threats and asks the questions and searches for justice is deluded? Doesn't the speaker's unwillingness to implicate herself imply that she is unwilling to face the truth that her journey in *Vita Nova* is supposed to supply? While these lines suggest that a change has taken place in the speaker—that she's able to stand with the world by thinking the past is arbitrary and unjust, rather than reasonable and fair—their declarative nature undermine the energy that such a realization would imply. In other words, in addition to its lack of logic, stanza five is too abstract and too lacking in music to be compelling. It reads more like philosophy than poetry.

In the poem's sixth stanza, the speaker returns to the poem's initial premise, saying that she "became almost radiant at the end. . . . clinging to these simple mysteries / so that [she] might silence in [herself] the last accusations," which she tells us in the poem's final stanza is the universal question, "Who are you and what is your purpose"? That is, the structure of the "The Mystery" is a spiral: it moves from the end result of being "a creature of light" backwards to the formless and arbitrary darkness of grief, then forward again to being "radiant at the end" and wishing at last to "silence . . . the last accusations." It begins and ends in the idea that the speaker is "a creature of light" —looking at the darkness of grief from the survivor's point of view. A spiral's very shape suggests a predominate middle, while the speaker claims that the "light" at the beginning and ending of her poem is her focus. That is, the poem's shape or structure undermines its claim.

"The Mystery" is made up of nine declarative sentences, one imperative sentence, and one question that begins as a declarative sentence. The declarative sentence can help poets achieve something like an "authority of voice," since it is by nature emphatic. That is, people who make statements sound confident. "I became a creature of light," ending on a period, is far more emphatic—far more sure of itself—than "I became a creature of light"? It is also important to note that the declarative sentence, when it is used unsparingly, is very flat—it allows for very little musical inflection and intonation. Glück's use of the declarative sentence in "The Mystery" is not as effective as it is in some of the other poems in *Vita Nova* partly because the statements Glück makes in this poem are not supported or reinforced by images or music, and partly because the statements, as we have seen, are slightly illogical. The effectiveness of images to reinforce statements can be seen in the poem's first stanza, where the poem's only true images reside. The speaker's claim that she became "a creature of light" is reinforced, in other words,

with images of "hydrant-color" roses and the "yellow stroller." The claims later stanzas make are not reinforced in this way. As seen in stanza four, the speaker commands herself "never [to] tremble again," but there are no images or music to help us believe that this command will be heard. Although the imperative sentence in this stanza is very emphatic, and though that tone is reinforced by a predominance of end-stopped lines, the stanza's vagueness—its lack of clarity—undermines the command's emphatic tone, suggesting again that the speaker is not as convinced of her emotional state as the poem claims. It's also worth noting that the empathic nature of the declarative and imperative sentences undermine the muted music in this stanza and in others: the repeated /w/ sounds in "shadow," "narrow," and "shadow," in other words, are hard to hear because of how very flat a series of declarative or imperative, end-stopped lines will sound.

Praising the Greek poet Sappho's "Seizure" in a recent issue of *The American Poetry Review*, the American poet and critic Joe Wenderoth remarks:

> In poetic speech, the subject has always implicitly suffered a blow, and this blow has opened up a chasm between herself and the loved scene; while it in some sense represents a dramatic impotence, this chasm nevertheless births a new power—or, it is perhaps better said, causes a new deployment of the same power. Instead of residing in an ability to make her way *through* the world, the poet's power is shifted toward an ability to stand *in*, to stand *with*, the world, which no longer offers a *through*.

It is interesting to note that Glück also has a poem called "Seizure" in *Vita Nova* and that it is placed in the book right before "The Mystery." Glück's "Seizure" ends: "And yes, I was alone; / how could I not be?" and so gets at a fundamental truth the loss of love should teach, which is that we are never lost as long as we are alive. In so doing, it reveals that in some poems in *Vita Nova*, Glück does communicate that her power has "shifted toward an ability to stand in, to stand with, the world." Yet Glück's "Seizure," like Sappho's, uses a complex of images from the natural world and varied sentence type to counter the heavy weight of this lesson with the beauty of exuberant, rather than flat, language. The same can be said for the final "Vita Nova" in Glück's book. Although the last lines—"I thought my life was over and my heart was broken. / Then I moved to Cambridge"—are as declarative as many lines in "The Mystery," they are countered in the poem with the speedy excitement in lines like, "Blizzard, / Daddy needs you; Daddy's heart is empty, / not because he's leaving Mommy but because / the kind of love he wants Mommy / doesn't have, Mommy's / too ironic—Mommy wouldn't do the rhumba in the driveway."

"The Mystery" may attempt to capture the uncertainty of a person trying to forge a new life from the jagged remains of the old, but its very uncertainty, the lack of resolve or reckoning in the poem's language, obscure any sense that the speaker has progressed into this "new life." The poem crumbles under the weight of its own flat tone and lack of music, and the reader is left feeling that the poem is an unfinished work—that the speaker is more interested in convincing herself that she need "never tremble again" than she is in showing the reader any insight into the human psyche's ability to overcome the loss of love.

Source: Adrian Blevins, Critical Essay on "The Mystery," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

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Further Reading

Glück, Louise, *The First Four Books of Poetry*, Ecco Press, 1995.

This collection of the complete texts from four of Glück's early books provides a good overview of the poet's continuing themes and style. These poems provide the reader with an interesting background to Glück's more recent work.

———, *Meadowlands*, Ecco Press, 1996.

Most scholars and critics acknowledge that Glück's *Vita Nova* picks up where *Meadowlands* left off. The poems in this collection explore the deterioration of the poet's marriage, and comparing them to the ones in *Vita Nova* gives the reader a stronger sense of how far Glück has come in her effort to build a "new life."

———, *Proofs and Theories: Essays on Poetry*, Ecco Press, 1994.

In this collection of sixteen essays, Glück explores her own work and the theories behind its creation, as well as the work of other poets. In the "Author's Note" at the beginning of the book, Glück claims, "I wrote these essays as I would poems; I wrote from what I know, trying to undermine the known with intelligent questions. Like poems, they have been my education."

Phillips, Robert S., *The Confessional Poets*, Southern Illinois University Press, 1973.

More than a quarter of a century has passed since Phillips published this comprehensive look at America's most renowned confessional poets, but he wrote it during the heyday of this genre's popularity. In it, he provides a history of confessional poetry, the critical reviews it received, and his own take on a style of writing that so many readers have found both intriguing and disturbing.

Porphyria's Lover

Robert Browning

1836

"Porphyria's Lover," which first appeared as "Porphyria" in the *Monthly Repository* in January 1836, is the earliest and most shocking of Robert Browning's dramatic monologues. The speaker—or, perhaps more accurately, thinker—of the poem recounts how he killed his illicit lover, Porphyria, by strangling her with her own hair. He does so to keep her his forever, reliving his story to justify his actions and preserve the moment of her death. The simple language and precisely structured form of the sixty-line poem combined with its asymmetrical rhyming pattern suggest a complex madness concealed beneath the speaker's outwardly calm manner and reasonable tone.

The poem's themes of sex, violence, and madness were of particular interest to Victorian readers, who reveled in sensational tales of horror and depravity despite societal condemnation of all things immoral, but Browning overturns normal expectations of such stories by presenting the sex between Porphyria and her lover as natural, making the reader consider the relationship between sex and violence, and exploring the complex nature of the speaker's madness. The result is a study of human nature and morality that poses more questions than it provides answers. The reader is left wondering, for example, whether to believe the mad narrator's account, how to understand society's condemnation of sexual transgressions, and why sexuality is so often linked with dominance and power. The widely anthologized poem is also considered one of the finest poetic explorations of

criminal pathology, an early example of Browning's treatment of the theme of experiencing an infinite moment, an ironic reaction against the Romantic idealization of love, and a work that shows a skilled use of lyricism to present the complex workings of a character's mind.

Author Biography

Browning was born in 1812 in Camberwell, a suburb of London. His father, a bank clerk, had a 6000-volume book collection, from which Browning read widely. Most of Browning's education came at home from his artistically inclined, nonconformist parents. It is believed he was proficient at reading and writing by age five and by age fourteen had learned Latin, Greek, and French. At ten, Browning attended Peckam School, where he remained for four years. In 1825, he received a volume of Percy Shelley's poetry and was utterly taken with it, declaring himself a devotee of the poet. In 1828, Browning enrolled at the University of London but soon left, preferring to read and learn at his own pace.

In 1833, Browning's first work, the long poem "Pauline," was published anonymously. The dramatic poem "Paracelsus" appeared in 1835 to lukewarm reviews. "Porphyria's Lover" was published a year later in a small monthly magazine and received scant attention. During the next few years, Browning wrote several unsuccessful plays and a difficult, obscure long poem, "Sordello." From 1841 to 1846, he published a series of poems under the title *Bells and Pomegranates*, which were poorly received at the time but that include some of his best-known poems. *Bells and Pomegranates* includes the poems "Pippa Passes" and "My Last Duchess." *Dramatic Lyrics*, in which "Porphyria's Lover" appeared untitled with "Johannes Agricola" under the general title "Madhouse Cells," was published in 1842, and *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* appeared in 1845. Again, while Browning received no critical recognition for these works, later commentators note that the techniques developed through the dramatic monologues during this period—including his use of conversational verse, rhythm, and symbol—are Browning's most important contribution to poetry, influencing such major twentieth-century poets as Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and Robert Frost.

While Browning failed to garner popular and critical recognition for his poetry, it won the admiration of the renowned poet Elizabeth Barrett. The couple met in 1845 and in 1846 eloped to Italy, where they lived together until her death. Barrett demonstrated her love for her husband in *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, and he dedicated his collection of poems *Men and Women* (1855) to her. The volume, which includes the famous monologues "Fra Lippo Lippi" and "Andrea del Sarto," is now regarded as one of Browning's best works, but it received little attention when it appeared; at the time, Browning was known chiefly as Barrett's husband.

After Barrett's death in 1861, Browning returned to England. The appearance in 1864 of the collection *Dramatis Personae* finally brought Browning critical and popular acclaim. In 1868–1869, he published *The Ring and the Book*. The enormously popular work established Browning's reputation, and thereafter he was considered one of England's greatest living poets. His 1880 prose narrative *Dramatic Idylls* brought him international fame. In the last years of his life, Browning received various honors, including a degree from Oxford and an audience with Queen Victoria. He died in 1889 in Venice on the day that his final volume of verse, *Asolando*, was published. Browning is buried in Westminster Abbey.

Poem Text

The rain set early in to-night:
The sullen wind was soon awake—
It tore the elm-tops down for spite,
and did its worst to vex the lake:
I listened, with heart fit to break,
When glided in Porphyria: straight
She shut the cold out and the storm,
And kneeled and made the cheerless grate
Blaze up, and all the cottage warm;
Which done, she rose, and from her form
Withdrew the dripping cloak and shawl,
And laid her soiled gloves by; untied
Her hat and let the damp hair fall,
And, last, she sat down by my side
And called me. When no voice replied,
She put my arm about her waist,
And made her smooth white shoulder bare,
And all her yellow hair displaced,
And, stooping, made my cheek lie there
And spread o'er all her yellow hair,
Murmuring how she loved me—she
Too weak, for all her heart's endeavor,
To set its struggling passion free
From pride, and vainer ties dissever,
And give herself to me forever:
But passion sometimes would prevail;
Nor could to-night's gay feast restrain
A sudden thought of one so pale
For love of her—and all in vain;
And she was come through wind and rain.
Be sure I looked up at her eyes
Proud—very proud—at last I knew
Porphyria worshiped me: surprise
Made my heart swell, and still it grew
While I debated what to do.
That moment she was mine,—mine, fair,
Perfectly pure and good: I found
A thing to do, and all her hair
In one long yellow string I wound
Three times her little throat around
And strangled her. No pain felt she—
I am quite sure she felt no pain.
As a shut bud that holds a bee
I warily oped her lids—again
Laughed the blue eyes without a stain.
And I untightened next the tress
About her neck; her cheek once more
Blushed bright beneath my burning kiss:
I propped her head up as before,
Only, this time *my* shoulder bore
Her head—which droops upon it still:
The smiling rosy little head!
So glad it has its utmost will;
That all it scorned at once is fled,
And I, its love, am gained instead!
Porphyria's love: she guessed not how
Her darling, one wish would be heard.
And thus we sit together now:
And all night long we have not stirred,—
And yet God has not said a word!

Poem Summary

Overview

The action of "Porphyria's Lover" unfolds through the recounting of the events of one night—culminating in the murder of Porphyria—by the speaker of the poem. Because the story is not retold to an audience but seems rather to be replayed in the mind of Porphyria's lover, it is somewhat inaccurate to refer to him as the poem's "speaker," but most commentators refer to him as such. Browning masterfully builds up tension in the poem by gradually revealing to the reader, through details provided by the speaker, what has taken place. As it also becomes clear that the narrator is mad, it is up to the reader to decide to what extent to believe the speaker's statements. The poem is a dramatic monologue told by Porphyria's lover (who is never named in the poem), and like other Browning monologues, what is learned about this person is to be gained not merely from what he says about himself but from what he does not say and from a sense that his depiction of himself may not be completely trustworthy. The speaker describes how his lover comes to him one night and he kills her, and in doing so he preserves their love forever. And while his portrayal of the situation is designed to show that his actions are justified, it becomes apparent that he is not so certain of this. In this poem Browning offers a complex psychological study of an insane man who uses reason and argument to explain and make sense of his actions.

Lines 1–5

The poem opens by setting the scene—it is raining, and a storm is raging outside—and with it establishes the tone of the action that follows. The storm is described in simple, direct language: it sets in early, it tears down tree limbs, and its force disturbs the calmness of the lake. The storm is also personified in a way that anticipates the mood of the speaker. Browning here uses a device called "pathetic fallacy," in which something nonhuman is endowed with human intentions and feelings. The wind, the speaker explains, is "sullen"; it destroys the trees out of "spite," and it deliberately tries to "vex," or anger, the lake. Later in the poem the speaker is sullen and he uses his sullenness to elicit some type of reaction from Porphyria. Also in these first few lines, it is learned that the events described are from the recent past; the speaker refers to "tonight." The mood of the speaker is made clear when he explains that he listens to the storm raging outside "with heart fit to break"—he

Media Adaptations

- The Victorian Web maintains a Browning web page at http://landow.stg.brown.edu/victorian/rb/rbov.html with links to other interesting sites.
- The audio collection entitled *Robert Browning: Selected Poems* (1984), edited by William C. DeVane, contains a representative selection of dramatic monologues, dramatic romances and lyrics, and short poems that are annotated and are supplemented by an introduction, a list of principal dates in Browning's life, and a bibliography.
- *Robert and Elizabeth Browning* (1998), a video in the Master Poets Collection, presents an overview of the lives, careers, and relationship of these two prominent Victorian poets.

is suffering greatly over something, and the weather outside mirrors and intensifies his feelings.

Lines 6–15

Porphyria enters the speaker's cottage, and immediately the tone of the poem changes. In line 4, the speaker introduces himself as passively listening to what was going on outside, but in his description of Porphyria, he presents a woman who busily and actively moves around. In these ten lines in which Porphyria is depicted, Browning uses an abundance of verbs, which show her as performing no less than twelve actions. However, even as she "shut," "kneeled," "made," "rose," "laid," "untied," etc., there is no sense that she is in a hurry or frenzy. Rather, she is in control of her brusque, purposeful movements, which are emphasized by the use of monosyllables. Porphyria enters the cottage and "straight," or right away, gets to work. Her presence shuts out the cold and storm, again an indication of her strength of personality. Despite the fact that there is a storm raging outside, there is no fire burning, and she sets about making one "blaze up." From this the reader gets a sense of her forcefulness but also of the speaker's passive and depressed state, as he has apparently been sitting alone in his cottage in the middle of a storm without attempting to warm the place up.

Indeed, throughout the poem, there are clear contrasts between Porphyria and her lover. She is described in terms of bright color (her yellow hair, the fire she makes blaze up, her blue eyes and rosy face), while he is pale. She is active, he is passive; she is talkative, and he is silent; she come in after being with many other people, while he sits alone and isolated in his cottage. After she makes the fire, Porphyria rises and takes off her clothes that are wet and soiled from the storm. The poet makes clear that it is only after she has put the scene in order that she approaches her lover. It is learned that Porphyria unties her hat, lets her hair down, "And, last, sat down by my side." The use of commas around "last" further emphasize that she goes to her lover only after she has set her surroundings right. She then calls to him.

At least one critic has argued that the portrayal of Porphyria in these early lines of the poem suggests that she is a vampire, or at least that the speaker presents her as one to justify his later murder of her. The setting of the poem, this critic suggests, is typical of the traditional Gothic horror story, as a mysterious lady enters at night during a storm. Porphyria "glides" into the cottage in the silent manner of the undead, and she shows her forcefulness and dominance in her actions before trying to seduce her victim. The rest of the poem, it is contended, provides further evidence of the speaker's belief in Porphyria as vampire, as he thinks her gaze weakens him and his only choice is to kill her, and as he believes that God has not punished him because in killing the vampire he has saved his soul. The name "Porphyria," too, it is claimed, has links with anti-Christian elements: "porphyre" designates a type of serpent, Porphyrius was an anti-Christian philosopher, and "porphyry" is a type of marble that is sensitive to light in the same way that vampires are said to be.

Lines 15–30

The speaker does not respond to Porphyria's call after she sits next to him. This failure to respond indicates his sullenness; perhaps he is even in a catatonic state. Interestingly, the speaker does not even present himself as "I," and the sense of his passivity is stressed once more when he says that "no voice replied" to her calls. Porphyria again is the active partner, as she puts her arm around the speaker's waist and bares her shoulder to him. She proceeds to seduce him, moving her blonde hair from her shoulder, pressing his cheek against

it, and then enfolding him in her long tresses. By modern standards, this description may not be considered sexually explicit, but in early Victorian poetry this would be considered a daring and erotically charged scene. The fact that the woman dominates and controls the situation is, of course, unusual, and this aspect is made all the more shocking when it is learned in the next few lines that she is a married woman of a different social class than the speaker. These facts are not immediately obvious, and the reader only gleans from several hints offered by the speaker that the two of them are engaged in an illicit love affair. He explains that Porphyria murmurs to him how much she loves him. But, he says, she is too weak, despite wanting to very much, to overcome her pride and follow her desire to be his forever. She cannot "dissever," or break, her "vainer" ties. However, sometimes her passion overcomes her and she cannot help but come to her lover. Tonight, for example, she has left a "gay feast" to be with him. Thoughts of her pale, lonely lover cannot keep her at the party, and she has come through wind and rain to be with him. The fact that she was at a "gay feast" indicates that she is from the wealthy classes, and so she has a much higher social position than he, who lives in a cottage. Their love affair would thus be frowned upon because of their different social backgrounds.

The picture of Porphyria in these lines of the poem comes as a contrast to the description of her given earlier in the poem. In lines 6 through 15, the speaker presented a figure of a strong, forceful, dominant woman. Now, he presents her as being weak and unable to do what she actually wants—which is to leave her "vainer ties" and be with him. It is not entirely clear whether in lines 22 to 25 the speaker is merely giving his own explanation of her actions or whether he is offering a mocking reproduction of Porphyria's own narration of her feelings and actions that evening. It is clear that while the earlier portrayal of Porphyria is offered in objective terms, the speaker now presents how he sees his lover in light of his self-importance, frustration, and bitterness. Before, the description was of outward events (the storm, Porphyria's entrance and action), and now the speaker turns inward to present a subjective interpretation of her state of mind and motives. While before she was dominant and in control, coming to him only after she has done what she needed to do, in his mind, she is weak and struggling, torn between the party's allure and coming through wind and rain to be with him.

Lines 31–42

Suddenly the demeanor of the speaker changes, and it seems that all is well and he is happy. But it becomes clear again that what he describes is not presented objectively but from the recesses of his troubled mind. While in the first half of the poem the speaker is depressed and morose, it becomes clear in this part that he is in fact quite mad. It becomes especially difficult to determine what to believe about the account he offers. He says that he looks up at Porphyria's eyes and they are happy and proud. He "knows" at that instant that Porphyria worships him. He is surprised and made proud by this realization, and his feelings intensify as he decides what he should do. In lines 31 to 36, the speaker suddenly uses a series of first-person pronouns: "I looked," "I knew," "my heart," "I debated," "mine, mine," and "I found." He thinks that at "that moment" Porphyria is completely and utterly his, and not only that but she is "fair / Perfectly pure and good." It suddenly occurs to him what he should do, and that thing he finds to do is to take her hair in one "long yellow string" and wind it three times around her throat, strangling her.

There is no description at all of Porphyria's struggle or horror, and according to the speaker, she feels no pain. He insists upon this twice. The reader knows the events cannot have occurred exactly as the speaker presents them, that he gives the interpretation of those events shaped by his demented mind. The speaker imagines that his lover who has trouble leaving her social circle to be with him in fact "worships" him, that she is completely his, and that at the moment she is with him she is perfectly pure. He is taken with the perfection of the moment, and he realizes that what he must do is preserve it. Killing her is the only way he can possess her completely. This act, he suggests, is not to be condemned, since, he insists, his victim feels no pain.

Lines 43–55

After strangling and killing her, the speaker opens Porphyria's eyelids, using a strange simile that is at once grotesque and oddly innocent: he lifts her dead lids as perhaps a child would who opens a flower that holds a bee. Again, her eyes indicate that she is happy: they are laughing and "without a stain"—an unusual occurrence indeed, since Porphyria is dead. The speaker then proceeds to loosen the hair from around Porphyria's neck and kiss her on the cheek, which blushes beneath his caress. Now he props her up and puts her head

on his shoulder; he points out that this is the same position they were in before, but now the roles are reversed, and he bears her on his shoulder. The balance of power, it seems, has shifted, after Porphyria has "given" herself to him completely and he has made sure that this will be the case for all time. The speaker explains that as he utters these lines, Porphyria's head is still on his shoulder, smiling and happy and free of its worries and in the state in which it has always wanted to be. He imagines that Porphyria shares in his joy of having stopped the passage of time in the exact moment in which her love for him is complete. She is finally free of all she scorned—perhaps her life in a monied society—and has gained her true love. This strange and disturbing depiction of what is happening is made all the more eerie by the fact that the speaker says that it is Porphyria's head, drooped on his shoulder like a flower, that has these thoughts and feelings.

Lines 56–60

The last five lines of the poem show the speaker sitting still with his dead lover's head upon his shoulder, as he reflects that Porphyria would never have guessed how her darling one wish—to be with her lover forever—would finally be granted. The moment of their perfect love has been captured and preserved for all time. They have sat together in the same position all night, not stirring at all, and this, it seems, is the beginning of an eternity together. Again the speaker tries to convince himself (or the reader) that what he has done is not to be condemned, for he says that even God has not spoken about his act. But he leaves it open that he is himself not absolutely sure of God's approval, as he says that "yet God has not said a word"—indicating that He might still do so. Once again, this seems to imply that the speaker, by presenting or reliving his account of the night's events, tries in his demented state to justify to himself, presenting the situation in such a way as to show how he is not to blame but seeming to feel undercurrents of distress and guilt at his crime.

Themes

Madness

Browning's study of madness in "Porphyria's Lover" is subtly presented. At the beginning of the poem there is little sense that the person who narrates these events is insane. The form of the poem is regular, with a tight *ababb* rhyme pattern. Most of the poem is written in an uncomplicated iambic pentameter, in which every other syllable is stressed, creating a rhythmically soothing beat. The diction of the poem is straightforward (most of the words used are monosyllables), as is much of the description of events presented by the speaker. The poem begins with a simple description of a storm and then moves into a similarly straightforward description of Porphyria's movements. The narrator explains everything methodically, presenting a catalog of his lover's movements, as she shuts out the cold, kneels down, makes a fire, takes off her coat, and sits by his side. However, as is soon made clear, the apparent objectivity of the account and the outward, metrical impression of reasonableness and calmness belie the psychological upheaval in the speaker's mind. As the events of the evening unfold through the speaker's monologue, the reader realizes the speaker is not completely in touch with reality. The sudden shift in the speaker's perception of Porphyria—she is at first a strong, commanding presence and in the next moment is shown as weak and indecisive—indicates that actual events and his interpretation of them are not in accord.

In the second half of the poem, Browning offers more and more clues to show that the speaker is not merely delusional or confused because of his near-broken heart but that he is quite mad. Yet all this is presented, again, in a manner of eerie calm, even as the speaker describes how he takes his lover's hair and twists it around her neck until she is dead. At the moment of her death, there is no shift in rhythm (although the language of the poem does become progressively more metaphorical throughout the poem), and the detachment with which her death is reported makes the scene all the more shocking. At the end of the poem, it is obvious that the speaker has completely lost touch with reality, but again neither the tone nor the diction points overtly to his madness. Rather, the reader gets a sense of his dementia from what the speaker does not say, from how his depiction of events cannot possibly accord with reality, and from the incongruity of his insistence of his lover's happiness with the fact that she lies dead in his arms. Although nowhere in the poem does the poet Browning offer his own commentary on the events that take place or the state of the speaker's mind, with his presentation of Porphyria's lover's account of what takes place, he forces the reader to ask questions about the nature of the speaker's mind and madness. By not writing using disjointed language

or crazy rhyme (the rhyme scheme is rather irregular but follows a very orderly pattern), Browning suggests that madness is a complex phenomenon that has more in common with sanity than most people would perhaps like to think.

Sex and Violence

"Porphyria's Lover" is not an overtly sexual poem by today's standards, but its frank depiction of an illicit love affair between a woman of high social standing and her poor lover would have been shocking to Victorian readers. However, Browning's poem is not shocking merely because it presents a transgressive sexual union but because of the way it depicts it. Nineteenth-century readers in England, despite strict societal standards of morality, were fascinated by stories of prostitution, unwed mothers, and torrid affairs, and the newspapers were full of stories catering to the public taste for scandal. Browning does not just offer the shocking story of an illicit affair but complicates it by showing the intimacy and complexity of the relationship and by provoking additional emotional reactions in readers when it is learned that the speaker kills his lover. Browning uses sex and violence in the poem to pose questions to readers about the nature of immorality. In the poem, Porphyria tries to seduce her lover by laying bare her shoulder and putting his head on her shoulder, and he in turn kills her and places her head on his. Both sex and violence were deemed "immoral" by Victorian standards, and Browning seems to be asking why this is as he shows the two acts mirroring each other. What makes these two very different types of acts "wrong" in the eyes of so many people? Why are sex and violence so intimately connected and of such interest to people that they continue to be fascinated with sensational and scandalous stories despite at the same time being horrified by them?

Dominance and Power

The two characters in the poem are lovers, but there is obviously a great deal of tension between them, and there is a sense of the speaker's unease at Porphyria's power. She is clearly more in charge: she is superior to him socially; she comes to see him and puts his house in order. She is a forceful presence as soon as she walks in the cottage and is able to shut out the storm. The speaker seems to resent her power over him. For, while he portrays her as strong and commanding, he insists that she is weak and needs him more than anything else. When he kills her, he finally reverses their roles so that he is in control; at the end of the poem, she sits with her dead head drooped on his shoulder, when before she had lain his cheek on hers. The fact that the woman is the more powerful partner in the relationship is contrary to the stereotype, and this may be the reason for the speaker's resentment

Topics for Further Study

- Compare and contrast "Porphyria's Lover" with another of Browning's dramatic monologues, such as "Johannes Agricola" or "My Last Duchess." What similar patterns do you see in the writing? What differs in their tone and style?
- In "Porphyria's Lover," what clues suggest that the speaker's account is unreliable, that what he says cannot be true? What would make you not trust his recounting of what happened?
- Do some research into the psychology behind crimes of passions. Based on your research, are crimes of passion only committed by those who are mentally unstable, or are "normal" people also capable of such acts?
- Do some research into the way modern U.S. courts evaluate sexually-motivated crimes. Explain how a modern court would address the crime and criminal that this poem presents. What do you consider would be a just punishment for Porphyria's lover? Explain your answer.
- Assume the identity of the speaker and write the defense you would use at your trial to explain the events that led up to the murder.
- Do you think there is evidence in the poem to suggest that Porphyria is a vampire? If so, what is it? If not, why do you think this is not a reasonable interpretation of the poem?
- Research the treatment of the criminally insane in England in the 1860s and their treatment in the United States in 2002. Write a compare and contrast essay that describes how the speaker in this poem would be treated in these different times and places.

and anger. The fact that he cannot control her—she has a gay social life which she enjoys—is a likely source of his bitterness, and the only way to rid himself of his feelings of impotence and powerlessness are to kill her. Again, while Browning offers no commentary on the nature of power in relationships, the poem brings up questions about how power dynamics manifest themselves in sexual partners' attitudes and behavior toward each other.

Experiencing an Infinite Moment

Time plays an important role in "Porphyria's Lover," which is made up of sixty lines divided into twelve parts using the same rhyme scheme. The use of sixty lines (reflecting the minutes in an hour) made up of twelve clock-like sets might be Browning's way of emphasizing the significance of temporality. From the beginning, when he tells us the rain set in early tonight, the speaker is aware of time. When he describes Porphyria's weakness at not being able to leave her other life behind to be with him, he insists that she wants to be with him "forever." The speaker, in his delusional state, believes that by killing Porphyria he can preserve forever "that moment" of their perfect love, and he feels his action is justified because he has captured for all time the beauty of their relationship. His replaying of the scene in his mind—and thus the poem itself—seems also to be an attempt to stop time and experience forever the moment of their perfect love. This theme of experiencing an infinite moment (in which the lover experiences a woman's perfect love) was common in much Romantic literature, and it has been suggested by a number of critics that in his poem, Browning parodies this notion by showing a madman capturing this infinite moment with his gruesome murder of his loved one.

Style

Dramatic Monologue

"Porphyria's Lover" is a dramatic monologue, a poem in which a speaker talks to a silent listener about a dramatic event or experience. Browning is considered to be one of the earliest and greatest practitioners of this form, and "Porphyria's Lover" is his first poem in this style. The dramatic monologue offers readers intimate insight into the speaker's changing thoughts and feelings because he presents in his own words how he sees and understands the situation he discusses. However, as becomes clear in "Porphyria's Lover," much of what the reader learns about the speaker of the monologue comes not from the speaker's own revelations but from what he does not say. The speaker in "Porphyria's Lover," for example, never declares that he is mad, but the reader infers from his words that he must be. The speaker also means to convince (perhaps himself) that his actions are justified, but there are clues that he may not actually feel this way, and certainly the reader can decide, after considering what has happened, how the speaker should be judged. One of the most interesting features of the dramatic monologue is that it presents a situation through the words and thoughts of a particular character, but then it is up to the reader to decide to what extent that character's actual depiction of the events should be believed. With "Porphyria's Lover," the reader must determine by reading between the lines of the speaker's account how reliable a narrator he is, how accurate his portrayal of Porphyria is, what his intention is in recounting the story, and exactly what is the extent and nature of his madness.

Form

"Porphyria's Lover" uses a highly patterned structure: it is composed of sixty lines of verse divided into twelve sets of five lines each which rhyme *ababb*. The regularity of the pattern is contrasted with the unusual asymmetry of the *ababb* rhyme, and together they every effectively emphasize the inward turmoil of the speaker's mind. The use of iambic pentameter throughout most of the poem lends it a steady, rhythmic quality, which again contrasts sharply with the unusually disturbing events depicted in the work. Browning uses the highly structured form of the poem to reinforce the speaker's sense of his own calmness and sanity, as he speaks reasonably and straightforwardly about his despicable acts, indicating perhaps that madness is a complex phenomenon that is not always immediately identified as such.

Language

Browning often uses complex classical reference and colloquialisms in his poems, but the content and language in "Porphyria's Lover" seem straightforward and easy to understand. Again, the directness and apparent transparency of what is said by the speaker seem unusual considering that he is a madman whose thoughts should be difficult to analyze. Browning seems to take pains to make the musings of a criminal psychopath clearly under-

standable to every reader. The poem uses simple, short words. However, there are subtle developments in the poem to suggest the speaker's unusual state of mind and his heightening sense of conflict. At first, the poem relies almost exclusively on straightforward description as the speaker recounts the events that have taken place, but as it becomes clear that the events described are seen through the lens of the speaker's madness, the language becomes more metaphorical. In the early description of Porphyria, the speaker offers a simple physical description of her. She has smooth shoulders and yellow hair. But after he kills her, he uses vegetative imagery to describe her—her eyelid is like a shut bud that holds a bee, her head droops like a fallen flower, and it is smiling and "rosy"—which seems to accentuate her total subjection by him. Browning also uses language in other effective ways in the poem. For example, the sense of Porphyria's dominance over her lover and the difference in their temperaments is indicated by the active verbs which initially describe her and contrast her with the speaker's passivity. When the balance of power shifts as he kills her, the speaker reveals himself as in control, and this shift is accomplished by his associating himself with action while she lies passively and silent against him.

Historical Context

Sex and Scandal in the Victorian Era

Strictly speaking, the Age of Victoria should correspond with the beginning and end of Queen Victoria's reign (1837 to 1901), but literary historians generally agree that the Victorian period began around 1830, when many social, political, and economic changes were taking place in English society. The Catholic emancipation of 1829, which enabled Catholics to sit in Parliament; the construction of the first railway in 1830; Parliamentary reform in 1832, extending the enfranchise to the middle classes (now one in five adult males could vote); the suppression of slavery in the colonies in 1833; and the beginning of the world's first industrial revolution meant profound changes in the existing social order. However, despite many positive social reforms, Victorian England was known also for its repressive attitude toward sexuality. This might have been partly as a backlash to the notorious debauchery of the Regency period during the early part of the century. Sexuality in the Victorian period was seen as taboo, not an appropriate subject of discussion. But, paradoxically, while moral purity was the norm in public, sex during the Victorian era was a powerful force in journalism, art, and literature. Sexual scandals were the subject of numerous newspaper stories, and the reading public had a voracious appetite for tales of illicit affairs. "Porphyria's Lover," written by Browning around 1834, during the early days of the Victorian period, takes on a scandalous subject that would have been of interest to the reading public that enjoyed shocking and horrific tales of sexual transgression. However, in his poem, Browning does not merely feed his readers' need for scandal by describing a sordid crime enhanced by madness and violence, but shocks his audience even further and thus forces them to question their desire for sensational stories that both titillate and horrify them.

The repression of sexuality in Victorian England, then, had the effect of unleashing a great deal of discourse about sex. The number of newspapers in Britain also multiplied during this time, and they became cheaper and more widely available. This burgeoning medium generated stories for popular consumption on a scale that had not been possible before. The papers' greater availability, coupled with increasing literacy, made scandals publicly accessible in new ways. It can be argued that the proliferation of sensational sex scandals in contemporary media has its roots in the Victorian era. The point here is that the social and material conditions were met during this period in Western history to make mass consumption of sensational material the phenomenon it continues to be today. Unfortunately for women, the double standards used to judge their sexual behavior in everyday life also found their way into the scandal sheets, and women suffered far more greatly than men if they were even rumored to be misbehaving sexually. A woman would lose her good name, be barred from society, and decried as "fallen," and because she was usually so completely under the power of her husband, any transgression on her part could mean being outcast for the rest of her life. Another reason that "Porphyria's Lover" is interesting in the context of Victorian social life is that the poem presents a situation in which a woman dominates an illicit relationship and the immorality of that relationship is then undercut by the horror of the murder that ensues. In the poem, Browning once again overturns his audience's expectations by presenting a twist on a scandalous subject that requires them to reconsider their attitudes towards sexuality, propriety, and morality.

Compare & Contrast

- **1830s:** The invention of the steam press, cheaper paper, and increasing literacy in England results in the proliferation of newspapers, including a great number of scandal sheets.

  Today: Circulation of tabloids in England such as the *Daily Mirror*, that concentrate on scandalous stories, far exceeds that of other daily publications.

- **1830s:** In England, a man has the legal right to beat and lock up his wife; a woman who leaves her husband is not allowed even to keep what she earns; a man may divorce his wife but a woman must prove cruelty or desertion if she wants to leave her husband. She is not able to obtain a divorce.

  Today: In the United States, statistics show that women experience more than ten times as many incidents of violence (including murder) against them by their spouses or partners than do males.

- **1830s:** In England, middle- and upper-class men were expected to have affairs, but the slightest hint of scandal that a woman had a sexual relationship outside marriage meant social ostracism.

  Today: In the United States, more men than women are reported to commit adultery, but more women than men file for divorce to get out of bad marriages.

Critical Overview

"Porphyria's Lover" was published early in Browning's career in the first issue of the journal *The Monthly Repository* under the title "Porphyria." It received little notice upon its initial publication in 1836, and critics were similarly unresponsive when it was reprinted in 1842 in *Dramatic Lyrics* together with a companion piece "Johannes Agricola" under the general title, "Madhouse Cells." When it appeared again in 1863 in *Poetical Works* under its present title, Browning's reputation had grown, and all his earlier poems were more favorably reviewed than when they were first published, but the work was not singled out for praise. In *Browning: The Critical Heritage*, which includes all major critical assessments of Browning's works in his lifetime, "Porphyria's Lover" is mentioned but twice, and at that only briefly and in passing. The English writer Charles Kingsley writing in 1851 is said to have disliked it, but an anonymous 1876 critic refers to it as an example of a good short poem by Browning. In general, in the nineteenth century the poem seems to have been seen as one of a handful of immature verses written by a young Browning during a period when he was writing poetry in the confessional style and developing his techniques of the dramatic monologue.

In the twentieth century, Browning's reputation in English literature having been firmly established, "Porphyria's Lover" was heavily anthologized but presented to be "of interest" by most critics almost solely by virtue of its being a "murder" poem, an example of Browning's interest in criminal psychology and violence, and Browning's first dramatic monologue. However, as the critic Norton B. Crowell points out in his study of Browning's works, the poem "rarely received the attention it deserves." Most of the analyses of the poem were brief and covered single aspects of the poem.

An interesting but largely discredited interpretation of the poem was offered in 1900 by James Fotheringham, who claimed that the lover in the poem is dreaming and the entire action takes place in "wild motions" of his brain. C. R. Tracy's 1937 *Modern Language Notes* article, one of the first devoted entirely to a discussion of the poem, argued that the speaker of the poem is not mad, or at least no more so that others of Browning's characters. Several critics have dismissed the poem as minor and unimportant. Thomas Blackburn writing in *Robert Browning: A Study of his Poetry* in 1967,

for example, complained that the work is "unleavened by insight," and Park Honan in *Browning's Characters* regarded it as an "extremely good anecdote" but essentially echoes the sentiments of the earlier critic J. M. Cohen that the work is a "juvenile and unrepresentative horror poem."

Recent commentators have tended to see the poem as more interesting and complex. While they agree that "Porphyria's Lover" certainly does not rank as one of Browning's most sophisticated works, they have pointed out the psychological complexity of the anonymous narrator, seen its indebtedness of earlier works such as John Keats's "Eve of St. Agnes" and William Shakespeare's *Othello*, recognized the use of techniques developed by Browning in his more mature monologues, suggested that the speaker views his lover as a vampire, and noted that the poem is an interesting study in abnormal psychology that anticipates Browning's most influential work.

Criticism

Uma Kukathas

Kukathas is a freelance writer and editor. In this essay, Kukathas considers to what extent the reader should believe the mad speaker's account of events in Browning's poem.

Many readers agree that "Porphyria's Lover," is a poem in which a madman recounts to himself the events of the night before that end with his murdering the woman he loves. The speaker's actions and words—his strangling of his victim with her own hair and his insistence afterwards that she is glad at what has happened—surely point to his tenuous grip on reality. However, if the narrator in "Porphyria's Lover" is in fact insane, certain difficulties arise. Since his is the only account offered of what happens that stormy night, it seems that the reader gets only his version of events and then must try to figure out from his view how to assess the situation. But what is the truth in the speaker's description of the circumstances and what are merely delusions of a demented psyche? How is the reader to determine which part of the deranged speaker's story should be believed and which rejected as untrue?

One reason the dramatic monologue as a poetic form is so compelling is that it offers a situation told from the perspective of a single character who, the reader gradually realizes, cannot be completely trusted to present with total accuracy the events he describes. The reader, then, must be the judge, both of the speaker's character and the veracity of what he says. How is the reader to do this? In "Porphyria's Lover," Browning presents subtle clues to reveal to the reader the speaker's psychotic state, and it is up to the reader to pick up on these to make inferences and recognize what kind of man the speaker is. That is, Browning offers hints that tell the reader what can be believed about what the speaker is saying and that also show the workings of his unbalanced mind.

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The clues Browning provides are of two kinds, which are used together to show the speaker's increasingly precarious grasp of what is real. First, with the structure of the poem, Browning shows the descent of the speaker into madness that takes place in three distinct stages. At the beginning of the poem, the speaker is in a depressed state, but he is not completely mad. His language and description of outward events indicate as much. But in the second part of the poem, as he turns increasingly inward, he is seen to be losing touch with reality: he does not describe outward events but presents only an interpretation of his lover's inner feelings and motives. By the end of the poem, the speaker can be seen to be clearly mad, as he offers again a description of outward events but in a manner that could not possibly accord with reality because they are so colored by his inner perspective. So then, Browning's second technique is to use changes in language to show how the speaker loses his grip on reality. In the first part of the poem, the language used is straightforward and descriptive. In the second part, it becomes more evaluative and concerned

What Do I Read Next?

- "My Last Duchess," published in 1842, is perhaps the most celebrated of Browning's dramatic monologues. It presents in fifty-six lines the thoughts of the Duke of Ferrara about his late wife, but as much is revealed about the coldness and inhumanity of the duke as about his gracious and exquisite wife.
- Browning's early lyric "Johannes Agricola in Meditation," which was published together with "Porphyria's Lover" in *Dramatic Lyrics* in 1842 under the general heading of "Madhouse Cells," is also a study of madness, in this case of religious mania.
- Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996) reconstructs the sensational story of a 16-year-old Canadian housemaid named Grace Marks who was tried for the murder of her employer and his mistress.
- *Dark Dreams: Sexual Violence, Homicide, and the Criminal Mind* (2001), by Roy Hazelwood and Stephen G. Michaud, reveals the twisted motives and thinking that go into sexual crimes.
- *Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness* (1992), by William Styron, describes the author's own descent into depression and madness.

with emotion. In the final section of the poem, the speaker again offers descriptions of outward events, but this time his language is much more metaphorical, and the description of external events is offered together with the speaker's unlikely interpretation of them. The further the reader is taken into the speaker's mind, the clearer it becomes that while his description of outward events can be taken seriously, his interpretation of them cannot be.

The first twenty lines of the poem consist of almost exclusively straightforward, descriptive words. Browning uses an extraordinary number of verbs—over twenty—in this section, and the adjectives he chooses for the most part describe external features. The speaker opens by setting the scene, explaining that it is raining, presenting the backdrop of trees and lake. He is alone in his cottage when in walks Porphyria. The description that is offered of Porphyria in the first part of the poem is completely external; it focuses on her actions, clothes, and body. She kneels down, rises up, unties her hat; her shoulder is "smooth white," her hair "yellow." The speaker in this first section of the poem does provide some information about himself, but it is minimal and concerns not his outward but his inner state. He is feeling dejected (with "heart fit to break") and silent when she calls out to him. There is a clear sense that he is depressed, but he is still in touch with reality, as his detailed observations of his surroundings and his lover indicate.

In line 21, after Porphyria murmurs that she loves him, the speaker abruptly moves from providing a description of external things to offering an interpretation of Porphyria's motives, feelings, and state of mind. The declaration of love on her part seems to set him off and now he does not *describe* her actions but *judges* them. The second section of the poem, from lines 21 to 40, then, turns to using language that is descriptive not of external objects and situations but of internal feelings and thoughts. The adjectives used become distinctly evaluative as the speaker's thoughts go inward. He explains that Porphyria is "too weak" to set her "struggling" passion free from pride. Sometimes her love for him overcomes her, as tonight, when she leaves a "gay feast" to be with him. As he looks into her eyes, the speaker sees that Porphyria is "happy and proud," and he realizes then that Porphyria worships him. The speaker's interpretation of Porphyria and her actions does not seem at all to accord with the more objective, straightforward description of her that he offers earlier. Her actions in the first twenty lines show her to be strong and decisive, but now the speaker says she is weak. The speaker also begins to use a great many first-person indicators, underscoring again that he is turning inward in his interpretation of what is happening. He says that Porphyria is "mine, mine" and then that she is "perfectly pure and good," and with that he strangles her with her own hair. So then, throughout most of this second section, Browning shows his speaker losing grip with reality as he ceases to offer objective reports of events but presents subjective evaluations instead. However, right at the end of the section, when the speaker describes the act of murder, he again uses objective, descriptive language, explaining that he

kills his lover by winding her hair around her throat three times.

But then the tone shifts abruptly yet again in line 41. Immediately after he confesses his deed, the speaker offers his own bizarre interpretation:

> In one long yellow string I wound
> Three times her little throat around
> And strangled her. No pain felt she—
> I am quite sure she felt no pain.

In the entire third section of the poem, from line 41 through 60, the speaker offers this type of interpretation repeatedly. He presents a supposedly straightforward, objective description of an event but then immediately gives his own, incongruous understanding of it. He strangles Porphyria, but she feels no pain. (The speaker even repeats this thought to convince himself of its truth.) He then opens her (now dead) blue eyes, and they laugh. When he kisses her (lifeless) cheek, it blushes, and her rosy head smiles. The speaker's madness in this section has descended into yet another stage, and the changes in language signal this. In the first twenty lines of the poem, he is in a depressed state, but he seems to interpret the outward world correctly with his observations. In the second section of the poem, the inner workings of his mind show him to misinterpret his lover's feelings for him. Now, in the third section, he misunderstands and misinterprets even the most obvious external signs and events. He thinks his lover's blue eyes are laughing when they are more than likely wide open in shock. He thinks that she is blushing when what may have happened is that his touch has brought color (in the form of his body heat) to the surface of her dead face. Also, it is noteworthy that throughout this third section Browning has his speaker use far more metaphorical language than in the previous two sections. In the first description of Porphyria in lines 1 through 20, the speaker puts forth a catalog of her actions. In this third section, he compares her to a flower: her eye is a shut bud, and her head is smiling and rosy.

The speaker in the final section no doubt descends into complete insanity, which is made clear by signs indicating he no longer makes sense of the external world as he used to. He no longer merely objectively observes outward events but filters them always through the subjective, interpretive lens of his complex feelings for Porphyria, which are shown in the second section to make him clearly delusional. However, this is not to say that at the end of the poem the reader can no longer take seriously anything that the speaker says. What Browning does in the poem is to present the speaker's descent into madness by showing his increasing movement away from an objective understanding of events. What this seems to indicate is that the reader can still take seriously the facts of the speaker's account (that his lover enters the room, that he strangles her, that they sit together all night long) but not his interpretation of them. It is, then, the speaker's *reading* of what has happened on that night that reveals him to be less than sane. It is up to the reader of the poem, then, to separate the objective, factual description presented by the speaker and provide his or her own (necessarily subjective but most likely not tainted by madness) reading of it to better understand the whole truth of what has transpired.

Source: Uma Kukathas, Critical Essay on "Porphyria's Lover," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Barry L. Popowich

In the following essay, Popowich examines the various meanings attached to the word "Porphyria," especially that of delusional madness and its meaning for Browning's poem.

If one examines such a standby as DeVane's *A Browning Handbook*, or the recent Oxford edition of *The Poetical Works*, one discovers no conjecture upon the name in the title of "Porphyria's Lover." While Robert Browning's poetry is undeniably well annotated, one of his most famous terms, "Porphyria," has not been glossed, apparently because its meaning has been taken as clearly the proper name of a female character. But, while Porphyria is certainly used as a character name, it is far from only that. The term resonates of alternate states of mind, for it is the name of a disease that brings delusional madness to its sufferers. (The disease also causes purple urine, hence the name which is based upon the Greek *porphryos* or purple, a derivative of which, porphyry, Browning uses a dozen times elsewhere.) I contend that Browning gained knowledge of this disease shortly before he wrote the poem, and, because he had seen the delusions experienced by porphyria sufferers, he wrote the poem to be read in a most unstable way as the raving memory of an inmate in an asylum. My contention also serves to reinforce the importance of Browning's interest in the pathological.

Michael Burduck's 1986 article in *Studies in Browning and His Circle* is in partial response to the ready acceptance of "Porphyria" as merely a fanciful female name, as Burduck implicitly notes the lack of attention given to it. He considers the possible definitions of the term as he makes a case

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for the poem's use of a submerged theme of vampirism. Burduck's research, while helpful, does not state the obvious, that "Porphyria" seems not to have appeared previously as a woman's name. He, however, usefully comments upon the Gothic atmosphere of the poem, and in a footnote, comes within a hair's breadth of what I believe to be Browning's inspiration for "Porphyria." Burduck's reference is to a "rare blood disease" called porphyria in which sun-sensitive skin is the main symptom, and which was a condition treated from medieval times by the drinking of blood. But what he seems not aware of is that porphyria as a disease is much more than this, indeed being that "madness" which George III suffered.

If Browning understood porphyria as a form of delusional madness, and the speaker in the poem is then understood as largely or even completely deluded in his perceptions, indeed likely locked up in an asylum, the reading of the poem will shift away from the angle of interpretation proposed by this quotation from DeVane, which also contains a reference to an older name for the poem:

> It is the opinion of Professor Tracy that the lover in the poem is no more mad than many others of Browning's heroes; he remarks that in calling this poem and "Johannes Agricola" "madhouse Cells" the poet lacking the full courage of his convictions, adopted a convenient method of fobbing off these two poems as objective studies of mental aberration.

Besides some readers' wishes to diminish the possibility of delusion in the poem, what also is being referred to here is that the title "Porphyria's Lover" is actually a late, third title to the work. Its first 1836 appearance was simply as "Porphyria," and then its second appearance in 1842 was as "madhouse Cells, No. II" (linked with "Johannes Agricola"). "Porphyria's Lover" was only added in 1849 as a subtitle, and by 1863 the madhouse main title was dropped. This retitling of the poem has had the effect of moving the opening denotation away from the issue of madness to that of character and relationship, i.e. the "Lover," and readers have been led along with this lessened attention to madness in the title to a more literal approach to the speaker's situation. Unaware that porphyria likely refers to a disease affecting the mind, the reader has been resituated from looking through a cell-door at someone suffering a delusion to an ethereal perspective in a country cottage—quite a large shift, itself indicative of the power of a title.

The question of just how to take the speaker in the poem has remained open. Herbert F. Tucker, Jr. in 1984 wrote on a number of possible motivations for why Browning would present "speakers in extremis" in dramatic monologue form. One reason involves the anxiety of influence from the lyric, first-person form of the past generation of poets, and Browning's wish to distance himself clearly from the extremity of the poem's speaker. Another reason Tucker proposes is almost the opposite, that Browning was making an ironic stance upon the reading public's overvaluation of the lyrical "I," as his mad speakers shattered expectations of what the private speaking voice in poetry would be like.

The issue of voice in this poem is a complex one of the self and language, of the poet speaking for another, if fictional, self, and of literary history and context. My contention that porphyria first and foremost meant madness to Browning serves to give his intention some clarity, but does not seek to answer for his fundamental interest in the chosen voice, other than to point out yet more definitely his interest in voices not often heard. Likewise, my seeing the speaker undoubtedly as in delusion in a madhouse helps to answer the question of what Tucker calls "the complicating factor of dramatic audience," for by placing the speaker in an asylum, the situation is altered to that of "doctor" and "patient," "keeper" and "kept," or "observed" and "observer." Furthermore, if one accepts Browning's use of a form of madness as the name for a woman, there is to be considered how he links madness and gender, particularly in the face of the violent end. (The editors of *The Poetical Works* provide the grisly sources that Browning drew upon for the murder of a woman by her "mate.")

Of course, my argument for extreme instability in the poem's speaker depends upon the hy-

pothesis that Browning was aware of the disease porphyria as a form of madness in the early 1830s. The history of medical terminology is a most vague area, but there is enough evidence to afford this hypothesis a high probability. As to the disease itself, its modern history is recounted in this quotation from Ida Macalpine and Richard Hunter's fascinating book, *George III and the Mad Business*, which traces in retrospect the hereditary disease's prevalence through the royal houses of Europe:

> Only in the present century did advances in medicine and biochemistry allow Sir Archibald Garrod to put forward the concept of 'inborn errors of metabolism' to account for a group of disorders in which inherited defects of body chemistry lead to an abnormal accumulation of toxic chemical substances which damage the nervous system. Among these is a rare variety, which was clinically defined only in the 1930s, called the porphyrias, because in attacks the urine is of a purple or dark colour, either when it is passed or left to stand. The biochemical lesion is a disturbance of porphyrin metabolism. These are purple-red pigments which are contained in every cell of the body and give blood its red colour. In the porphyrias their formation and excretion is greatly increased and they or their precursors appear in large amounts in urine and faeces. Their excess in the blood causes widespread intoxication of all parts of the nervous system, peripheral and central. In this group called variegate porphyria there is, in addition, sun-sensitivity and increased fragility of the skin to trauma.

(Here is the same photo-sensitivity that Burduck noted as vampirish in the line "A sudden thought of one so pale," and in the overall gloom of the setting.)

While this disorder gained clinical definition only in the twentieth century, its very name was derived from the much older observation of the symptom of the purple urine. For instance, in *Dunglison's Medical Dictionary* of 1857, the definition is given:

> PORPYRURIA, from "purple" and "urine." A state of the urine in which it deposits the remarkable colouring matter.
>
> PORPHYURIA, Porphyruria.

The observation of this single symptom gave the name to a complex disease that was to be understood later as a metabolic disorder (which has alarming frequency in certain populations). Porphyria, then, is not a feminine form of a proper name, but originally a compound noun, purple-urine.

Even if it took into the twentieth century to define its cause, porphyria as a diseased condition was observed long before. In the work *Porphyria in Australia*, Roderick McEwin notes of the disease's research history:

> Scherer showed in 1841 that a substance of blood-red colour, but not due to iron, was present in blood… The name porphyria first appeared in the literature in 1871 when Hoppe-Seyler prepared haematoporphyria from blood.

Throughout the nineteenth century, researchers were studying this symptom, and while these efforts were uncoordinated, there would have been opportunities for one to come across the term orally outside of the medical research literature, particularly for someone as interested in such matters as Browning. The term would have been in use long before inclusion in a medical dictionary.

It is hard to imagine, even if complete scientific understanding was lacking, that such a "remarkable" symptom would go unnoticed among relatively numerous "madhouse cell" occupants at the time. The patients with purple urine would be ones that would attract attention, for the disease's effect upon the nervous system is severe and they would be far from passive. Physicians studying the troubling case of George III, now realized to have had porphyria and to offer a representative example of its symptoms, described his mental state in the following way:

> Dr. Robert Darling Willis summed up the problem for the parliamentary committee in December 1810: "I consider the King's derangement more nearly allied to delirium… In delirium, the mind is actively employed upon past impressions … which rapidly pass in succession… There is also a considerable disturbance in the general constitution; great restlessness, great want of sleep, and total unconsciousness of surrounding objects."…
>
> … The first asylum doctor who studied George III's illness was Isaac Ray… [H]e gave an account of all attacks from printed sources then available… This attack (1810) closely resembled the others. It was manifested by hurry, restlessness, caprices, indiscretions, violence, and delusions.

Macalpine's thesis is that George III had a disease with physical origins, and not an "insanity." Such a distinction in definition and cause, however useful to hindsight's repairing of a royal reputation, would not keep any less distinguished patient out of one of the growing number of asylums of the time. Unquestionably Porphyria's lover has a number of the characteristics noted above, and one can soon place him in a madhouse cell, where he is actually in delirium, fixated upon God and his past deed, rather than still being at its location. In fact one might pursue a reading in which the desired woman is a delusional construct, a product of the

madness after which she is named; although, when considering Browning's sources, I believe the speaker is intended to be a murderer.

The gap in the absolute proof of my argument is that in the 1830s there seem to be no recorded studies connecting the symptom of purple urine with delusion and violent madness. For instance, over the earlier period of George III's attacks (1788–1820), his discolored urine was often noted, but not directly related to his delusions. Yet, there was an explosion in scientific interest in insanity by the time of his death. Inevitably there would have been numerous asylum inmates who would have been exhibiting as an additional symptom the "remarkable" coloring effects of porphyria in their often extraordinarily confined cells. And this very unsubtle symptom had been given the name *porphyuria* at some point well before the mid-century (perhaps as Burduck notes even back to medieval times). In British medical history there is a long if inconsistent interest both in classification of symptoms, and also in studying urine. As Macalpine related in her book, the "piss prophets" were divining from urine in the seventeenth century. One only has to believe as probable that Browning would have visited an asylum (or spoke to someone who had) and encountered an example of porphyria. Then one can accept that his use of the term got its inspiration directly from a form of madness brought to his attention by asylum staff. Is this sort of excursion or contact, then, an action that can be assigned to Browning with reasonable likelihood?

As to the availability and attraction of an asylum, Macalpine's book is especially noteworthy for its analysis of the development of the "madhouse" in England after the time of George III. In her chapter "The Asylum Era: Acute Mania," she writes:

> When the insane were raised to the status of patients and hospitals were built for them and doctors took an interest in 'insanity,' a new specialty was launched, which was later named 'psychiatry' or 'psychological medicine.'
>
> By the middle of the nineteenth century the asylum era was in full swing.

While the social implications of these institutions are beyond the scope of this paper, I think it reasonable that Browning would have been especially attracted to such places, indeed fascinated by what he might learn there. In Donald Thomas' biography, we learn this of Browning in 1829, several years before he wrote the poem:

> In the following spring he withdrew from the university altogether… Soon he was exploring new and more scientific paths of knowledge, perhaps a corrective to the prodigies and monstrosities of Wanley's *Wonders of the Little World*. He attended the lectures of Dr. James Blundell at Guy's Hospital, the celebrated physician sharing at least with Wanley a special interest in midwifery.

As Thomas points out earlier, Browning had a deep interest in new medical developments and in the medically unusual, likely fueled by his favorite childhood reading, manifesting in his adult life as his seeking of the obscure and often unpleasant:

> For such ghastliness he had been well prepared by other items of childhood reading. Chief of these was Nathaniel Wanley's *Wonders of the Little World: or, A General History of Man in Six Books* (1678). Among its anecdotes of piety the work contained much that was grotesque or terrifying. With great relish Wanley devotes chapters to monstrous births or abortions… To the child's imagination Wanley also offered a chapter 'Of such persons as have changed their Sex', including a spirited chapter of a girl who leapt a ditch, ran screaming home to report that 'her Bowels fell out, but exhibited instead 'the hidden evidences of a man.' To complete the child's knowledge of the world there was a formidable section on torture and execution. He read, for example, a description of how a man might be severed at the waist, his upper half kept alive on 'an hot Iron, or Plate of Copper, that sears up the Veins.'

As W. Hall Griffin has noted, Browning turned to Wanley for a large number of later inspirations. Lest one think that this collection of the highly unusual was an isolated influence on Browning's uniquely developing curiosity, one can also note that at one time his father was found dissecting a rat at his desk in the Bank of England, or that his sister Sarianna's favorite reading was the graveyard humor of Thomas Hood. (Indeed it was a friend of his father that was the famous Dr. Blundell's cousin and led Browning to those surgery lectures.)

Following along in the path of Browning's interests in these earlier years, he later became particularly concerned with forms of insanity. He was especially interested in the production of "the Song of David" by Christopher Smart, supposedly scratched upon the walls of his cell in Bedlam. This act of "madness" is referred to in *Paracelsus*, itself a work that required much medically-related reading. Thomas outlines most completely Browning's incessant interest in such matters as insanity, phrenology, and criminal mentality. And, in regards to the creative process, Thomas notes how Browning kept his public self quite distinct from his private sources of inspiration. Given all this, it seems more difficult to believe that Browning would not have visited or inquired into asylums and madhouses than to accept that he would have.

Browning was eager to "see, know, taste, feel, all," and in this process he came across much that was esoteric and even macabre. While there doubtless can never be direct proof that with the first title, "Porphyria," he referred to a distinct condition of madness encountered in his wide-ranging explorations, which included "madhouse cells," it seems more than sufficiently probable that the first two titles of the work are more useful as a guide to his original focus than the one by which the poem is now known. While this awareness may serve to guide readers concerned with the authorial intention into a yet further destabilized reading of what to make of that well-known act of love, it also illustrates much of the socio-historical milieu and its ability to generate such diverse and often disturbing work as Browning exemplifies.

Source: Barry L. Popowich, "Porphyria Is Madness," in *Studies in Browning and His Circle*, Vol. 22, May 1999, pp. 59–65.

Michael L. Burduck

In the following essay, Burduck studies "Porphyria's Lover" within the context of "traditional vampire lore."

For some curious reason scholars have virtually ignored the Gothic features of Robert Browning's "Porphyria's Lover." In the poem, Browning, familiar with the horror literature of his day (especially the lore lying behind such poems as Keats's "Lamia"), creates a dramatic soliloquy in which the speaker attempts to justify his murder of Porphyria by suggesting that she was a vampire. Throughout the work, he selects particulars that reinforce this view, for if he is convincing that he has killed a vampire, he believes he can absolve himself of guilt.

The first clue to Browning's strategy is the connotations of Porphyria's name. Three variations of "Porphyria" known during the nineteenth century shed some interesting light on the poem. According to Murray, the noun "porphyre" designates a type of serpent, while the adjective "porphyrian" pertains to the Neo-Platonic philosopher Porphyrius, a staunch antagonist of Christianity. In his famous dictionary, Dr. Johnson defines "porphyry" as a variety of marble that is extremely sensitive to light. Collectively these meanings conjure images of the undead. First, the snake suggests consummate evil and deadly, dagger-like fangs. In addition, the bloodsucker of legend despises all Christian symbols and reacts adversely to sunlight.

Along with the significance of Porphyria's name, Browning has his narrator carefully select details that suggest a vampiric view of Porphyria. The speaker opens his narration in the traditional Gothic manner as the mysterious lady enters at night during a storm. One can also speculate that the lover's weakened condition—"I listened with heart fit to break"—makes him the perfect prey for Porphyria's promises of eternal life and devotion. Next he analogizes her moving into the room to that of a serpent: "When glided in Porphyria." Typically, according to the narrator, she relies on a form of silent movement employed by the undead. She seems to command the storm to cease and the fire to blaze: "straight / She shut the cold out and the storm, / And kneeled and made the cheerless grate / Blaze up, and all the cottage warm;", thereby demonstrating some of her powers. In line 12 the narrator mentions her "soiled" gloves. Obviously they have been sullied by the rain, but the speaker's word choice suggests that they carry the blood stains of her previous victims. Sexual advances constitute part of the vampire's arsenal; and as the narrator recounts it, Porphyria seductively bares her shoulder as she tries to seduce the speaker, who refers to himself in lines 28–29 as "one so pale / For love…" Does he not suggest his discoloration results from her having previously drained some of his blood? Tradition maintains that a vampire's glance can lure a victim into a spell from which he has little chance of escape. Looking into her eyes, the lover becomes surprised as he feels his ability to resist weaken. Here he hints that she had supernatural power over him and thus he was not responsible for any ensuing actions. He suggests he is left with the two traditional alternatives: succumb to her seductions (which will make him one of the undead) or kill her.

> *"The narrator actually believes that The Creator refuses to punish him because he has saved his own soul, as well as Porphyria's, by dispatching one of hell's voracious minions."*

The speaker resolves the dilemma mentioned in line 35 ("I debated what to do") in lines 37–38

with the words "I found / A thing to do…" At this point he tries to indicate that he rose to heights of heroics to slay her. His willpower triumphs, and he destroys the predacious creature. The method used to subdue Porphyria combines two procedures for eliminating vampires. When he strangles her with her hair, he performs a type of quasi-beheading. Also, according to legend, a vampire can be killed with a part of its own body. After the speaker slays Porphyria she appears curiously refreshed, just like the preternatural creature of lore once the vampire hunter relieves it of its unholy burden. Lines 56–57 ("she guessed not how / Her darling one wish would be heard.") show how the lover claims he demonstrates his love not by falling into Porphyria's trap as she had hoped but by destroying her. Browning's irony in the concluding line ("And yet God has not said a word!") becomes clear. The narrator actually believes that The Creator refuses to punish him because he has saved his own soul, as well as Porphyria's, by dispatching one of hell's voracious minions.

"Porphyria's Lover," then, is an early example of the self-deluded narrator and the dramatic irony that Browning would develop later in such poems as "Fra Lippo Lippi" and "Andrea del Sarto." Although "Porphyria's Lover" has been interpreted from numerous vantage points, studying the work in relation to traditional vampire lore might possibly offer an interesting, though exploratory, alternative reading.

Source: Michael L. Burduck, "Browning's Use of Vampirism in 'Porphyria's Lover,'" in *Studies in Browning and His Circle*, Vol. 14, 1986, pp. 63–65.

Steven C. Walker

In the following essay, Walker examines how Browning is able to fuse diverse elements into "poetic coherence" in "Porphyria's Lover."

The young Robert Browning manages remarkable mileage from nine sentences worth of the distracted reflections of "Porphyria's Lover." The poem is at once a murder shocker featuring a madman strangling a comely blond, a sociologist's case study of inability to communicate in a sexual relationship, a glimpse at the impact of artificial social values upon individual lives, a presodium pentathol excursion into the mind of an apparently motiveless killer, a convincing speculation as to why all men destroy the thing they love. Browning's fusion of such diverse forces into poetic coherence, let alone a compelling work of art, poses an intriguing problem in literary dynamics.

The only clear source in "Porphyria's Lover" of this surprising poetic resilience is the source of its flaws: Browning allows his intense interest in human dynamics to decrease the priority of the ordering formal aspects of his poem. Such subordination of form tends to artistic blunting—in this poem occasionally to chaos—but at the same time frees the poet to concentrate upon seeing rather than upon expressing prior judgment. Browning plays no favorites; the tenacious ambiguity of the poem demonstrates the balanced sympathy generated for the opposing characters. We are as shocked as we are empathetic with Porphyria's strangler. We share his tenderness for Porphyria at the same time we recognize her greed in grasping for the best of both worlds. The very madness advertised in the "Madhouse Cells" title becomes a moot question: Though the Lover's behavior is clearly antisocial, his motives for that behavior are not easily condemned. Browning's noncommittal stance and resulting psychological acuteness usher us into a credible, dynamic, uncomfortably unresolved poetic world.

Thus from forced suspension of judgment Browning generates tensions which energize the poem. "Porphyria's Lover" is a struggle from its introductory storm to the unresolved ambiguity of its final line. Structurally, the poem is a juxtaposition of antitheses. The most apparent of its many dilemmas is the simultaneous attraction and repulsion of Porthyria and her lover, "lovers" satisfied neither with union nor with separation: They can't live without each other; they can't live with each other.

Browning dramatizes the ambivalence of their relationship by personality contrasts—she is a collage of "yellow" and "blue" and "rosy" color, he is "so pale"; she initiates almost all the action of the poem, he is catatonically passive; she is talkative, he silent; she reflects the norms of society and its "gay feast," he is the isolated individual in his "cottage." The paradox of the lovers' total misunderstanding of each other underscores these constant contrasts. Much is made in the poem of inability to communicate, of inadequate listening, of failure to answer—he listens "with heart fit to break"; for her, "no voice replied."

Sexual conflict intensifies the friction of the communication gap. The female at first dominates, approaching the man, carrying the conversation, initiating the lovemaking. The Lover's perception of her as indecisive, as "too weak," is pathetically typical of his projection of his own inadequacies. Her aggressiveness penetrates even the diction; there are more verbs in the Porphyria passages, and they are significantly more active.

The poem pivots upon male assertion of dominance. The ardor of the battle for power is evident in the man's satisfaction in the ascendant role: "this time my shoulder bore / Her head." The sudden lurch to trochees from previously steady iambs signals the shift of power, and the vegetative imagery—the "shut bud," the "rosy" head which, flower-like, "droops"—underlines her total subjection. Male-female confrontation sparks considerable sexual tension. As its title hints, the poem could be read as a sensually rhythmic accelerando to the climactic fulfillment of a literal dying; Porphyria's disrobing stimulates a vigorous movement of clauses passionately accelerating to the ejaculatory rhythm of "mine, mine, fair / Perfectly" and its metrically and syntactically satiated aftermath.

The frictions between Porphyria and her lover are multiplied by vacillation within his mind, vacillation made visible as he projects his moods upon the environment. His alternating visions of storminess and warmth approach manic depression in their drastic divergence. The poem begins in the "cheerless" atmosphere of a wet, windy storm, thereafter shifting precipitously between this "sullen" mood and the warmth surrounding Porphyria, her "yellow hair," the fire she causes to "blaze up," and the whole overflow of laughter she brings with her from the "gay feast." The very diction softens when Porphyria is viewed; liquids and sibilants, overwhelmed by harsher consonants in stormy parts of the poem, predominate three to one near Porphyria.

Beneath these rhythmic tensions, the poem pulses with the systole and diastole of reasoned madness. Browning rejects the temptation of writing crazily to portray insanity. The poem is formally regular—especially for Browning. Over three-fourths of its uncomplicated iambic tetrameter lines are unvaried. Diction, 85% monosyllables, is sanely simple. Tight ABABB rhyme pattern starches the regularity. Even syntactically, "Porphyria's Lover" is far less elliptical than "Fra Lippo Lippi," far less convoluted than "Andrea del Sarto." The metrical impression is one of calm, methodical reasonableness, and it is significant that the reasonableness approaches total detachment during the strangling itself. Rigid regularity provides a solid background for the counterpoint of psychological chaos, at the same time reflecting the obsessive care with which the Lover strives to repress aberrant impulses.

The structural conflicts of "Porphyria's Lover" proliferate through the prism of Browning's narrative perspective. The Lover's insight, the focal center of the poem, varies widely in depth, from naively superficial naming of emotions, through revelation projected in his perception of the external world, to penetrating clues of characterizing thought patterns. The poem moves from a wide-angle perspective of the storm to a close-up of Porphyria disrobing, from the almost tactile intimacy of the strangulation to the broad philosophical perspective of "And yet God has not said a word."

Browning's noncommittal stance and resulting psychological acuteness usher us into a credible, dynamic, uncomfortably unresolved poetic world."

This complex central point of view is further refracted by reader reaction. The Lover's language, not so much the language of thought as the more associative language of conversation, invites reader response. By partly talking to himself, partly addressing an individual listener, and partly appealing for sanction to a metaphysical system, the Lover forces the reader to view his position from those varying perspectives. Browning exposes us to the interior of a value system with which we partially identify and yet whose very sanity we question, thus altering our viewpoint from that of curious bystander to that of confidant, then double, perhaps psychiatrist, even God.

Illuminating and yet further complicating the whole spectrum of the poem's point of view is the evaluative control of Browning himself. That control, usually imperceptible, becomes pointed in the poet's acute application of dramatic irony: "As a shut bud that holds a bee," for example, portrays the projected hostility of the Lover as tellingly as it describes the grotesqueness of Porphyria's condition. Browning's multifaceted viewpoint subtly explicates through ironic refraction of perspective.

But the ultimate control of the poem, the power which prevents the centrifugal force of its complex and shifting points of view and tensions from im-

pelling it off the page, is focus in time. The poem's conceptual heart is an attempt by Porphyria's Lover to prolong the ideal moment, "that moment" when "she was mine, mine, fair / Perfectly pure and good." The very line, dragging its spondaic feet, seems loath to pass. From the initial time reference—"early" in the first line—to the "now" and "yet" and "all night long" which in the final three lines become static equivalencies, the entire movement of the poem is a striving to stay the external moment.

The structure itself is almost graphically temporal; the poem contains exactly sixty lines comprising a clocklike twelve stanzas. Its iambic tetrameter beats as regularly as a metronome. Concern with transcending time is emphatically stressed. "For ever," in line 25, stands at the climax of one of the five-line stanzas, receiving the full force of its triplet of rhyme and standing out further as the only feminine rhyme in the entire poem, its additional syllable propelling its rhythmically out of time. Thus the formal weight of this central line, "and give herself to me for ever," underscores the fervor of the Lover's longing for an eternal present with Porphyria. The Lover, like the poem, strives to extend infinitely "that moment she was mine."

And he succeeds. His strangulation of Porphyria terminates time not only for her, but for himself. Upon attaining the finality of "that moment," the poem strives for stasis. Terminal punctuation of clauses doubles in frequency, braking the syntax. A crescendo of "again"s, "once more"s, "as before"s, and "still"s hallmarks the timelessness of the "all night long" in which Porphyria and her Lover "have not stirred" and God has indicated His eternal changelessness by not saying a word. The poem has become a paradigm of the artistic paradox of attempting to enrich life by arresting it in static form.

Thus Browning molds "Porphyria's Lover" into a lens of a moment, focusing the entire raw power of his poetry through that moment. It is the intensity of the temporal focus which unites the disparate moods and methods of the poem, concentrating otherwise dissipative forces into an explosive proximity. The moment is everything; the moment of the poem, like the Lover's endless moment, unites past and future in a perpetual present, and captures motive, action, and consequence within the framework of immediate psychology. Browning, like the Lover, succeeds in maintaining his moment by transfixing it. In that success lies the vitality of the poem. "Porphyria's Lover" is an amalgamation of structural irresolution, viewpoint wavering between nebulousness and didacticism, and psychological inconsistency wandering from objectivity to sentimentality made poetically compelling by suspension within an artistic moment.

Source: Steven C. Walker, " 'That Moment' in 'Porphyria's Lover,' " in *Studies in Browning and His Circle*, Vol. 7, No. 2, Fall 1979, pp. 70–74.

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Further Reading

Curry, S. S., *Browning and the Dramatic Monologue*, Haskell House, 1965.

Curry claims that Browning invented a new language with the dramatic monologue, which might account for why critics were slow to embrace his work.

Dupras, Joseph, "Dispatching 'Porphyria's Lover,' " in *Conversations: Contemporary Critical Theory and the Teaching of Literature*, edited by Charles Moran and Elizabeth F. Penfield, National Council of Teachers of English, 1990, pp. 179–86.

Dupras expresses the difficulties he encountered in teaching "Porphyria's Lover" to his students and explains that when a teacher forcefully determines a poem's "meaning" to other readers, the poem dies.

Pearsall, Robert Brainard, *Robert Browning*, Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1974.

Pearsall provides a straightforward account of Browning's career as a whole and attempts to say something useful or interesting about every book and every poem that Browning published.

Sutton, Max Keith, "Language as Defense in 'Porphyria's Lover,' " in *College English*, Vol. 31, No. 3, December, 1969, pp. 280–89.

Sutton shows how this poem spoken by a madman extends the reader's awareness of how the mind works and reveals what madness is like by following the speaker's train of thought.

Rusted Legacy

Adrienne Rich

1997

Adrienne Rich published "Rusted Legacy" in the literary journal *Sulfur* in 1997. The poem appeared two years later in her poetry collection *Midnight Salvage*, in which the poet declared she tried, at the end of the century, "to face the terrible with hope, in language as complex as necessary. . . . to write … for readers … finding their own salvaged beauty as I have found mine." The poems meditate on political ideas and events from the twentieth century and attempt to "salvage" hope from the fear, violence, and despair that have characterized that period of history. Like the other poems in the volume, and as with much of Rich's work since the 1960s, "Rusted Legacy" fuses the political and the personal. In the poem, the speaker looks back on political events and attitudes of another time and place and laments the decay of once powerful ideas and ideals, exploring the effect of those views on society and on her personally.

"Rusted Legacy" is an intense and difficult work, one that does not lend itself to straightforward interpretation. The poem's action is often perplexing, and the images used are obscure, rooted as they are in Rich's personal experiences. The piece seems to denounce political repression, comment on the withering of principles, and explore sexual roles, but this sense is derived not from any sustained statement or explanation by the poet but from the mood and scattered thoughts presented in the work. Rich has been faulted for her grim intellectualism and inaccessibility, and these characterizations may well be said to apply to "Rusted

Adrienne Rich

Legacy." However, for all its complexity and gloomy obscurity, the poem also bears the hallmarks of Rich's finest work, with its musicality of language and ability to elicit emotions using stark, disconcerting imagery.

Author Biography

Rich was born in 1929, in Baltimore, Maryland, to a well-to-do family. Her father was a physician, and her mother had aspirations of being a professional composer. Rich was homeschooled until the fourth grade and began to write poetry at an early age. After high school, she attended Radcliffe College, where she studied and was influenced by the work of the dominant male poets of the time: Robert Frost, T. S. Eliot, and W. H. Auden. She graduated in 1951, and that year, she published *A Change of World*, her first book of poetry, which Auden selected for the Yale Younger Poets Award and praised generously. In 1953, Rich married Alfred Conrad, a Harvard economist. Over the next six years the couple had three sons. Rich's poetry during this time, for example in her 1955 collection *The Diamond Cutters and Other Poems*, continued in the male-centered tradition she learned as an undergraduate. However, *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963) began to reflect her growing political involvement and interest in women's social and political roles. In 1966, Rich moved to New York and became involved in activities protesting the Vietnam War. Her political views became apparent in her work, and her poetic style began to change. She broke from the tight form and metrics of her early works and produced poetry characterized by greater improvisation. Examples of this change were seen in *Necessities of Life* (1966) and *Leaflets* (1969).

In 1970, Rich left Conrad, and later that year, he committed suicide. Her work continued to become increasingly political and her style more urgent. In 1974, Rich received the National Book Award for *Diving into the Wreck* but rejected it and instead wrote a statement accepting it in the name of all women. In 1976, Rich published *Twenty-One Love Poems* chronicling her lesbian relationship, which she has since explored in her other work. Rich's other books of poetry include *The Dream of a Common Language* (1978), *The Fact of a Doorframe* (1984), and *Time's Power* (1989). Over her career, Rich has also published widely in literary magazines. "Rusted Legacy," for example, first appeared in the journal *Sulfur* in 1997 before being collected in *Midnight Salvage, Poems 1995–1998* (1999).

In the early twenty-first century, Rich enjoys a reputation as one of the most distinguished American poets of her age. She is known for her commitment to liberal political causes as much as for her prolific literary output. In addition to more than sixteen volumes of poetry, she has published four books of nonfiction prose. Her work has been translated into German, Spanish, Swedish, Dutch, Hebrew, Greek, Italian, and Japanese. She has received numerous awards, including the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize, the Lenore Marshall/Nation Prize for Poetry, the Lambda Book Award, the Poet's Prize, the MacArthur Fellowship, and, the Dorothea Tanning Prize of the Academy of American Poets. In 1997, she refused the National Medal of Arts in protest of government policies that foster social inequity. She has lived in California since l984.

Poem Summary

Overview

Readers expecting a clear message, argument, or narrative from "Rusted Legacy" will be disappointed. Like many contemporary and "postmod-

ern" poems, the work pushes the limits of normal speech and communication and offers ideas that are arcane, complex, and impossible to articulate using ordinary language and linear narrative. In the poem, Rich presents a series of images that seem to be disjointed, and there is often no clear sense of how the poem hangs together. There are also what seem to be personal reflections and references that are not explained. All these elements together seem to emphasize the idea that there are, in fact, no easy responses or analyses of the situations that are referred to in the poem—or to life in general. What seems to be suggested by this style of writing is that poetry is another complex human response to events and attitudes and to distill these experiences and ideas into neat, digestible, and pithy statements gets no closer to a genuine exploration or comprehension of them. Thus, the poem makes the reader work hard, to think about what is going on, to make connections, to call up emotions, to go down a number of different avenues of thought, even to admit to being confused in order to be engaged with the poem. Even so, it seems that the reader will be left wondering about many of the references made and what the poem ultimately "means." However, that one does not "get" the poem fully does not indicate a failure on either the part of the poet or the reader. The experience of the poem itself is rewarding, and part of the strength of this particular work is its ability to elicit highly individualized responses and interpretations from readers. The following "summary" of the poem, it should be kept in mind, is also but one response to the poem, and there are other ideas lurking within it that will be summoned up by other readers, which might yield conflicting but equally legitimate interpretations of the work.

Title

The plot or action of "Rusted Legacy" is difficult to decipher, but the title gives some indication of what the poem's main theme or intention might be. A "legacy" is something (often a gift) that is transmitted from the past. This legacy or thing from the past that the poet speaks of is "rusted," indicating that it is in some state of disrepair or decay. It was presumably once strong (as suggested by the metal imagery), but the years have diminished its sturdiness and shine. Reading through the rest of the poem, it seems likely that the "legacy" the poet speaks of is an ideological one, a set of beliefs or ideals that were once vibrant and powerful but are no longer the force they once were. Various images in the text of the poem suggest that the poet is looking back at a place and time in which she (and others) held certain ideals dear. Her opponents (those in authority) did not embrace her views, but they were important to the poet and her associates. There is also a suggestion that the ideals held by those she opposed (the authority figures) have similarly decayed. Various ideas or ideals from the past, then, are now seen by the poet to have degenerated; the legacy of that previous time is "rusted," and the poem meditates on and grieves this state of affairs.

Media Adaptations

- The Academy of American Poets maintains a Rich web page at http://www.poets.org/poets/ with links to other interesting sites.
- The audiobook *Adrienne Rich (Voice of the Poet)* (2002) features Rich reading from and talking about her work.

Stanza 1

The first stanza opens by asking the reader to "Imagine a city." The reader is thus brought in immediately as an active participant in the poem. It is not clear from the first line whether the city the poet speaks of is a real city or imaginary city. The poet then describes what seem to be very personal experiences from life in that city. Still addressing the reader, she says that in that city nothing a person does is forgiven, and one's past deeds stay with a person like a scar or tattoo. But, strangely and paradoxically, while deeds are not forgiven, they are forgotten. The sense conveyed is that the reader has an intensely personal connection to the city and that the city is some sort of authority figure over her, a parent-figure perhaps.

The images used in the stanza are strange and suggest a number of possibilities. The poet says that almost everything is forgotten but then proceeds to list a series of memorable events. There is a deer flattened after it leapt across the highway looking for food. This seems to be an image that suggests wide-eyed innocence and a sudden, violent death

that was unexpected in the course of doing something as basic as looking for sustenance. The poet then refers to "the precise reason for the shaving of the confused girl's head." This might be a reference to the shaving of young women's heads in France during World War II as a sign or "brand" (echoing the references to "scar" and "tattoo" earlier in the poem) that they were "collaborators" who had relationships with German officers. In the latter part of the twentieth century, the shaved head of a woman often symbolized the fact that such branding of women did not recognize the complexity of female political and social roles in society. Thus, a shaved head for a woman is a sign of political protest, and perhaps here, the poet suggests a young woman (herself?) who is serious about her political beliefs but also confused about them in some way. The image that follows of the young boys pushing frogs is another violent image, but one that is strangely universal. All young boys, it seems, kill things for pleasure in this way. This of course makes the violent act no less disturbing.

The poet returns to talking about the city. It is a city that does not remember but yet is intent on retributions, or vengeance, for what has been done. What is the city intent on retributions for? Perhaps the political ideologies that it did not agree with, the defiance of authority on the part of those whose deeds adhere to them like scars? The poet again asks the reader to imagine the city, this time its physical appearance (its architecture) and political organization (its governance), including the men and women in power. Then, after asking the reader to imagine this city and presenting what seem to be references that are personal to *her*, the poet talks to the reader as though the reader has been a part of that city: "tell me if it is not true you still / live in that city." The poet and the reader seem to have merged into one person. The poet is remembering a city or place (or a state of mind) whose ideology was contrary to hers. It is a city that is at once imaginary and also a place or a state of mind that the poet has never left.

Stanza 2

The city the poet asks the reader to imagine in the second stanza seems to be the same city but it has very different characteristics. The imagery in this stanza is, among other things, religious. The poet asks the reader to imagine a city that is partitioned. This could be a city anywhere—in the Middle East (Jerusalem), where Israelis and Palestinians are forced to live in separate settlements, or in the United States, where many cities are divided so distinctly between sections where rich and poor reside. The city is described too in surreal terms. Temples (religious gathering places) and telescopes (suggesting that there is no privacy, that the residents are being observed constantly), the poet says, "used to probe the stormy codices." Again, the latter is a religious image (a codex is a religious or spiritual law; "codices" is the plural form of the noun). It is not clear whether "used" indicates the past tense or whether the temples and telescopes *are* used to probe the stormy codices. Then too, the idea of "stormy codices" is puzzling.

The city is "blind" in some sense, as it is "brailling through fog"; the use of the noun "braille" (the script used by blind readers) as a verb together with "fog" offers another strange picture. The city, it seems, is a place of confusion and political repression (suggested by the "twisted wire" so common in prisoner-of-war camps). It is dark but there is something sensuous and inviting (its "velvet dialectic") about it, perhaps in a false way. The city is corrupted, its rivers the same as its sewers. There is a great deal of water imagery in this stanza. The poet talks about art's "unchartered aquifers," indicating perhaps that the city has neglected this aspect of civil life. The source or "springhead" of the water is in municipal gardens that are left unlocked at night. All this water imagery, much of it mysterious, seems to indicate a city that is deluged and out of control. Water is normally cleansing and rejuvenating, but this water is not. The water might also indicate tears.

The second half of the stanza shifts in tone, and suddenly the poet seems to be transported to a very particular time and place. She is "under the pines" (apparently in one of the city's unlocked municipal parks) at night while "arrests" are going on. She is fingering glass beads that she has strung. The beads (and arrests) might be an indication that this is the 1960s (when many young people wore beads), and the poet is at some type of protest or demonstration. That she is fingering beads (like a rosary) also reinforces the religious overtones of the stanza. She says she was transfixed from head to groin (which is unusual because this means her legs can move), and she wanted to save what she could—but there is no indication of what this might be. Then she says that "they" (with little clue as to who "they" are) brought little glasses of water into the dark park. They did this before they "gutted" the villages. Perhaps "they" are the authorities (police), who after their somewhat human gesture of bringing water for the demonstrators proceeded to destroy and do violence in response to the demon-

strations. Then the poet ends the stanza by saying that "they" too were trying to save what they could. Maybe what she is suggesting here is that both the protestors and the authorities were acting according to their beliefs, each group doing what they had to do. The stanza ends echoing the last line of the first stanza, asking the reader if this is not the same city. Once again, it seems that the poet is looking back at the past but recognizes that in some ways things have not changed very much at all.

Stanza 3

The poet now moves to speaking entirely in the first person, and it is clear that the city is a place she knows intimately. She says she has forced herself to come back to this place like a daughter who must put her mother's house in order—presumably because her "mother," the city, is old and diseased or dead. So then perhaps the "rusted legacy" that the title refers to is the legacy of the city, which is now decayed and no longer what it used to be. It is up to the daughter to clean up the ruins left of her family history. The poet says she returns to her mother's house, where she needs gloves to handle the medicinals (that kept the mother going even though she was ill) and disease that pervade the house. She wonders if she is up to the task. She is an "accomplished criminal," she says but does not know if she can accomplish justice here. This seems to imply that her criminal activity is not really criminal but politically subversive. Perhaps she is an activist who has moved on to other things and issues and now returns to the place of her past. It could be her past "deeds" were ineffectual but not "forgiven," and now it is time to make positive changes to the city. The poet says she does not know whether she can do it, whether she can tear "the old wedding sheets" (family heirlooms, intimate treasures of one's past) and "clean" the place as she needs to. There is a strong suggestion in this stanza that the poet is a person of certain political convictions who returns to the place of her youth, a place that she both loves and despises. The city she lived in has decayed, but the change she fought for has never made an impact on the city. She has come back to do something positive for the city, but she is not sure that she can do it.

There is water imagery in this stanza as well. The poet describes herself as stone with water pleating across her. Again, the water here might be tears. The idea of stone pleating across water also implies change that is extremely gradual (water eventually erodes and wears away stone). The poet seems to lament the fact that she is so unmoved by returning to the city and her mother; she is a faithless daughter "like stone." But she has water pleating across her, implying that perhaps she can do something positive and make the changes that will make some difference to the city. Again, the stanza ends with the refrain echoed from the first stanza, as the poet asks if this is the same city. The city is the same, but in many ways it seems very different since it is in such a state of decay.

Stanza 4

In the final stanza, the poet at first refers to herself in the first person but then makes references in the third person, using "she" and "her." In the course of the poem, the poet has gone from being a shadowy presence who speaks to the reader, who then merges with the reader, who takes on a distinct personal past and becomes an "I," and now seems to look at herself in a distanced and disengaged manner. She asks if this "I" must lie scabbed with rust. The title of the poem comes to mind, and it now appears that the poet herself embodies the "rusted legacy" referred to. Perhaps what she is saying is that her political ideology and deeds that once seemed so important are decayed and seem ineffectual. Thus she is like the city; she had strong beliefs that have degenerated, and in a sense, she too has decayed. The poet is crammed with memories of this place, this city where, again, most things are forgotten. There is no one left in this city, she says, to "go around gathering the full dissident story." It sounds like she is the only one (of those who were arrested, or in the park, perhaps?) of her associates who has returned to the city and can tell the truth about what has happened in the past. Perhaps all her youthful associates have left the city (and the political causes) they held so dear when they were young, and she is the only one who still is fighting for justice. The poet says her hands and shoulders are rusting, her lips stone (indicating she is silenced in some way). Again there seems to be some hope for change as there are tears "leaching down" from her eyesockets (a disturbing image that seems to imply the tears are coming from deep within her). The water in her tears again might be the force of change, the power that slowly reshapes the stone of herself and the city into something of hope and renewal. She asks if her tears are for "one self" (herself) only. No, she concludes, her eyesockets, her tears are for the whole city. Each "encysts" it; each forms a sort of membrane or pouch around the city. This is, again, a disturbing and graphic image, but the idea seems to be that even from horror, violence, bitterness, regret, and

Topics for Further Study

- Research the work of other contemporary poets who write about politics. How do their approaches and styles compare to or differ from Rich's?
- Explore the phenomenon of the "Baby Boomer" generation, which was very involved in radical politics in the 1960s but has now moved away from political concerns and has embraced a more consumer-oriented social attitude. In what ways, if any, does this phenomenon connect to Rich's poem?
- Compare Rich's "city" in "Rusted Legacy" to other imaginary political cities that have been described in the Western tradition, for example the cities in Plato's *Republic* and Thomas More's *Utopia*. Are there any similarities in the descriptions of these political cities?
- The "city" Rich describes might be a figurative and not a literal one. If it is figurative, what might it represent?

mourning of a troubled past can there spring possibilities for positive change.

Themes

The Personal and the Political

"Rusted Legacy" is a work with political themes, but those themes are suggested not by any sustained action or statements in the poem but by different images scattered throughout the four stanzas. The images presented for the most part are intimate, implying the close connection between personal attitudes and events and political ideas. The poet invites the reader from the beginning to "Imagine a city," and this city is not an abstract, ideal city (like the philosopher Plato's city in *The Republic* or the theologian St. Augustine's city in *The City of God*) but what seems to be a very real, recognizable place with deer being killed on highways, where there are sewers and parks, and where there is architecture, governance, and people in power. The intimate connection between the poet and the city, the personal and the political, is emphasized by the poet as she thinks of the city as a mother to whom she returns when the former is dying.

Other images reinforce the link between the personal and the political. The image of the "confused girl" seems to suggest the idea of political statements made by women who shave their heads to point out that the complexity of women's political and social roles in society are most often not fully appreciated. But it is significant that it is a very particular girl (perhaps herself) that the poet refers to; she is not merely a symbol but a very real—but "forgotten"—girl who is part of the city. The poet refers to herself specifically beginning in the second stanza, explaining that she has a past in the city. This point becomes even clearer in the third stanza as she says she has forced herself to come back to the city to put her mother's house "in order." The poet uses another intimate image in the third stanza when she wonders if she can tear the old "wedding sheets" and use them as cleaning rags to put her mother's house in order.

The sense conveyed in much of the poem is that the "rusted legacy" the poet is talking about is an ideological legacy, ideas from the past that have somehow become corrupted and are in a state of decay. At the end of the poem, the poet herself becomes these political ideas, as she is the one who is "scabbed with rust." That is, within her, the personal and the political are completely fused. Like the other themes and ideas in the poem, to try to spell out exactly what Rich "means" when she suggests that the personal and political are intertwined is a difficult task. Perhaps she is calling to her reader's attention, among other things, that politics pervade life at every level, that personal actions determine what happens in the world, and that emotional responses can provide hope for positive change even in a repressive and troubled political environment.

The Corruption of Political Ideals

The image of the city in "Rusted Legacy" offers a physical image of a place where the ideas of the past are in a state of decay. At first (in the first stanza), the city seems to be the same city it always was; it has the same architecture and governance that it had in the past, the same men and women in power. By the second stanza, it seems that the city was always in some state of degeneration and corruption, for example, its sewers are the same as its rivers. In the third stanza, there is the stark image

of the city as an old woman who is sick and has been kept alive through the use of "medicinals." The city in one way does not seem to have changed from the past to the present day, but in another way, it is a very different place now than it once was. There seems to be a suggestion that political ideas, positions, or outlooks in one sense stay the same but in another they change a great deal over the course of time. That is, the vibrancy of those ideas becomes old and dull as time passes.

The poem seems to suggest that political ideals of different kinds have corrupted over time. The city, which perhaps embodies the status quo or dominant ideology of American government (with its mainstream values of liberal democracy and suspicion of "leftist" or radical politics), was once powerful and strong but now it is like an old woman who relies on medicines to keep her alive. The political ideals of the poet/speaker seem also to have decayed over time. The poet says that she too is scabbed with rust, so presumably her political views have also degenerated. It could be that she once tried to accomplish justice in the city by her "dissent" but that was not successful. She returns to the city years later to find that the city has decayed but so too have her own ideals, or at least that they are no longer put into practice. Her lips are stone, which indicates she no longer professes (publicly) her ideals or does what needs to be done to effect change. However, although the poet laments the fact that political ideas and ideals are in a state of decay, she holds out hope for change. The tears that come from within her (a deeply personal and emotional response to the world) seem to be a likely force with which to create change, to "put her mother's house in order," to better the city, and to make the world a better a place.

Style

Style

"Rusted Legacy" is a perplexing poem, one that uses difficult language and concepts, unusual images, and disjointed sequences of actions. It seems to move from present to past and back again but without any clear indication that this is what is happening. It is told from the point of view of a speaker/poet who addresses the reader, who provides intimate details about her own experiences, and who sometimes implies that the experiences she describes as her own are the reader's. Such basic aspects of the poem as time and point of view are not clearly delineated, and much is required of the reader to try to decipher who the poet might be, what her history is, what events she is describing, and in general what she might be trying to communicate. The overall effect of the disjointed style is one of disorder and complexity. This effect underscores the political and personal confusion in the poem, as it describes a city that forgets deeds it has not forgiven, as it explores the poet's own emotions of confusion and guilt at being a "faithless daughter."

The structure of the poem is not uniform, which again suggests disorder. The first stanza is eleven lines long, the second sixteen lines, the third ten lines, and the fourth seven lines. The poem is written in blank verse. The rhythm varies from stanza to stanza and indeed from section to section of the poem; there is no regular beat that ties it together. The only unifying element of the poem comes at the end of the first three stanzas when the poet asks the reader to "tell me" about the city and in the fourth when she says her eyesockets "encysts" the city. The repetition and focus on the nature of the city at the end of each stanza provides a loose structure to the poem, and the cryptic refrain further adds a sense of mystery and darkness to the work.

Imagery

The mood of the poem is suggested by the various disturbing and startling images that are scattered throughout. Some of the images, like that of the deer flattened on the highway, seem to have definite implications (the deer might symbolize wide-eyed innocence), but others seem to be highly personal references. The "trays with little glasses of water" the poet refers to in the second stanza, for example, seems to be something from her personal past. Some of the images recur in the poem in different forms. For example, there is a great deal of water imagery, beginning with the sewers, river, aquifers, and glasses of water in the second stanza to the water pleating across stone in the third stanza, to the poet's tears in the fourth stanza. How these images are tied together is not entirely clear, but the water at the end of the poem does seem to suggest hope for renewal and change. By using water imagery early on in the poem, the poet might be referring to possibilities for change that were not allowed to flourish or that were thwarted somehow. Again, much of the imagery in the poem is cryptic, and it is left as a challenge to the reader to read deeply and to explore possibilities of what individual references might be pointing to.

Historical Context

Rich published "Rusted Legacy" in 1997, as the century was drawing to a close. The poem is political, and although it is difficult to pinpoint particular events in the work, it clearly comments on the political legacy of the second half of the twentieth century. This is a common theme in almost all of Rich's work from the 1960s on, as the poet explores her frustrations with the status quo and the injustice she perceives in society. Indeed, Rich expresses her anger at social injustice not only in her work but also by being a vocal advocate for political change on a number of fronts, fighting for gay rights, women's rights, and economic justice. In 1997, the same year that "Rusted Legacy" was published, Rich made headlines when she refused the National Medal for the Arts, which is awarded by the White House. In a letter published by the *New York Times*, Rich wrote "I cannot accept such an award from President Clinton or this White House because the very meaning of art, as I understand it, is incompatible with the cynical politics of this administration." She further commented that she could not be celebrated by a political system that allowed such disparities between rich and poor in American society.

"Rusted Legacy" is a poem written very much in the spirit of Rich's anger at the corrupt politics of the United States at the end of the twentieth century. The poem laments the degeneration of once powerful political principles as the poet looks back and is saddened that the activism of earlier times did not elicit any lasting change. Although Rich's poem makes no specific reference to this situation, it is interesting that President Bill Clinton has been seen by many of his critics to have been a figure who once held lofty political ideals (he was known for his extremely liberal position in the 1960s and his objection to the Vietnam War) but who abandoned those notions for practical political gain—essentially so that he could have a career in mainstream politics. While Rich does not make the connection in her poem, it is ironic and significant that her public political objection to the Clinton administration in 1997 is echoed in her poem, written the same year, that mourns the decay of political ideals.

Critical Overview

Since the publication of her first book of poems in 1951, Rich has been a dominating presence in American literary circles. She is one of the most popular and influential poets of the early-twenty-first century, publishing widely and prolifically and traveling to give talks and read from her work. Each new collection she publishes is thus a literary event, and this was certainly the case with her volume *Midnight Salvage*, in which "Rusted Legacy" appeared in 1999. Although the poem had been published two years earlier in the journal *Sulfur*, it was not reviewed individually after its appearance there. Even in the voluminous reviews of *Midnight Salvage*, the poem has not received any individual critical attention. Other poems in the collection, such as "The Art of Translation" and "Midnight Salvage," have been singled out by critics as being particularly noteworthy for their daring imagery and nuanced language, but "Rusted Legacy" has not been mentioned except in passing with other poems as being one of Rich's many reflections in the volume on political repression. This might not be an indication of lack of interest in the work so much as a consequence of the difficulty of summarizing and characterizing the poem in analytic terms. Interestingly, as a collection, *Midnight Salvage* has been praised by the vast number of writers who have reviewed it, but most examinations of the work have been brief and not particularly informative. Ann K. Van Buren writing in the *Library Journal*, for example, commented that the work is "liberating in content and in form," and Janet Montefiore in the *Times Literary Supplement* called the poems "wide-ranging, untidy, and intimate." Again, the reason for the scarcity of commentary may well be the difficult and cryptic nature of the poems themselves, which do not lend themselves to straightforward interpretation or easy analysis, but which have a mysterious appeal because of the intensity of language and imagery used.

Criticism

Uma Kukathas

Kukathas is a freelance editor and writer. In this essay, Kukathas considers whether "Rusted Legacy" fails as a political poem because of its use of private rather than public language, images, and ideas.

Like most of Rich's poetry, "Rusted Legacy" is a pointedly political work. Also, as is the case with a great deal of Rich's work, it is impossible to present in the form of a coherent analysis or statement

exactly what the poem "means." The language the poet uses is difficult, her images are unusual and sometimes perplexing, and the ideas explored in the poem are hard to decipher. Indeed, paradoxically, that this undoubtedly political poem *is* political is not immediately obvious because the piece offers no overt message or ideological position of any distinct sort. Rather, actions, images, and ideas are presented and explored that have political overtones. The political nature of the poem, it might be said, is apparent while the political view being discussed in it (if there is one) is not clear at all. This is certainly unusual, as one would perhaps think that the *purpose* of a political poem is to make plain to readers a particular viewpoint that the poet holds up as more reasonable and reflective of the way the world is (or should be) than competing theories. Or at least one would expect it to explore the strengths and weaknesses of competing political doctrines. Further, it would seem that a political poem would be a public statement of some sort, written in a language that is far-reaching and accessible, that would have some universal resonance to emphasize that political and social concerns are common to all human beings. But "Rusted Legacy" meets none of these expectations. It seems to take pains to be obscure, offers no clear political point of view and is written in an intensely private style using images and ideas that appear to be part of the poet's very individualized experiences that are certainly not easily recognizable in all people at all times.

How, then, is the poem political? As noted earlier, Rich makes a number of allusions throughout the piece to political ideas and images. It seems that one of the things going on in the poem is that the poet is reflecting on her past and the thinking about the political environment in which she grew up. She opens by asking readers to "[i]magine a city" with a certain type of governance, where there are "men and … women in power." This seems to be the city of the poet's past but is also very much present in her life right now. The poet seems to be remembering incidents from her past that have taken place in the city, including her being present when people are being arrested and "villages gutted." She says she returns to the city to "accomplish justice" and is the only one left to "gather . . . the full dissident story." But these political allusions don't hang together very well to tell a coherent story. They seem to suggest that the poet has had certain experiences in the past that were politically significant to her, but why those experiences or events should be important to anyone else is not clear at all.

'Rusted Legacy' is a pointedly political work . . . [that] seems to take pains to be obscure, offers no clear political point of view, and is written in an intensely private style. . . ."

The main reason it is not clear why those experiences should be important (politically or otherwise) to others is they are provided in a context that is not public but private. Instead of situating her political experience in a larger, more recognizable context, Rich focuses on specific, private incidents that define those experiences for her. In the first stanza, the poet talks about the city as though she knows it intimately (she speaks with a certain amount of familiarity and bitterness when she explains that the city forgets but does not forgive, that it is intent on retributions) and offers a series of three images. The first image, of a deer being flattened on a highway, is bizarre but recognizable and thus "public" in some way. It seems to suggest innocence and naiveté, perhaps of a political sort. The second image is of a "confused girl" having her head shaved. This image could, again, be political if one thinks of women with shaved heads as representing the unappreciated complexity of women's social-political roles. But that this is what this "confused girl" stands for is not that obvious. It is also not clear whether the girl might be the poet herself. The image does not seem to be sufficiently public because what it is supposed to represent is (at least for most readers) so hard to unravel. The third image, of boys punishing frogs, is again universal and thus public, but it is hard to say how the image fits in with the other two and with the stanza as a whole. The images in the second stanza are even more obscure. The poet is, on the one hand, at a very particular place ("under the pines") but there is no clue provided as to where this might be. There are arrests going on, but what are the arrests for? Who is the "they" being referred to? Why do they bring "little glasses of water"? What were the poet and "they" trying to "save"?

What Do I Read Next?

- *Arts of the Possible: Essays and Conversations* (2001) features essays by Rich written from the 1970s through the 1990s and shows how her thinking about poetry and politics has changed over time.
- *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (1999) by the philosopher Richard Rorty discusses the shameful incidents of the United States' political past and urges that what is needed is a reform movement that can work positively to turn the country into a better nation.
- Rich's collection *Fox: Poems 1998–2000* (2001) contains more work that focuses on politics and shows her frustration with the injustice in society.
- *What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics* (1994) contains journals, letters, dreams, memories, and poems by Rich that reflect on how poetry and politics enter and influence American life.

These unexplained images and ideas work (or don't work) together to present a confusing picture. The experiences described or alluded to are important to the poet, but in what way? They seem to tell the reader nothing about her political beliefs or point of view. Instead of making the political situation or governance or power structure she is talking about more recognizable to readers, they make it less so. The events related seem not to be offered to prompt in the reader certain shared ideas or feelings or to communicate commonly understood or appreciated human experiences. They seem, in essence, to be too completely private and personal to be fitting for a public, political poem. The political allusions do not present an accessible, public message that strikes the reader as being "universal" in an important way.

All these features of "Rusted Legacy" would suggest that it does indeed fail as a political poem. But does it? There is good case for saying that it does not. It might be that the expectations and characteristics of a political poem offered earlier might simply be too stringent and conservative, and it could be that Rich is simply offering a political poem of a different, maybe radical, sort. Rich could be suggesting in both form and content of her work that a political poem does not have to be "public" or to have an overt message. In fact, she could be suggesting that politics is much more complex than can be expressed in statements of ideological or doctrinal principles; it is an integral part of human experience that loses its richness, complexity, and power when reduced to slogans and statements of beliefs. One of Rich's intentions in the poem seems to be to point out how the political and the personal are connected. The most striking, and certainly the most "universal," "public," and recognizable image she uses is that of the city as the mother to which she returns as a "faithless daughter" after some years of absence. There is a sense that the political past the poet is reflecting on is significant to her not because of the ideologies involved but for a much more personal reason. Deep feelings are generated (tears leach down from her eyesockets) when the poet remembers the past, and it seems that an emotional rather than a rational response is what is required if the poet is to "accomplish justice," effect political change, and "put her mother's house in order."

"Rusted Legacy" is certainly a difficult and confusing work. But its difficulty and obscurity are not necessary failings but rather might be seen as carefully chosen devices used to communicate a deeper message about politics. Rich presents a series of disjointed images that are obviously rooted in some personal experiences she has had. She remembers the political past not in terms of particular ideologies, slogans, positions, or statements of beliefs. Rather it is a part of her emotional life. The political, she seems to be saying, is not so much about public views as it is about people's personal commitments and relationships, about how they see the world not as public beings but as members of a greater human family who love and disappoint and hurt each other. Politics is bound up in everyday life, and to try to offer some statement about how the world is or should be governed does not do justice to how deeply politics is a part of human experience.

"Rusted Legacy" does not fail as a political poem because the political is not necessarily only (or primarily) something public but something deeply private. That Rich uses the image of a

mother and daughter is especially significant because she seems to be saying that the political is intensely private, intimate, and bound up with one's particular, often incommunicable experiences. These experiences are even more recognizably "universal" than more public ones because they form the greater part of human existence and are central to human emotional and mental life. The other obscure images Rich uses in the poem might not be familiar to readers, but they are part of the poet's political past in a way that is meaningful to her. The poem explores a public subject in a most private way—using private language, images, and ideas—because politics is meaningful only insofar as it is connected with real, intimate, human experiences that sometimes cannot be communicated or understood but are for that reason no less "universal."

Source: Uma Kukathas, Critical Essay on "Rusted Legacy," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Pamela Steed Hill

Hill is the author of a poetry collection, has published widely in literary journals, and is an editor for a university publications department. In the following essay, Hill contends that Rich saves her poem from the fate of many of her politically didactic works by using lush imagery and language that is more poetic than preachy.

When Adrienne Rich is able to refrain from man-bashing and obsessing on male violence against women, when she can put aside overt political propagandizing and social injustice tirades, and when she steps back from using her lesbianism as an in-your-face tool for provoking the status quo, her poetry is all the better for it. In spite of the fact that Rich's fame, or infamy, is founded on her tendency to dwell on these very subjects, no scholar or general reader can deny that she has produced some of the most arresting imagery and unique poetic visions of anyone writing in the contemporary United States. One of her more recent poems, "Rusted Legacy," is evidence of it. This poem proves that what one does simply with *language* can make a remarkable difference in determining what is just rhetorical fodder and what is truly a message worth receiving.

The concern for *place* is a major component of Rich's poetry, and often it turns out that the place in question is the speaker's own body. While there may be nothing inherently misleading about this premise in verse, Rich frequently lingers on the intimate, personal self to the point of overkill. She has long been noted for insisting that the personal is inevitably political, and these two elements serve as vital inspiration for her. As a result, they tend to fuel each other throughout much of her work. In *Modern American Women Writers*, critic Harriet Davidson suggests that "Rich's emphasis on 'location' keeps her tied to the material world and away from the temptations of philosophical idealism and transcendence that tend to obscure the material conditions of different people's lives." This may be partially true, but the poet is no stranger to philosophizing in verse and using her publications as political platforms. Davidson addresses Rich's common use of the physical being as a "location" in saying that "The body's world is in history, in places, in discourses, a world we cannot escape or control." This theory is probably on the mark as far as understanding Rich's penchant for linking personal life to politics and, therefore, to history and society in general. But in "Rusted Legacy" the reader, for the most part, is spared too much intimate exposure and too much ideological ranting in favor of provocative imagery and objective accounting. Certainly, place is central to the poem's context, but, here, the location is not the speaker's body, but a city. That alone helps make the poem more palatable than many of Rich's goading, didactic works.

> *Luckily for this poem, its good parts are lengthy enough to withstand a brief bad stanza. And those good parts are made so by the strong imagery they contain and the intriguing presentation of language."*

Likely since the first poet put pen—or quill—to paper, verse writers have endured the precarious burden of assuring their art's credibility, especially in the face of so many who would cast it off as mere fluff or sentimental poppycock. While history has shown that the naysayers have at times been justified in their skepticism, it has also shown that

good poetry has served the populace well in explaining the unexplainable, reaching depths of the mind and soul that may otherwise have remained untouched, and in stirring the intellect to new levels of thought and deliberation. In essence, poetry has been and still is a valuable component of human culture. But what must be maintained to assure its credibility is uniqueness and compelling presentation. The metaphors and the specific details of "Rusted Legacy" make it worth reading. They are related by an objective speaker—Rich herself—describing what is *outside* her own mind and body. The "city" she chronicles is harsh and unforgiving, and it pays no mind to its victims—the "deer flattened leaping a highway for food," the "confused girl's head" that was shaved, apparently in a mental institution, and "the frogs" bearing whatever cruelty "small boys" can weigh upon them. These are things most people are familiar with, and yet they probably do not come to mind until someone points them out. Rich's message is critical: it is easy to forget the suffering of the innocent when they are overshadowed by the mindless machine of "governance" and "the men and the women in power."

The poem becomes even stronger metaphorically in the second stanza. Regardless of what city or cities are referred to, one knows for sure that these are towns with troubled histories, towns that the poet lived in or visited long enough to witness social unrest among the citizens and a frequently severe response from the government. Rich is eloquent in her depiction of an evidently dismal scene—the city is "divorced from its hills," and "temples and telescopes" have played a role in breaking down the codes of would-be revolutionaries and dissidents. Perhaps the city in the second stanza is Rome, which Rich visited as a young woman. But this idea is downplayed as though to emphasize that the specific place is not as important as understanding the condition of urban life generally and symbolically. The word "brailling" adds a wonderful touch to keep the idea of codes and underground operations and government probes alive. Since it is spelled with two *l*'s, one must assume the word is simply the verb form of Braille, a type of code used by the blind. But the phrase "a city brailling through fog" reminds one of the word "brail" (spelled with one *l*), a nautical term for the nets that one uses to haul in fish. This definition still cleverly perpetuates notions of dissident behavior and how those involved often become trapped in the nets of government crackdowns and investigations. Rich enhances the image with "thicket and twisted wire," again implying a world of secret networks and a web of revolutionary activity.

All of that metaphorical bounty is contained in only the first four lines of the second stanza of "Rusted Legacy." There is much more. As a self-professed follower of Karl Marx (the nineteenth-century German economist and political philosopher), Rich often explores the Marxist theory of dialectics—the endeavor to reach a solution to a problem by pitting opposing forces against each other in a series of questions, arguments, and answers. For Marx, and perhaps for Rich, the ultimate use of dialectics is in the concept of class struggle, in which the fight would lead to less distinction among citizens in society and to a communist economy. But in "Rusted Legacy," "night's velvet dialectic" is a strikingly poetic way of describing how sewers can be rivers and rivers "art's unchartered aquifers" whose springhead opens into yet another possible metaphor, a fountain in a public garden. Water is an important symbol in this poem, both for its role as a source or a beginning and as a substance that can cause other materials to break down, an idea implied later in the poem. Here, Rich uses it as a transport, so to speak, to move the poem from a present city she asks the reader to imagine back to a city she recalls being in "while the arrests were going on." The sewer waters of underground activity give way, metaphorically, to the garden fountains, which, in turn, lead Rich's memory to the "trays with little glasses of cold water" offered to the revolutionaries before they were detained by police or military personnel. As usual, Rich's point is political: governments are oppressive, and even helpless little villages are not safe from the big, trampling boots of capitalists. The poem is saved from overt political philosophizing simply by its admirable poetics. Rich makes nice use of the water metaphor, allowing it to guide both herself and the reader on a journey from the present to a historically significant moment (at least, in the poet's mind) and back to the present: "tell me if this is not the same city."

True to her contention that the personal is political and that poetry is a vehicle for exploring the two together, Rich moves "Rusted Legacy" into the intimate arena of her own life before closing. While the third stanza concentrates on mother-daughter allusions, incorporating both the personal ("I have forced myself to come back like a daughter / required to put her mother's house in order") and the political ("Accomplished criminal I've been but / can I accomplish justice here?"), it also continues

the water metaphor. Likely, it also explains the title of the poem. It is no secret that Rich's relationship with her parents was strained, at best, and, therefore, it is no surprise that she describes herself as "Faithless daughter / like stone." But water, in the form of tears this time, is also present, and the idea that enough water can erode stone, taking advantage of its porous nature and exposing its vulnerability. Apparently, even a hard-hearted daughter has her weaknesses. Water does something else too. It aids the growth of rust, and even the toughest, hardest of metals is susceptible to it. By portraying herself as "scabbed with rust," the poet exposes her own vulnerability through metaphor—perhaps softening the recognition of a dubious legacy.

It is unfortunate that some poets go beyond points where they should have ended. That is, they take a poem past its effective stopping point to belabor what does not need to be belabored. Rich does this with "Rusted Legacy," a poem that is otherwise provocative and intellectually stimulating. In the last stanza, after describing herself as "scabbed with rust," she falters into self-pity and sentimentality. There is a weak attempt to make another political statement in descrying the fact that there is "no one left / to go around gathering the full dissident story" (presumably, her own), but it carries little weight on which to end the poem. Probably the last two lines of "Rusted Legacy" actually reveal what is wrong with most of the last stanza: the tears are "for one self only." Although the final statement, "each encysts a city," may try to reconnect the personal to the political or social, it rings too much of pathos and is too overworked to be persuasive. Even the seldom used verb "encysts" is an obvious attempt at drama, but one without payoff.

Luckily for this poem, its *good* parts are lengthy enough to withstand a brief bad stanza. And those good parts are made so by the strong imagery they contain and the intriguing presentation of language. One who is familiar enough with Rich's work understands why it has been both loved and hated by critics and the reading public. When her poetry exists solely as a platform to convey a fervent political or social statement, the language is generally hateful and flat, as well as inflammatory. For this reason, some people consider Rich more an activist or feminist than a poet. But when her work conveys her messages—albeit controversial and militant—with attractive metaphors and powerful visual details, it demonstrates that she is indeed a *poet* in the best sense of the word. Asked by critic Rachel Spence about the current direction of her poetry, in an interview included in Rich's *Arts of the Possible: Essays and Conversations*, Rich said, "I have thought recently that my poetry exposes the scarring of the human psyche under the conditions of a runaway, racist capitalism. But that's because my psyche is also scarred by these conditions." This analysis of her own poetry may get at the root of why she has turned out numerous questionable works in the field of poetry. But "Rusted Legacy" is one of Rich's good poems, and it need not be diminished by any that came before or after it.

Source: Pamela Steed Hill, Critical Essay on "Rusted Legacy," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

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Smart and Final Iris

James Tate

1986

"Smart and Final Iris" appears in James Tate's collection *Reckoner*, published in 1986, and is reprinted in his *Selected Poems* (1991). Though known primarily for his playful, often hallucinatory lyrics in which his speakers stumble about in a world of bizarre characters and events, Tate addresses socio-political subjects in his poems as well, highlighting the ways in which reality is often more absurd and dreamlike than dreams. "Land of Little Sticks, 1945," for example, the opening poem from *Constant Defender* (1983), mythically depicts the moment when the first atomic bombs were dropped, and suggests that the world will never be the same. Like "Land of Little Sticks, 1945," "Smart and Final Iris" addresses the possibility of nuclear annihilation and the ways in which that possibility affects the human imagination. In twenty short lines, Tate poetically describes the absurdity of the Pentagon's attempt to account for various scenarios resulting from nuclear war. He does this by turning the military's own practice of using silly code names for violent operations and outcomes against itself, in the process showing the insufficiency of language to adequately represent a catastrophe like nuclear war. Tate draws on readers' knowledge of popular culture to write this serious but funny poem.

Author Biography

James Vincent Tate was born in Kansas City, Missouri, in 1943, in the middle of World War II. Tate's father, Samuel Vincent Appleby, was a pilot who was reported missing in action while on a bombing run over Germany in his B-17. Tate, who never met his father, was raised by his mother, Betty Jean Whitsitt. The title piece of his prize-winning Yale Younger Poets collection of poems, *The Lost Pilot* (1967), captures the poet's sense of the loss of his dead father. Themes of loss, absence, and imminent catastrophe pervade much of Tate's work. Tate is also fascinated with war, which he explores in "Smart and Final Iris," "Land of Little Sticks, 1945," and other poems.

Tate began writing poetry at 17, often composing in a trance-like state. Though he read and admired modernist poets William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens, Tate maintains that neither influenced him, and that it is difficult to name any direct influences on his writing—although he will admit to being a jazz aficionado, and a life-long student of popular culture and human nature. In 1965, he graduated from Kansas State College, and in 1967 he took a master of fine arts degree from the University of Iowa's prestigious Writer's Workshop, where he studied with poet Donald Justice, among others. In 1971, after teaching at Columbia University and the University of California, Berkeley, Tate joined the English department at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, where he remains today.

From the moment Tate appeared on the scene, critics have characterized his poetry as improvisational, surreal, bizarre, absurd, and singular. Though some have faulted his poetry for being little more than verbal antics, most have recognized Tate's original voice and see his poetry as part of a process of spiritual questing and self-invention.

Tate seems to agree with them, to a point. In his introduction to *Best American Poetry of 1997*, Tate writes, "What we want from poetry is to be moved, to be moved from where we now stand. We don't just want to have our ideas or emotions confirmed."

The larger poetry world seems to agree with him. Tate's peers have awarded him many of the literary world's top honors, including a National Institute of Arts and Letters award for poetry in 1974; Guggenheim and National Endowment for the Arts fellowships in 1976 and 1980, respectively; the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1992, for *Selected Poems*; and the National Book Award for poetry in 1994, for *Worshipful Company of Fletchers*. Tate was also awarded the $100,000 Tanning Prize from the Academy of American Poets in 1995. He has authored some thirty books and chapbooks of poetry, from presses small and large.

James Tate

Poem Text

Pentagon code
For end of world
Is *rural paradise,*
If plan fails
It's *rural paradise*

For losses under
100 million, *a trip*
on the wayward bus

For a future of mutants,
bridal parties collide

World famine is
a plague of beatniks

First strike and
I sniff your nieces
I fall to pieces
Get hell out . . .

A madman comes,
one of those babies
the further you kick it
the bigger it gets.

Media Adaptations

- In 1992, New Letters on the Air released an untitled audiocassette of Tate reading his poems.
- The Academy of American Poets has a website on Tate at http://www.poets.org/poets/poets.cfm?prmID=71 with biographical information and links to a few poems.

Poem Summary

Lines 1–5

Tate's title, "Smart and Final Iris," refers to the name of a warehouse grocery chain that operates over 214 stores in California, Arizona, Nevada, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Florida, and Mexico. The name is derived from the company's founders, Jim Smart and Hildane Final. Iris is the name of the company's private brand label introduced in 1895. In 1953, after acquiring its leading competitor, Haas, Baruch, and Co., Smart and Final became Smart & Final Iris Co. The obscurity of the title makes it a code of sorts because readers have to figure out what it has to do with the poem. This tactic makes sense because the poem concerns itself with the idea of code names and what they represent.

The Pentagon is the building in Arlington County, Virginia, near Washington, D.C., that houses the United States Department of Defense and all four branches of the military—Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines. It is also one of the world's largest office buildings. But "Pentagon" is often used to refer to the U.S. military in general.

The first line refers to the Pentagon's practice of giving code names to military operations and scenarios. For example, during the 1950s and 1960s, the United States Airborne Alert Program, which kept up to a dozen nuclear-armed bombers airborne 24 hours a day to deter a possible Soviet surprise attack, was variously called "Head Start," "Round Robin," and "Chrome Dome." Tate satirizes this practice by imagining what the Pentagon's code words would be for the end of the world, if Pentagon military plans for nuclear war fail. The phrase is ironic because there would be no paradise in the aftermath of a war. The word "rural" alludes to the fact that cities would be the primary targets and bombed first. By repeating the phrase "rural paradise," clarifying it the second time, Tate delays the ironic effect, showing his adroitness with comic timing.

Lines 6–8

In this stanza, Tate again satirizes the Pentagon's naming of horrific scenarios of mass destruction. Military bureaucracies are often criticized for using cost-benefit analysis to develop war strategies and to calculate acceptable numbers for the loss of human life. The phrase, "a trip on the wayward bus," conjures up associations of carefree, serendipitous travel, and the image of Volkswagen buses of the 1960s.

Lines 9–12

In these stanzas, Tate first presents the image of a "future of mutants" resulting from a nuclear war. His code for such a scenario, "bridal parties collide," is even more bizarre than his previous codes, and suggests the drama, comedy, and confusion at weddings, and the promise of children often resulting from them. Many of the children born to survivors of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings were deformed because of the radiation their mothers experienced from the atomic blasts. The phrase also calls up images of monsters and the walking dead, popularized in films such as *Dawn of the Dead* and *Night of the Living Dead*. The link between the code and what it signifies is comical in the next stanza because Tate plays with the idea of beatniks as impoverished artists who are frequently hungry. The word beatnik is often used as a derisive term for members of the Beat generation of the 1950s, a social and literary movement whose members abhorred conventional society and sought spiritual enlightenment through jazz, drugs, sex, and the practice of Eastern religion including Zen Buddhism. Beats were also the precursors to the hippies of the 1960s and 1970s, who shared many of the same beliefs. To have a "plague" of them is doubly derisive.

Lines 13–16

In this stanza, the absurdity of assigning code names for scenarios of nuclear holocaust and of Tate's own poem comes to a head. "First strike" refers to the military strategy of initiating nuclear war. First strike was a viable option in the Pentagon during the cold war. The idea behind such a

Topics For Further Study

- Tate has written other poems on the horrors of nuclear war. Compare his poem "Land of Little Sticks, 1945" from his collection *Constant Defender* with "Smart and Final Iris." What are the differences and similarities in how they describe scenarios for nuclear annihilation?
- Conduct a survey of people over forty years old and under forty, asking them to what degree they believe a nuclear war is possible in their lifetime. Then, write an essay exploring what the answers have in common and how they differ. What conclusions can you draw from the responses?
- Research and report on the current strategy of the United States for nuclear defense. Do you agree with it? Why or why not?
- Assume you and a few classmates have been given the responsibility of drawing up a response and survival plan for your school in the event of a limited nuclear attack on a city fifty miles away. What would your priorities be? What does this tell you about your own values?
- Poll your class to see who believes that nuclear arms are a deterrent to war and who believes they are not. Then, research the positions and stage a debate.
- Compile a list of code names for military operations and projects for the twentieth century (for example, the 1991 war against Iraq was dubbed "Operation Desert Storm"), then write a poem using these names.
- Research the number of countries that either now possess or have the capability of making a nuclear bomb. Next, research which of these countries is currently involved in a conflict with another country or countries. Which country do you think might use the bomb first, and why?
- All of the following code words are related to projects associated with nuclear bombs and nuclear bomb testing by the U.S. government: "Operation Ranger"; "Fat Man"; "Operation Plumbob"; "Ranier." Research what they refer to and report your findings to your class.
- Compare and contrast films about nuclear war released before and after 1980 and report on how the depiction of nuclear war has changed over time. Start with these films: *On the Beach* (1959); *Dr. Strangelove; or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1963); *Fail-Safe* (1964); *Mad Max II* (1981); *Threads* (1984); and *The Day After* (1984).

strategy is that by striking (bombing) the enemy first, you take away their ability to respond. By saving this military operation as the last to be named, Tate underscores its inherent absurdity, and the absurdity, in general, of planning for a nuclear war. The code here mimics song lyrics and underscores the continued deterioration of the logic that links the code to what it represents.

Lines 17–20

This is the only stanza in which there is no code. Yet the stanza itself needs interpreting and so can be seen as a code, as can much poetry. The madman here might be any tyrant with access to nuclear weapons, or maybe even someone at the Pentagon caught up in the image of himself as a hero or patriot. Popular culture is full of just such figures. By using the pronoun "it" to refer to "one of those babies," Tate shows his contempt for such people. He dehumanizes those who treat others as numbers in a war game and can even imagine a world after nuclear war. These madmen "get bigger" because they get madder when "kicked" by their enemies. Tate uses these terms figuratively. "Getting bigger" suggests becoming more outlandish in one's behavior, more self-righteous. The poem ends on this ominous note, creating a sense of imminent doom.

Themes

Language and Meaning

Modern poetry has long been considered a rarified form of expression, accessible only to those trained in the "art" of interpretation. In this sense, it can be seen as a code needing deciphering. "Smart and Final Iris" alludes to poetry's reputation as a difficult art by making a poem out of the very subjects of obscurity and codes. The title of the poem highlights this fact. Just as the U.S. military uses words bearing little discernible logic to the events they signify, so too does Tate use a title with no seeming logical relationship to the poem it names. In copying the military's naming tactics, however, Tate makes poetry out of them. Although "Smart and Final Iris" alludes to a chain of grocery warehouses—something most readers would not know—it is also a somewhat fitting image for nuclear apocalypse. The image of the nuclear mushroom cloud is flower-like, and the words "smart" and "final" can be read as both ironic (what's smart about dropping bombs?), and descriptive of a nuclear holocaust. By appropriating the Pentagon's naming practices, Tate is able to show the irony inherent in attempting to imagine the end of human civilization while at the same time working to prevent such an event.

Popular Culture

By referring to and incorporating elements of popular culture into his poem, Tate reconfigures readers' expectations about poetry's subject matter. Historically, critics have judged "great" poetry to be that which transcends historical circumstances and says something universal about the human condition. "Smart and Final Iris," however, is rooted in history and American culture. Readers need to know what the Pentagon is, the American military's practice of giving code names to operations, the double meaning of the title, and something about the fear of nuclear war to fully appreciate the poem. Arguably, such topical subject matter also makes the poem more immediately relevant to readers' lives than, say, another love poem.

Cold War

Historians often date the Cold War from the end of World War II until 1989, with the opening of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union. The term refers to the struggle for power between Western powers and Communist countries during this time. The nuclear arms race between the Soviet Union and the United States is a direct result of the Cold War, and the scenarios Tate satirically describes would not be imaginable without the race. In the second half of the twentieth century, many of the images and much of the discourse on nuclear war in popular culture assumed it would result from a clash between the superpowers.

Style

Definitions

"Smart and Final Iris" is written as a series of definitions. Definitions are statements that attempt to express the meaning of a word, word group, sign, or symbol. Tate inverts the conventional order of defining terms by first supplying the definition and then the name of the thing defined. For example, he first gives the definition of "rural paradise" in the opening stanza, writing, "Pentagon code / for end of world." This is similar to how questions and answers are formulated on the popular game show, *Jeopardy*. By using code words to name the thing defined, Tate is creating metaphors. Metaphors are figures of speech that draw similarities between two unlike things or ideas. Tate's metaphoric definitions are often ironic because the similarities are the opposite of what one would expect. For example, "paradise" isn't what most people think of when they think of the end of the world. The effect of providing ironic definitions is that readers see things in a new light.

Satire

"Smart and Final Iris" satirizes the U.S. military's attitude toward nuclear warfare by poking fun at the way the Pentagon gives secret code names to various scenarios for nuclear war. Satire often uses irony, wit, and sarcasm to reveal humanity's vices or stupidity and to make change possible. The purpose of satire is primarily moral, that is, it aims to provoke a response. A favored classical genre, satire remains popular in literature, film, and other art forms today, often targeting political figures and institutions.

Historical Context

Tate wrote this poem in the early 1980s, when Ronald Reagan was president of the United States. A conservative Republican and staunch advocate of a strong defense, Reagan was a militant Cold War politician who once called the Soviet Union an "evil empire." In 1981, a year after Reagan's election, Congress approved an $18 billion increase

Compare & Contrast

- **1983:** President Ronald Reagan announces plans for an extensive program to examine the feasibility of a missile defense program. The concept—derided as "Star Wars" by opponents in Congress—revises the nation's 35-year-old nuclear strategy by focusing on missile defense rather than the ability to retaliate against nuclear attack.

  2001: Although Russia, China, and North Korea tell the U.N. Disarmament Commission that a U.S. missile defense system would threaten international security, trigger a new arms race, and undermine the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, President Bush advocates further developing the system. The proposed 2002 defense budget allots $8.3 billion for missile defense.

- **1986:** Washington severs all economic and commercial relations with Libya, accusing it of giving aid to international terrorists.

  2001: Following the Libyan handover of two suspects in the 1988 bombing of Pan Am flight 103 to stand trial before a Scottish Court in the Netherlands, the United States modifies its Libya sanctions to allow shipments of donated clothing, food, and medicine for humanitarian reasons. All other U.S. sanctions against Libya remain in force.

- **1986:** The Soviet nuclear plant at Chernobyl in the Ukraine is destroyed by fire, sending a large radiation cloud over much of Europe and contaminating vast areas of Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus.

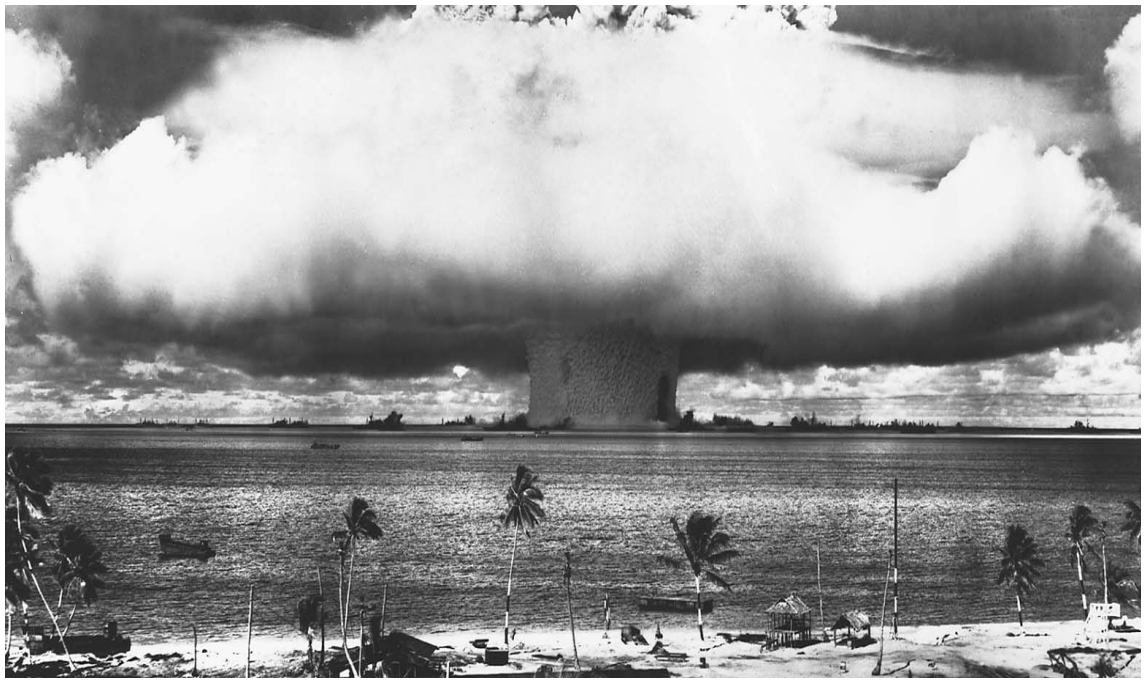
  2001: Ukrainian officials say that 400,000 adults and 1.1 million children are currently entitled to state aid, as a result of the Chernobyl accident.

- **1986:** President Reagan signs the tax reform bill into law, the first full scale remodification since 1954.

  2001: President Bush signs into law the Economic Growth and Tax Relief Reconciliation Act of 2001. The 10-year, $1.35 trillion package provides for the biggest tax cut since 1981 and the most sweeping changes to the tax system since the Tax Reform Act of 1986.

in defense spending. Part of this increase included the creation of a rapid deployment force, and the construction of the neutron bomb, a nuclear weapon that maximizes damage to people but minimizes damage to buildings and equipment. Reagan's hard-line stance against arms control as a means of dealing with the Soviet military threat included public statements about the Unites States' chances of winning a "limited" nuclear war by confining losses to Europe. However, the nuclear freeze movement, a group dedicated to halting the production and proliferation of nuclear weapons, made it more difficult for Reagan to maintain his hard-line stance. Although Congress passed Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative (dubbed "Star Wars"), based on the use of space satellites equipped with lasers to shoot down Soviet missiles in the air, it appropriated only a fraction of the Reagan administration's requested budget for SDI. In 1986, Congress prohibited further SDI tests and cut the SDI budget by one-third. Although the military budget under the Reagan administration increased from $157 billion in 1981 to $233 billion in 1986, Americans were no more secure than before.

Meanwhile, the Soviet Union was undergoing tremendous changes, as the new Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, was pushing for reforms to liberalize the country. Reagan and Gorbachev met in Geneva in 1985 in a superpower summit, and Reagan agreed, in principle, to Gorbachev's proposal for both countries to cut nuclear weapons by fifty percent. In 1987, the United States and the Soviet Union signed the Intermediate Nuclear Force treaty (INF), in which both countries agreed to dismantle more than 2,500 Soviet and American short range missiles based in Europe.



A mushroom cloud from a nuclear explosion

The subject of nuclear war pervaded the music of the 1980s as well, whether it was heavy metal, reggae, rock, or folk. Pink Floyd sang about the finality of nuclear war in "Two Suns in the Sunset," while Underworld's "Underneath the Radar" used early warning systems for nuclear war as a metaphor for love. Many songs protested the Reagan administration's pronuclear stance in their lyrics, such as Escape Club's tune, "Wild, Wild West": "Gotta live it up, live it up / Ronnie's got a new gun / Headin' for the nineties, livin' in the eighties, / screamin' in the backroom, / waitin' for the big boom." Reagan didn't help matters when, before one of his weekly Saturday radio addresses in 1984, he jokingly said into the microphone (which he thought was turned off), "We are going to bomb Russia in fifteen minutes." His gaffe was later incorporated into a number of rap and pop songs of the era.

Critical Overview

Tate has always had both fans and detractors, and critical responses to *Reckoner* (1986), the volume in which "Smart and Final Iris" appears, illustrate this. Chris Stroffolino, for example, notes that the volume marks Tate's turn "toward society and sociopolitical themes," and says that "Smart and Final Iris" is about the public's "helplessness in the face of the doublespeak of 'Pentagon code.'" Lee Upton similarly notes that many poems in the collection appeal to readers who have lost faith in conventional institutions of the state. Dick Allen's review is typical of the position taken by Tate's detractors. Known for his love of formalist poetry and his own formalist poems, Allen calls the poems in *Reckoner*, "basically a self-indulgent exercise for which there is no excuse." Allen faults Tate's poems for their lack of social significance and, mimicking Tate's penchant for using surrealist imagery, writes, "This is occasional surrealistic poetry, written with the fingernails on stumps of fog."

Criticism

Chris Semansky

Semansky is an instructor of English literature and composition whose essays, poems, and stories regularly appear in journals and magazines. In this essay, Semansky considers how Tate's poem on the topic of weapons is also a kind of weapon itself.

James Tate's poem "Smart and Final Iris" is both about the terrors of nuclear weaponry and is a kind of weapon itself. As a poem, it examines the rela-

tionship between war and language, showing the part words play in the construction of popular images about nuclear war. In doing this, the poem intervenes in the ways readers think and, hopefully, respond to the threat of war.

By taking as his subject the Pentagon's practice of giving secret code names to its nuclear defense strategy, Tate foregrounds the role of language in how human beings imagine death. Like death, codes are a secret, standing in a metaphoric relationship to the thing or things they represent. Their purpose is to obscure or hide what they name.

Consider the poem's title, which is taken from the name of a chain of grocery stores. To most readers, who do not understand the reference, the title would remain a mystery. Even if a reader did catch the reference in the title, its meaning might still remain a mystery. After all, what does a grocery warehouse chain have in common with a poem about nuclear war? Many readers would simply chalk up the reference to poetry's reputation as a difficult and esoteric art form. They might even think that they're not "smart" enough to "get it."

But "getting it" is precisely the idea the poem addresses. By foregrounding the ways in which poems are codes, Tate implicitly asks readers to consider how the Pentagon keeps secret information about their own future from them, citing reasons of "national security." Like the Pentagon, many modern and contemporary poems are deliberately obscure, and poets often rationalize poetry's difficulty by claiming that it takes a special kind of person or mind to understand them, someone who is aesthetically sensitive to language, or who knows how to read "correctly." For many, poetry remains a kind of "secret language," accessible only to the initiated. By parodying the ways in which the Pentagon uses code names for unimaginable events, Tate calls into question the moral authority of those who create the codes and keep the secrets, and he points out the irrationality of the practice.

Tate also touches on the questionable practice of preparing for nuclear war in order to avoid it. Critic John Gery notes the absurdity as well, writing:

> What distinguishes our contemporary sense of annihilation, whether it come about by nuclear, ecological, biomedical, or other technological forces, is that we imagine it will occur not *in spite of* our human efforts but *because* of them.

This idea is embedded in Tate's poem, as all of the scenarios suggest failure of the "plan."

Indeed, a large part of society's 'nuclear anxiety' stems from the belief that nuclear war could occur despite best intentions and current controls."

Tate treats catastrophic results of a nuclear holocaust such as a mutating race, widespread death, and famine as opportunities to lampoon the military and underscore humanity's current predicament. His darkly humorous codes for these scenarios attest to his vision of a world gone mad, where the only rational response to imminent doom is laughter. Black humor has a long history in American literature. Novelists such as Kurt Vonnegut, Joseph Heller, and Thomas Pynchon, among others, have used it to emphasize the absurdity and paradox of modern life and, especially, of modern warfare. Stanley Kubrick's film *Dr. Strangelove; or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1963) is perhaps the best-known black humor response to the threat of nuclear war and draws on the Cold War fears of the 1950s and 1960s. The film's cast of characters includes a mad scientist, an inept president, and a pair of macho, psychotic generals intent on world destruction. Tate alludes to just such characters in the last stanza:

> A madman comes,
> one of those babies
> the further you kick it
> the bigger it gets.

Tate's associative logic and surrealist imagery formally parallel ideas associated with the fear of nuclear war: randomness and accident. However unlikely or impossible, the chance that a nuclear war could be started by someone pushing the wrong button or by misunderstanding orders is an idea often presented in films and writing on the subject. Indeed, a large part of society's "nuclear anxiety" stems from the belief that nuclear war could occur despite best intentions and current controls. Such potential miscommunication highlights the importance of clear channels of command and precise language in keeping the world safe. By suggesting

What Do I Read Next?

- Tate's *Selected Poems* (1991) draws from all of his major collections to this date and provides an overview of his development as a poet. Tate won a Pulitzer Prize for this volume.
- One of Tate's friends and a strong influence on his poetry, Bill Knott, published *Laugh at the End of the World: Collected Comic Poems, 1969–1999* in 2000. Knott's goofy vision of the world and his absurdist sense of humor are strikingly similar to Tate's.
- Richard Howard's 1988 translation of Andre Breton's classic surrealist novel *Nadja*, first published in the 1920s, details the narrator's wanderings through the streets of Paris with a seemingly "mad" woman named Nadja. Breton uses his narrative to reflect on the nature of time, perception, space, and reality. Tate writes out of the surrealist tradition.
- In 1977, Tate published a novel entitled *Lucky Darryl: A Novel*, which he wrote with Bill Knott. The two have collaborated on poems as well.
- John Gery's 1996 study entitled *Nuclear Annihilation and Contemporary Poetry: Ways of Nothingness* examines both the direct and the indirect impact of the nuclear threat on American poets from Gertrude Stein to James Merrill, providing both detailed readings of over fifty poems and four general groups into which poems might be categorized: protest poetry, apocalyptic lyric poetry, psychohistorical poetry, and the poetry of uncertainty.
- Paul Brian's book entitled *Nuclear Holocausts: Atomic War in Fiction, 1895–1984* (1986) provides a highly readable and detailed annotated bibliography of fiction depicting nuclear war or its aftermath.
- In 1995, Coffee House Press released an anthology of poetry addressing the possibility of nuclear apocalypse, entitled *Atomic Ghost: Poets Respond to the Nuclear Age*. The collection, edited by John Bradley, contains poems from more than one hundred poets, including Adrienne Rich and William Dickey.
- James Merrill was a widely respected poet whose work often explored human responses to living in the nuclear age. Critic Timothy Materer's 2000 study of Merrill's poetry, *James Merrill's Apocalypse*, shows how apocalyptic motifs inspire and inform Merrill's poetry.

that the Pentagon's "plan" to keep the world safe contributes to the possibility of miscommunication and heightens the chance of nuclear outbreak, Tate underscores the perilous nature of language. He elaborates on this belief in his essay "Live Yak Pie," written as an introduction to *Best American Poetry 1997*. The idea is a central part of his own poetics:

> The poet arrives at his or her discovery by setting language on edge of creating metaphors that suggest dangerous ideas, or any number of other methods. The point is, language can be hazardous as it is our primary grip on the world. When language is skewed, the world is viewed differently. But this is only effective if the reader can recognize this view, even though it is the first time he or she has experienced the thought.

Recognizing how Tate skews the language is the reader's challenge. The "dangerous idea" in "Smart and Final Iris" is that our image of the world is being configured by forces beyond our control and without our approval. It isn't only the idea that a nuclear apocalypse is a strong possibility, but that individuals can do nothing to prevent it. The crumbling relationship between code and referent in Tate's poem attests to the fact that the system itself is breaking down.

> First strike and
> *I sniff your nieces*
> *I fall to pieces*
> *Get hell out . . .*

It is no coincidence that Tate mocks the Pentagon's strategy of first strike capability in his penultimate stanza. Critics of the first strike strategy routinely point out its status as the very catalyst for the nuclear arms race. In short, first-strike capability denotes a country's ability to eliminate retaliatory second-strike forces of another country. At the height of the Cold War in 1962, then U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara explains the "logic" behind staying ahead in the nuclear arms race in his speech, "Mutual Deterrence":

> Now what about the Soviet Union? Does it today possess a powerful nuclear arsenal? The answer is that it does. Does it possess a first-strike capability against the United States? The answer is that it does not. Can the Soviet Union in the foreseeable future acquire such a first-strike capability against the United States? The answer is that it cannot. It cannot because we are determined to remain fully alert and we will never permit our own assured-destruction capability to drop to a point at which a Soviet first-strike capability is even remotely feasible.

By 1986, when Tate's poem appeared, McNamara's words still expressed the Pentagon's policy. Despite the Soviet Union's dissolution, President Bush's decision to pursue Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative is only the latest manifestation that the arms race is alive and well in the twenty-first century.

Tate's poem, though, is a strike against the Pentagon's attempt to dictate the world's future with policies built to fail. Gery emphasizes poetry's power in the atomic age, writing, "without having to lay claim to universality or transcendence, poetry can still, to paraphrase Theodore Roethke, learn by going where it has to go—not only as an agent *for* change but as an agent *of* change." Psychologists Robert Jay Lifton and Nicholas Humphrey, experts on the psychology of surviving war and living in the atomic age, second Gery's view, suggesting that poets are among the frontline soldiers in humanity's fight for survival:

> If anything in our culture symbolizes the fact and hope of human continuity, it is the continuing presence of the poets, philosophers, and thinkers of the last few thousand years, who in the service of life once stretched their imagination and can now stretch ours.

Source: Chris Semansky, Critical Essay on "Smart and Final Iris," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Ryan D. Poquette

Poquette has a bachelor's degree in English and specializes in writing about various forms of literature. In the following essay, Poquette explores Tate's use of polarities in his poem.

In these times, when the threat of nuclear war was ever-present, hell could be unleashed by the push of a button."

James Tate's Pulitzer Prize-winning poetry is marked by both comedy and surrealism—a mixing of reality and fantasy that produces unusual scenes that are often found only in dreams. Says Stephen Gardner in his entry on Tate in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, "The poems themselves are rooted in landscapes that are often—if not generally—bizarre and surreal." In "Smart and Final Iris," Tate's use of comedy and surrealism reaches an apocalyptic level. Through the poem's use of pattern and word choice, Tate gives the reader a false sense of security, setting the reader up for the climactic end of the poem in which all sense of security is lost.

The poem follows an obvious pattern, employing polarities—or opposites—to trick the reader into feeling that the Pentagon has everything under control. In each of the first five stanzas, the speaker in the poem gives a description of an apocalyptic situation that could happen in a post-nuclear attack. These descriptions are followed by a "Pentagon code." Whereas the description of the apocalyptic situation is very grim, the Pentagon codes, by contrast, are light-hearted, sometimes surreal, and even humorous, as if the Pentagon does not take the situations seriously. By categorizing these apocalyptic situations with such light-hearted codes, the Pentagon gives themselves mental control over these post-nuclear possibilities.

The divide between grim reality and light-hearted code is emphasized even more by the style of the text. The real situations are written in plain text, while the Pentagon codes are all in italics, drawing attention to them.

With or without italics, however, the codes draw attention to themselves. As the poem progresses, the codes become ever more surreal and humorous, playing off the real apocalyptic descriptions that they represent.

The first stanza introduces the idea of the Pentagon code:

Pentagon code
for end of world
is *rural paradise,*
if plan fails
it's *rural paradise*

Unlike the other stanzas, in which the code is only featured once, this stanza features the code, "rural paradise," in two separate places. Poets use repetition like this when they want to draw attention to a key idea or image. In this case, Tate is trying to impress upon the reader the idea of the end of the world, and the finality that this idea brings with it.

Apocalyptic landscapes are not usually described as either "rural" or as being a "paradise." But in Tate's poem, the surreal images make sense upon closer inspection. A rural area is usually fairly unpopulated. By magnifying the idea of "rural" into a "paradise," or the ideal form, a "rural paradise" becomes a world without any people at all—which is what would happen if the world ended. The term paradise is significant in another way. According to Biblical history, the world's first rural paradise, the Garden of Eden, started with no people. So, it is fitting that the paradise at the end of the world would also have no people.

In the second stanza, "losses under 100 million," is given the code of "*a trip on the wayward bus.*" A "wayward bus" implies that somebody has made a minor mistake and taken the wrong bus. In a global nuclear war, under 100 million dead people would, in fact, be seen as a minor mistake, when compared to the total amount of people who could have potentially been killed.

It is in the next stanza that Tate hits his surrealistic and comic stride: "For a future of mutants, / *bridal parties collide.*" As with the previous codes, the words seem out of place at first. However, when one starts to analyze the stanza based on the "mutants" description, the words start to fit. The "bridal parties" colliding provides a surrealistic image of several people in formal wear who have been scrambled into mismatched body parts and outfits during the nuclear attack, becoming mutants. It is a surreal image, yet one that elicits a small laugh on the part of the reader. "There's a nervous, high-strung humor which often seems intended to bring forth an equally nervous titter from the reader as reality and fantasy are deftly and intricately intertwined," says Stanley Wiater, in an interview in the *Valley Advocate* in 1984.

The next stanza is even more surreal and comical: "World famine is / *a plague of beatniks.*" Although there is nothing funny about famine, or hunger, it is amusing to imagine a horde of beatniks, considered a type of "starving artist," roaming the earth.

In these first four stanzas, the poem's pattern of offsetting serious descriptions with increasingly humorous images makes the reader feel as if there is nothing to worry about—the Pentagon has everything under control. With the next stanza, however, Tate changes tactics and disorients his reader, shaking the reader's confidence in the Pentagon:

First strike and
I sniff your nieces
I fall to pieces
Get hell out . . .

This unusual language does not readily invoke any humorous images as the other codes do, but it does grab the reader's attention through several of the words. Up until now, the Pentagon codes have been described in an impersonal fashion by an unseen speaker, allowing the reader to distance themselves from the horrors being described in the poem. This code, however, yanks the reader back to reality, and pulls them into the action by using the personal "I," and by addressing the reader directly by talking about their family members ("your nieces"). Suddenly, more seems to be at stake, and nobody is laughing. The pattern of this stanza yields even more insights. As the stanza progresses, the lines get shorter and shorter, invoking the image of the types of countdowns generally used to launch nuclear weapons. Something bad is definitely happening.

At this point, the normally vivid, concise codes have deteriorated into desperate thoughts. "I sniff your nieces" alludes to the fact that after a nuclear bomb has struck, you can smell the stench of those of the dead who aren't totally obliterated, which may include a reader's family. In a similar style, "I fall to pieces" indicates that the Pentagon staff and their carefully laid out plans are crumbling. Finally, "Get hell out . . ." is a curious positioning of words.

Normally, one would use the phrase "get the hell out" to talk about evacuation during a nuclear attack. However, without the word "the," the line instead becomes a directive to the Pentagon to unleash hell. In other words, a counterstrike. The finality of such a move is underscored by the ellipsis at the end of this line, which implies that the counterstrikes will continue indefinitely until everything is gone, blown into oblivion. This is the beginning of the end.

The word "hell" itself is important and has been used many times by writers throughout history to describe the horrors of war. In the 1980s, the United States and the Soviet Union were locked in a tense standoff known as the Cold War, where each superpower hovered over its respective buttons for launching nuclear weapons, just waiting for the sign that its adversary was going to attack. In these times, when the threat of nuclear war was ever-present, hell could be unleashed by the push of a button.

After all of the Pentagon codes that offset the realistic descriptions, and the three-line code that announces the devastation of a "first strike," the last stanza serves to blindside the reader with a sense of dread. There is no humorous or surreal code to offset the final situation, where "a madman comes." During the Cold War, the Soviet Union was the primary enemy of the United States, but there also existed a number of smaller countries who had access to nuclear weapons, and these countries were sometimes run by people who were considered "mad."

"Smart and Final Iris" was "written at the height of Reaganism," says Chris Stroffolino in his entry on Tate in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. During this time, Tate turned "toward society and sociopolitical themes," according to Stroffolino. One of these themes was how nuclear war was ever-present, and how the United States was encouraging it through certain actions or inactions.

In Tate's poem, these smaller countries, the "babies," are viewed as more dangerous than the Soviet Union superpower, which is locked in a stalemate with the United States. Unfortunately, superpowers sometimes failed to realize the potential power of smaller countries with less resources, and so would "kick" them aside, not giving them a second thought, or investing minimal resources to keep them contained—saving the majority of time and effort for the larger adversary. The problem is that the more these countries were kicked aside and out of the Pentagon's view, the larger they got and the more dangerous they became.

This is ironic in a society that is supposed to have some of the world's best intelligence officers. In fact, the title itself,"Smart and Final Iris," plays off the supposed intelligence of the Pentagon. The "Smart" refers to the highly intelligent people who work for the Pentagon, who think that they are prepared for anything. In the poem, however, they are stripped of their confidence, but not before hell is unleashed, in the form of nuclear war. Says Stroffolino, "Smart and Final Iris' deals with helplessness in the face of the doublespeak of 'Pentagon code.' "

The inability for the Pentagon to realize that they have missed a much more serious threat than the Soviet Union—and start focusing their intelligence efforts where they need to be—will eventually bring about the "Final Iris." The iris is the part of a human's eye that one sees on the outside, through which the world is viewed, so a "final iris" can be thought of as a "final" view or image.

In Tate's surreal poem, "Smart and Final Iris," the poet uses specific patterns and word choices to convince the reader that the Pentagon knows all they need to about the threats of potential nuclear war and how to handle them. As the poem progresses, Tate builds up this confidence, then suddenly disorients readers, showing them that the "smart" guys aren't always smart, and the final iris, or view, may be reserved for a madman.

Source: Ryan D. Poquette, Critical Essay on "Smart and Final Iris," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

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Further Reading

Bellamy, Joe David, ed., *American Poetry Observed*, University of Illinois Press, 1988.

This volume of interviews is unusual because well-known contemporary poets interview other well-known contemporary poets. As a result, the exchange is substantive and focused.

Lifton, Robert Jay, and Nicholas Humphrey, eds., *In a Dark Time*, Harvard University Press, 1984.

Psychiatrists Lifton and Humphrey have collected excerpts from literature of the last 2,500 years that comments on the psychological and imaginative confusion surrounding war. Lifton is known for his psychological studies of survivors of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings.

Tate, James, *The Route As Briefed*, University of Michigan Press, 1999.

This volume collects Tate's short stories, interviews, and essays. It is an engaging, accessible, and humorous collection.

Tate, James, and David Lehman, *The Best American Poetry 1997*, Scribner, 1997.

Each year, a different poet is invited to guest edit a new volume in this popular series. Tate selected the poems for this volume, and his selections can tell readers as much about his own taste as his own poetry can. Tate's introduction, "Live Yak Pie," provides insights into his composing process and his vision of what poetry can be.

What Belongs to Us

Marie Howe

1987

"What Belongs to Us" is included in Marie Howe's first book, *The Good Thief* (1988), which Margaret Atwood picked for the National Poetry Series Award in 1987. In twenty long free-verse lines, the poem lists things that people can never really own, including phone numbers, memories, other people, the past and, ironically, their own pain. Howe's primary theme is the transitory nature of human life, the idea that "all things must pass." Rather than making abstract metaphysical comments on life, however, Howe piles up images to make her point. The cumulative "weight" of her list hits readers, so they reconsider exactly what it is they *do* own, if anything. Many of the poems in the collection are of a spiritual nature, as is the tone of "What Belongs to Us." Although the speaker uses personal memories to make her claim, memories accessible only to her, she universalizes her experience, suggesting that all people have similar memories. She does this to emphasize the idea that individual identity is illusory and that individual human consciousness is part of a larger cosmic consciousness. This notion is rooted in Eastern religious traditions, and in the American poetic tradition of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman, among others.

Author Biography

Marie Howe was born in 1950 in Rochester, New York, the oldest of nine children. Telling stories

was a way of life for her family and the household of eleven people assured her of a ready audience. Raised Catholic, she attended the Sacred Heart Convent School, where Howe says the nuns modeled what it meant to live a spiritually active and politically engaged life. After taking a bachelor of science degree from the University of Windsor, Howe had a short career as a journalist in Rochester, writing for a few local papers. She did not begin taking herself seriously as a poet until she turned thirty, after attending a poetry workshop for high school teachers with Karen Pelz at Dartmouth College. She credits that workshop with changing her life. A few years later, she enrolled in Columbia's master of fine arts program, where she studied with Stanley Kunitz.

Howe soon began publishing in literary journals and magazines, and, in 1989, Margaret Atwood chose Howe's book *The Good Thief* as a winner in the National Poetry Series. Howe also received the Peter Lavan Younger Poet Prize from the Academy of American Poets for the book. Many of the collection's poems, such as "What Belongs to Us," tackle themes of loss, memory, and love, and the impermanence of individual identity. Howe, whose brother, John, died of AIDS, has also co-edited a collection of essays on the disease, *In the Company of My Solitude: American Writing and the AIDS Pandemic*, with Michael Klein. Her most recent collection of poems is *What the Living Do* (1997) and was named one of the five best books of poetry published in 1997 by *Publishers Weekly*. Howe has received fellowships from the Massachusetts Artist Foundation, the Fine Arts Work Center, Radcliffe College's Bunting Institute, The St. Botolph Foundation, The National Endowment for the Arts, and the Guggenheim Foundation. She teaches at Sarah Lawrence College in New York.

Poem Summary

Lines 1–5

"What Belongs to Us" is a list poem, the subject of which is signaled by the title. Think of how lists are made, with a subject such as "Stuff to do on the house," or "Chores." However, Howe inverts the subject, and instead of listing "what belongs to us," she lists what doesn't belong "to us," "us" being humanity. She begins the poem with an item familiar to most readers: memorized phone numbers. On a literal level, the reader can't own the numbers because they are someone else's numbers. On another level, they are a product of memory and circumstance, both of which change with time (i.e., people lose their memories, and people move and get new phone numbers). The "short cuts home" also don't belong to people, as the short cuts exist outside of them, and the childhood summer she remembers is long gone, a thing of the past. The simile "shimmers like pavement" makes a comparison between how pavement shimmers in the sun and how the memory shimmers in the speaker's mind. The last item in the list, the "tiny footprints in the back files," also refers to a childhood event: children's footprints in a medical file or children innocently walking over their parents' things. These images border on the sentimental and the cute.

Lines 6–10

The items in these lines refer to things in the public domain. Historical information such as a list of kings does not belong to anyone because, para-

Media Adaptations

- American University in Washington, D.C., has two audiocassettes of Howe reading her poems. The first is a recording of Howe reading with Allen Barnett, recorded in 1991, and is part of the university's Visiting Writer Series. The second was recorded in 1998 and is also part of the writer's series.
- The English Department of The State University of New York at Brockport sponsors readings by and discussions with poets in The Brockport Writers Forum. All of these readings and discussions are videotaped and archived. In 1988 Stan Sanvel Rubin hosted a session with Howe, in which she discusses the craft of poetry. The tape order number is V–447.

doxically, it belongs to everyone. These items also appear to be from her childhood. The list of kings is information the speaker probably had to remember for school. Charlemagne (742–814) refers to Charles the Great or Charles I, the Frankish king (768–814) and emperor of the West (800–814). Charlemagne organized the beginnings of the Holy Roman Empire. Henry refers to Henry VIII (1491–1547) of Britain, the second son of Henry VII and Elizabeth of York. The boxes under the bed are a staple of many children's "secret life," and Tommy's wedding day is an event she witnessed and remembers in great detail. The image of her waving to Mark and him waving back suggests the idea not only of greeting, but of parting as well. It is also an image packed with the speaker's self-consciousness, as it demonstrates her awareness of her awareness. The tenth line is perhaps the most mysterious in the poem. Though there is no explicit reference, it suggests a baptismal ceremony, or perhaps Hindus stepping into the Ganges River for healing and worship.

Lines 11–16

The "I" enters the poem for the first time in these lines when the speaker announces she has a photograph, as if a photograph were the perfect evidence that something occurred in the past, and that occurrence could still be owned. The "you" is never named, but readers now understand that the poem is addressed to this "you." Lines 13–16 describe the photograph, what it does and does not show. The description, again, evokes the speaker's self-consciousness. That the two people are "in motion / not looking at each other, smiling" emphasizes the emotional distance between human beings, even those close to one another. It underscores the existential idea that human beings are born alone and die alone.

Lines 17–20

In these lines, the speaker picks up with her list of what does not "belong to us." The "we" refers to the speaker and the person in the photograph. By the speaker's description, readers can assume that the two are very close, perhaps siblings or close childhood friends. The last item listed is the blisters on the speaker's arm. She claims that not even they belong to her. This idea underscores the motif of self-consciousness in the poem, as it positions the speaker outside of her body, being in it but not of it. The last word in the poem, "Look," performs a similar function, as it abruptly ends the list of descriptions with a startling command.

Themes

Loss

"What Belongs to Us" evokes the idea of loss, even as it suggests that the very idea of possessing anything is an illusion. In item after item, Howe hammers away at the notion that attachment to things defines human beings. By questioning the validity of worldly attachment as a means of comforting oneself, Howe implicitly suggests that it is only by renouncing the worldly that human beings can find true peace. That the speaker of the poem has achieved a kind of spiritual peace is evident in the last line of the poem, when, apparently, she has separated herself from even physical pain.

Nostalgia

Howe's poem both exhibits a persistent nostalgia and emphasizes the idea that such thinking only leads to grief. Nostalgia is a longing for the past, and more specifically defined, a severe homesickness. Marketers, artists, writers, and poets evoke nostalgia to capture audience attention and

Topics For Further Study

- Make a list of the things in your life that are most important to you, and then give them a value on a scale of 1–5, 5 being the highest and 1 the lowest. Next, categorize them. For example, you might use the categories of material and non-material things. What does this list tell you about your own value system?
- Write a poem about a photograph from your childhood. What does the poem tell you that the photo does not, and vice versa?
- Research the doctrine of non-attachment in Buddhism. How does it apply to Howe's poem?
- Free write about some of your strongest memories from childhood. Next, talk to some of the people who were part of those childhood events, and ask them what, if anything, they remember about the same event. Write an essay exploring the differences between versions of the events.
- Compare the idea of belonging in Howe's poem with the idea of belonging in Mark Strand's poem, "From a Litany." Discuss similarities in tone and meaning. Strand's poem can be found in his collection *Darker* and in his *Selected Poems*.
- Many Western religions assume that human beings have a core or center that makes them who they are. Do you agree with this? Why or why not? Provide examples to support your position.
- Interview at least six people, asking them when they are most aware of their bodies, and when they are most unaware of them. What do the answers have in common? How do they differ?
- Sit in an upright position, with your legs folded in front of you, back unsupported. Concentrate on your breathing and try to eliminate all thoughts floating through your mind. Do this for ten minutes. Write down your responses to this exercise in a journal. Repeat this exercise twice a day for two weeks, tracking the changes in your attitude and thinking.
- Write a poem to a friend or a lover, referring to incidents or events known only to the two of you. Now, rewrite the poem for an audience that knows neither of you. What did you change and why?

sell their products, whether they are beer, cars, or poems. By presenting a list of her childhood memories, specific in their detail, the speaker implicitly highlights their importance in her own life. Rather than embrace these memories, however, the speaker uses them to show that they are mere representations of events that will never return. In essence, she has it both ways: she expresses nostalgia while at the same time renouncing it.

Identity

The notion that human beings possess identity, that is, something that belongs only to them and makes them who they are, is an assumption undergirding Christianity and much of the political and economic foundation of Western countries. Howe questions this assumption, suggesting that those features conventionally used to establish individual human identity do not belong to individuals at all, but are constructs used to categorize and name human experience.

Style

List

By constructing the poem as a list, Howe is able to evoke ideas and emotions through repetition. Auxesis is the cataloging of a series that closes at the zenith, or high point, of the set. In Howe's case, that "zenith" of the set is her own pain. Not even it belongs to her. In its structure, Howe's poem also resembles a litany. Litanies can be

Compare & Contrast

- **1987:** The World Health Organization reports that 8% of all pregnant Zairean women and 17% of Zairean blood donors are AIDS infected.

  Today: A cumulative total of 12.1 million African children have lost either their mother or both parents to AIDS, according to UNAIDS (a United Nations' organization), and thus are regarded as "AIDS orphans." A recent report by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) puts the number of such orphans currently living in 26 African countries at 6.5 million, and projects that by 2010, there will be 15 million African AIDS orphans, including 2.7 million in Nigeria, 2.5 million in Ethiopia, and 1.8 million in South Africa.

- **1987:** Prince William Arthur Philip Louis, first son of Prince Charles of Wales and Princess Diana, enrolls in Wetherby School in London, and is a pupil there until July 1990.

  Today: Prince William has been accepted by the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, where he will study the history of art. He will begin his four-year course in autumn 2001. He is first in line after Prince Charles to become King of England.

- **1987:** The largest stock-market drop in Wall Street history occurs on "Black Monday"—October 19, 1987—when the Dow Jones Industrial Average plunges 508.32 points, losing 22.6% of its total value.

  Today: The great bull market of the 1980s and 1990s comes to an end, as technology stocks lead the markets lower. Analysts place much of the blame on the "bubble" (i.e., inflated prices) in internet stocks.

prayers consisting of a series of invocations or supplications, or more simply a repetitive chant. Another prayer-like element of the poem is its focus on the relationship between mind and body. Other poets who have used lists extensively in their poetry to comment on mind-body issues include Walt Whitman, Allen Ginsberg, Diane Wakoski, and Mark Strand.

Tone

The tone of Howe's poem is elegiac. Elegies are poems or songs that mourn the loss of something or someone. Although "What Belongs to Us" doesn't mourn an individual, it does evoke a sense of loss, nostalgia, and sorrow. Much of this emotion, however, is in response to the speaker's sense that very little belongs to her, rather than sadness over the larger losses of humanity in general.

Diction and Audience

Howe's poem uses prose-like rhythms and everyday speech. She "speaks" matter-of-factly, using little figurative language. She addresses a specific (unnamed) and absent person, and readers are in the position of overhearing a "conversation." This practice of addressing an absent person is called apostrophe, and it has a long tradition in Western poetry. The references she makes are familiar to the person she is addressing, but not to readers. This is in keeping with Howe's poetics. David Daniel quotes Howe as saying about her poetry, "Poetry is telling something to someone. . . . It's between them. It can't happen alone, without being said aloud. It's physical, social, erotic."

Historical Context

1980s and Materialism

Howe's poem was written during the Reagan administration of the mid-1980s, when acquiring wealth and material things had become almost a religion to many Americans. Although she makes no explicit references to public historical events, the speaker does recount personal history. The nostalgia these memories illustrate, along with Howe's age, mark her as a Baby Boomer, that is, one born

between 1946 and 1964 (Howe was born in 1950). In contrast to the 1960s and 1970s, decades defined by Americans' pursuit of spiritual and political action, the 1980s were characterized by an ethic focused on consumption and acquisition of material things. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the United States had experienced a recession, but pulled out of it under Reagan's policies of deregulation, which ignited a bull market. The growing economy lasted until the beginning of 2000.

Oliver Stone's film *Wall Street* illustrates the widespread obsession with making money during this time. Baby boomers, many of who had renounced the values of capitalism in the 1960s and 1970s, helped fuel the market boom, as they climbed the career ladder, bought houses, and poured money into 401(k)s and individual retirement accounts. *Newsweek* dubbed boomers who now focused on their careers and achieving the American Dream "yuppies" (young urban professionals), and defined them as people between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-nine, with incomes of at least $40,000, who were professionals and managers. On October 19th, 1987, what has come to be known as "Black Monday," the stock market crashed. The financial industry was hit hard, and many people were laid off. This proved to be a small hiccup, however, in the bull market, which continued its run shortly thereafter.

The emergence and rapid spread of AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) during the 1980s into a worldwide epidemic deepened the sense of mortality for people throughout the world. Although the disease was identified in the early part of the decade, it was only after celebrities such as actor Rock Hudson died from AIDS complications that Americans began to take the disease seriously. Prompted by the fact that AIDS is a sexually transmitted disease, Americans underwent a wholesale change in sexual behavior. The gay community was especially hard hit, as a disproportionate number of gay men contracted and died from the disease.

Critical Overview

Because Howe has authored only two collections of poems, there has been little criticism written about her work. The cover of Howe's collection carries these words by Margaret Atwood, who chose *The Good Thief* for the National Poetry Series: "These poems are intensely felt, sparely expressed, and difficult to forget; poems of obsession that transcend their own dark roots." Under Atwood's words are those of Stanley Kunitz, Howe's former teacher at Columbia, and mentor. Kunitz writes, "Marie Howe's poetry is luminous, intense, and elegant, rooted in an abundant inner life . . . In essence, she is a religious poet, that rarity among writers of her generation." Reviewing the collection for *The Partisan Review*, Bonnie Costello also notes the poems' religious orientation, saying that Howe, "may well have a career as a poet of spiritual instruction." Noting the poet's tendency towards transcendence, Costello writes, "Howe's best poems refuse to make the body the measure of the soul." Rochelle Ratner, while praising the collection as a whole, questions the accessibility of some of the poems. In her review for *Library Journal*, she argues that the poems embody a "fashionable surrealism," but that Howe could be more direct about the emotional issues from which they spring.

Criticism

Chris Semansky

Semansky is an instructor of English literature and composition whose essays, poems, and stories regularly appear in journals and magazines. In this essay, Semansky considers the idea of belonging in "What Belongs to Us."

In "What Belongs to Us," Howe explicitly questions human beings' relationship to the world and to themselves by examining assumptions under girding notions of individuality and belonging. She does this through questioning the ways in which Western selfhood has been represented.

The idea of belonging is powerful. People belong to families, to jobs, to communities, to churches. They believe in ideas, in things, in one another, in order to be a part of something bigger than them, to give their lives meaning and purpose. Poet John Donne wrote that "No man is an island," meaning that people need one another to survive, to prosper, to simply be. However, belonging isn't necessarily a choice that one makes. Human beings can't choose their parents or their genes, the country of their birth, their language, sex, or, some might argue, their sexuality. By writing a poem about all that does not belong to human beings, Howe asks the reader to consider himself as a process in flux, rather than a stable point in the midst of changing world. In this sense, her poem

is implicitly more interested in asking questions about the importance of belonging and having, rather than offering elaborate explanations for the way things are.

If belonging is understood as meaning the property of a person or thing, in what way can memories be said not to belong to people? Howe's poem makes this very claim as she enumerates memories from her childhood and then disowns them. Howe represents these memories differently, showing the complications of living in a world where all experience is mediated by language. She lists memories of words, numbers, and images, describes a photograph, and presents a physical wound, all to show how they, in fact, do not constitute evidence of permanence or selfhood. Her images of the past evoke a kind of dreamy netherworld, in which the speaker grapples to keep the past alive. Howe draws on her own memories to select incidents most readers can not only see, but also empathize with. She renounces the "summer, shimmering like pavement, when Lucia / pushed Billy off the rabbit house and broke his arm." The reader doesn't know who Billy and Lucia are, but he doesn't need to. Most readers' memories of childhood are made up of antics like the ones Howe describes. They are so widespread that they are almost generic. Implicit in the speaker's renunciation of these memories is the idea that, paradoxically, they do not make up her identity. It is paradoxical because the speaker obviously still retains these memories, and describes them to show that they are not a part of her and, by extension, that a reader's memories may not be part of them, either.

In the West, it is common to believe that one's memory makes up a large part of one's identity, and Westerners largely see identity as continuous, coherent, and unified. Memories are part of the glue of identity, and human beings use language to describe those memories. But memories by their very nature, whether they be of a phone number or of an event, are representations of something outside of the individual human being, both in time and space; they stand in for the original action or event. In this sense, they do not belong to individuals, but to an unrecoverable past. Memories do not belong to human beings because they are processes, rather than discrete things that can be held, touched, felt. Memories are "jogged" by ideas, sights, sounds, words, expressions, and circumstances, and so they are also, to a large extent, random and unpredictable. They are contingent upon other people and events for their very existence. "Short cuts home," which the speaker mentions in the second line, are also a kind of memory, a memory that becomes a physical habit.

Memories are part of the glue of identity, and human beings use language to describe those memories."

The objects of Howe's renunciation are also kinds of evidence for human presence, the idea that individuals are separate, self-contained entities, "belonging" to themselves, and conscious of themselves. Evidence is a form of representation. Semioticians define and often categorize the relationship between a thing and what it represents into three categories: icon, symbol, and index. An iconic representation, for example, might be a statue of a woman. The statue stands for the woman because it resembles her in some way. A symbolic representation, however, is not based on resemblance, but on convention, that is, a social agreement that x will stand for whatever. Language is a form of symbolic representation because there is no resemblance between a word and what it represents unless people agree there is. Indexical representation is based on cause and effect. It indicates connectedness or physical proximity between something and something else. In making claims for all that does not belong to human beings, Howe attempts to provoke the reader, to unsettle the reader's own sense of belonging to others, to the world, to themselves. When she writes that not even "our tiny footprints in the back files" belong to us, she is questioning not only memory, but also the continuity of human identity. As a form of indexical representation, these tiny footprints can be understood as evidence of someone's presence. They are the effect of a particular cause: small children walking over paper. But the people to whom these footprints belong no longer exist. They have grown into adults, one of whom remembers the footprints and writes down that memory (itself a representation) in words in a poem, creating an image in the reader's mind.

Photographs combine iconic and indexical representation. The photograph that Howe's speaker mentions is unusual because she cites it, paradoxically, as evidence of absence:

> I have, of course, a photograph:
> you and I getting up from a couch.
> Full height, I stand almost two inches taller than
> you
> but the photograph doesn't show that,
> just the two of us in motion
> not looking at each other, smiling.

The "you," a pronoun standing in for a noun, is never named, but his presence in the photo allows the speaker to describe herself in relation to him. Not only does the photograph not show the true heights of the speaker and her companion, it cannot show anything apart from what the speaker describes. Words, in this case, are used to represent an image, an image to which the reader has no access.

The introduction of the photograph also marks the introduction of the speaking "I" in the poem, as well as the "I"'s audience, "you." Looking back at the poem, the reader now sees that the "you" would understand references to Lucia and Billy, and the other childhood memories listed. This puts the reader in a different position, as an eavesdropper on an intimate conversation between the speaker and someone close to her.

Howe's poem proceeds like this, in an infinite regress of representation, of words standing in for memories standing in for images, and so on. No thing exists by itself, but is always contingent upon some other thing, or person, some other words. Buddhists have a name for this idea of relationality: emptiness. In his study, *Buddhism without Beliefs*, Stephen Batchelor writes, "Emptiness does not describe how . . . things exist; it merely describes how they are devoid of an intrinsic, separate being." Batchelor argues that the more people try to latch onto the idea of the self, defining it, protecting it, naming it, the more they create anguish for themselves, for the self is no one thing, but a system of interacting processes and circumstances. He writes:

> We have been created, molded, formed by a bewildering matrix of contingencies that have preceded us. From the patterning of the DNA derived from our parents to the firing of the hundred billion neurons in our brains to the cultural and historical conditioning of the twentieth century to the education and upbringing given us to all the experiences we have ever had and choices we have ever made: these have conspired to configure the unique trajectory that culminates in this present moment.

This moment too, must pass, and that's what Howe's poem wants the reader to grasp. Instead of seeing oneself as separate from others, from nature, from time and space itself, identifiable as this or that kind of person, her poem asks the reader to think of themselves as part of cosmic consciousness, as transient accumulations of cells, thoughts, air, water, earth, already beginning to break down and become something else. Her speaker demonstrates an eerie separation from even her own body, when she holds forth her blistered arm for her companion to see, as if her own wound were evidence of her non-attachment to the world.

Source: Chris Semansky, Critical Essay on "What Belongs to Us," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Adrian Blevins

Blevins is an essayist and poet who has taught at Hollins University, Sweet Briar College, and in the Virginia Community College system. In this essay, Blevins argues that a study of the discursive mode in Howe's poem reveals that idea, when married to image and music, may bring the beauties of image and music into very sharp focus.

By articulating a preference for the concrete and particular over the abstract, poets like William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound made the image reign supreme in twentieth-century American poetry. A desire "to grasp the fluid, absolutely particular life of the physical world," as the American poet and critic Robert Pinksy says of the modernist preference for the image in *The Situation of Poetry*, requires a preference for the descriptive mode of discourse. In the descriptive mode, writers avoid abstraction and statement, choosing instead to *present feelings*, thoughts, observations, and sensations by using similes, metaphors, and other figures of speech to construct the visual pictures we call images. While there can be no doubt that images are essential to poetry, in recent years some poets have begun to realize that a preference for the descriptive mode has dominated American poetry to the point of injury. One such American poet is Marie Howe.

The descriptive mode describes the way that poets or writers use concrete terms (like roses) to ornament and present abstract ideas (like love). The narrative mode describes people moving through time, and the effects their actions have on the world around them. In the discursive mode, poets tell readers what is happening, rather than showing them, through the use of analysis, exposition, or rhetoric. An exploration of Marie Howe's "What Belongs to Us" must partly be an exploration of the way the discursive mode works in some of current American poetry since so much of the poem is made up of ideas, rather than things, and is told, rather than shown.

"What Belongs to Us" explores the allusive nature of childhood and—by extension—of all experience. It investigates the speaker's memory of her childhood by listing the memories and bodies of knowledge that can't be possessed, or owned. In other words, the poem makes a dreamy statement about the way hindsight or retrospect can turn the act of remembering into a nonspecific and therefore spiritual enterprise. Howe's use of the discursive mode contributes to the poem's ambiguity since ideas are automatically abstract. The sense of ambiguity in Howe's poem makes the old and common experience of remembering childhood unfamiliar to us: it reinvigorates an ordinary act by placing it into a poetic space that is hazy and indefinite and in so doing does what poems should do with recollected experience. The poem's first line—"Not the memorized phone numbers"—expresses not a phone number, but the fact that the "memorized phone numbers," according to the title, do not "belong to us." The poem's second line refers to a part of childhood that also cannot be possessed and is an idea in the sense that it does not present a "carefully rehearsed short [cut] home" so much as *state* that those paths, as well, are not to be possessed. In other words, the first two lines of "What Belongs to Us" are completely discursive.

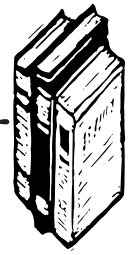
In the discursive mode, a poet's voice and unique system of thought can dominate a poem: statements expressing ideas, while abstract, tell us how speakers *think* more directly than images do. By beginning in the discursive mode, Howe establishes the authority of her voice. An authoritative and emphatic voice is especially important in an expression of vague, unsupported ideas. That is, if readers are going to accept the initial premise of a poem that begins in the discursive mode, they will do so because of the tone of the speaker's voice, rather than because of anything specific the speaker says or reveals about her skill with image and music. Although the speaker doesn't tell us much in her first two lines, she does establish a certain kind of authority over her subject matter by using the statement's inherent emphatic tone. That tone is necessary because there are no images—there's not even music—to make the first two lines compelling.

The poem moves from its discursive opening to a use of the descriptive mode in stanza three. That stanza opens with an actual image—"Not the summer, shimmering like pavement"—and then moves to a memory about someone named "Lucia," who "pushed Billy off the rabbit house and broke his arm." The image in this stanza demands attention and is thereby able to slow down the poem's movement forward. That is, since the poem's first two lines present no visuals or experience for the senses, the reader welcomes the image in the poem's third line that the "summer [is] shimmering like pavement." The alliteration of the /s/ sound in "summer" and "shimmering" contributes to the power of this image. It's also interesting to note how different the "summer, shimmering" image is from the actual memory about Lucia in this stanza. Although the Lucia memory produces a kind of picture, it does not work like the image made with the simile. It is more discursive in the sense that it makes a statement: it records a fact and therefore does not come from the imagination like the second stanza's image does. The tension between the "summer, shimmering" image and the less-imagistic, but visual line about Lucia reveals that a constant movement between the various modes of discourse can help give a poem energy.

> *"Howe's movement in 'What Belongs to Us,' from the discursive to the imagistic to the lyrical and back again, has enacted the idea that memory is more motion than image."*

The poem's fifth line—"or our tiny footprints in the back files"—combines both fact and imagination. That is, the children in the speaker's family probably had, on their birth certificates, "tiny footprints in the back files" of a doctor's office, but because the rhythm in this line takes great advantage of the hard stresses of monosyllabic words—every word but "footprints," which might also be read as containing two hard stresses, is monosyllabic—it is much more musical than the discursive lines that opened the poem. The repetition of the /i/ sound in "tiny" and "files" and alliteration in "footprints" with "files" contributes, as well, to this stanza's music. The tension between the lack of music in the poem's first two lines and the gradually increasing music, or lyricism, in it serves to increase the poem's pacing, or suspense.

What Do I Read Next?



- Stephen Batchelor's *Buddhism without Beliefs* (1997) provides an accessible introduction to the principles and values underlying Buddhism, without the accompanying religious dogma.
- Howe's *The Good Thief* (1988) contains the poem "What Belongs to Us," along with thirty-three other poems. Readers could benefit from reading the entire book to develop a strong sense of how the poem fits into the collection.
- Howe has edited, with Michael Klein, *In the Company of My Solitude: American Writing from the AIDS Pandemic*, published by Persea in 1995. Howe's brother, John, died of AIDS.
- For an innovative look at 1980s' conservatism, read Michael X. Caprini's 1986 book entitled *Change in American Politics: The Coming of Age of the Generation of the 1960s*.
- Matthew Rettenmund's 1996 book entitled *Totally Awesome 80s: A Lexicon of the Music, Videos, Movies, TV Shows, Stars, and Trends of That Decadent Decade*, is the first pop reference work on the 1980s.

The poem progresses as it had begun, listing in the negative what cannot "belong" to the speaker and her siblings in stanzas made of one and two, often end-stopped, lines. In the poem's sixth line, the author moves to a more discursive statement with "Not the lists of kings from Charlemagne to Henry." This line is discursive because a list is more of an idea than an object. But notice that Howe will not express ideas for long without making music to counteract them. The alliteration in "not the boxes under our beds" in the poem's sixth line works to save the Charlemagne line from becoming too flat. Then, in a stanza much like the poem's third stanza, we move to another memory of "Tommy's wedding day when it was so hot and Mark played the flute / and we waved at him waving from the small round window in the loft." The sound play in this stanza is as noticeable as was the image about the "summer, shimmering like pavement." Again, because there has been discursive language leading up to that line in lines like "Not the list of kings from Charlemagne to Henry," the music here comes into sharp focus. The alliteration of the /w/ sound in "wedding," "when," "we," "waved," "waving," and "window" is picked up again in the poem's tenth line, when Howe writes about "the great gangs of people stepping one by one into the cold water." The music in these two lines is really very stunning. Not only does the /w/ sound in "water" rhyme with that sound in the poem's eighth and ninth lines, the alliteration of the guttural /g/ sound in "great gangs" is countered by the many long and short /o/ sounds in the line, as well.

The movement from the use of the discursive mode in the poem's first two lines to the descriptive mode in the poem's third line in the image about the summer to the intensely lyrical music in the poem's eighth, ninth, and tenth lines works almost the way suspense would in a narrative poem. That is, Howe's progression from a flatly discursive line to a more imaginative line to a more musical line gives the poem its energy and increasingly fervent tone. In so doing, Howe mimics the way the emotions that memories elicit gradually increase in feeling and heat.

"What Belongs to Us" turns, much like a sonnet, in its eleventh line, with a shift from the catalogue of statements to a specific memory about a certain photograph. Structurally, this movement imitates the increased heat or fervor because it moves from the general (the list of what can't belong) to the specific (this very photograph). The reader finds out in line 12 that the poem is addressed to the person who is "getting up from a couch" in a photograph. Although the speaker doesn't give us the identity of the person she's addressing, the reader can assume from the poem's context that the person is a sibling. This information increases the poem's intimacy since suddenly the reader realizes he is eavesdropping on a private conversation. Although the reader may be curious about what, if anything, does belong to the speaker, stanza nine offers no such clues. It is as negative as are the poem's first ten lines. That is, the poet describes not so much what the photograph shows as what the photograph "doesn't show," which is that the speaker "stand[s] almost two inches taller" than the person she's addressing. This stanza reinforces the conflict between what adults remember of childhood and the actual objects people use to record their memories. In other words, people cannot own photographs any more

than they can own "the carefully rehearsed short cuts home" or the "list of kings from Charlemagne to Henry." What the photograph does record is "just the two of us in motion / not looking at each other, smiling." What the photograph *does reveal* is just a sense of movement, of motion, that Howe suggests in this poem is the essence of the act of remembering.

Howe returns to her catalogue in the seventeenth line, reinforcing the poem's overall catalogue shape. Here the reader gets another list of what does not belong to the speaker and the sibling she's addressing. The lines in these stanzas are much like the poem's opening lines—they are empathic statements that present very little. The reader is offered the vague image of two children "leaning against the kitchen counter," but is not told what the children look like. The poem's eighteenth line contains another specific memory, of an occasion on which the speaker "burned [her] arm." The other child in the photograph—the "you" of the poem—said, "oh, you're the type / that even if it hurt, you wouldn't say." This statement says more about the speaker than the person to whom the poem is addressed, and reminds the reader that poems using the discursive mode can point backwards to their speakers in psychologically significant ways.

The memory of the burn moves the reader to the poem's last line, a reference to blisters. The imperative "look" in this last line makes a demand on both the person the speaker addresses and the poem's readers. It is a fragment of one word, a verb, and ironically recalls what people do when they experience the world with the sense of sight, which is often what they do when they experience poetic images. After a long catalogue of the memories that cannot be owned by children, the speaker demands that the reader "look." The reader supposes he is being commanded to look at the photograph that has just been mentioned. But that photograph offers nothing concrete to look *at*—just two children "in motion, not looking at each other, smiling." Then the reader understands that he is being asked to look at motion itself.

Howe's movement in "What Belongs to Us," from the discursive to the imagistic to the lyrical and back again, has enacted the idea that memory is more motion than image. In so doing, it reveals that poems that actively employ more than one mode of discourse can be put into rhetorical forms and modes that mimic content. For these and other reasons, it seems clear that the discursive mode can be effective in poems; sometimes it can even make the images and music poetry relies on even more beautiful than they would otherwise be.

Source: Adrian Blevins, Critical Essay on "What Belongs to Us," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

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Further Reading

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Howe co-edited this special edition of the journal *Ploughshares*, which features new and emerging poets and fiction writers. This is a good book to read for an idea of Howe's taste in literature. Contributors include Michael Klein, Anne-Marie Levine, Fred Marchant, Jeffrey McDaniel, Jane Mead, Malena Morling, Suzanne Owens, Suzanne Paola, Candice Reffe, and Martha Rhodes.

Prince, Ruth E. C., "The Impermeable Line: An Interview with Marie Howe," in *Radcliffe Quarterly*, Summer 1998.

Howe talks about her writing history and habits and discusses her latest book, *What the Living Do*. This issue also contains a few poems by Howe.

Sewell, Marilyn, *Cries of the Spirit: A Celebration of Women's Spirituality*, Houghton Mifflin, 2000.

Sewell collects poetry by a variety of women, and from a woman's point of view, on topics including marriage, death, birth, and loss.

Wild Geese

Mary Oliver

1986

"Wild Geese," which first appeared in Mary Oliver's *Dream Work*, published in 1986, is one of the poet's most anthologized poems. It is also one of her most arresting. In it, she explores the connection between the human mind, nature in general, and wild geese in particular. Oliver is well noted for her poetry of the natural world, and she often relates animals and varieties of plant life to the human condition. Typical themes involve the beauty and wonders of nature and how much better the world would be if people were more in tune with it. In "Wild Geese," she encourages the reader to be more imaginative and to shed loneliness by discovering his or her place "in the family of things"—namely, the family of sun and rain, prairies and trees, mountains, rivers, and, ultimately, wild geese flying home.

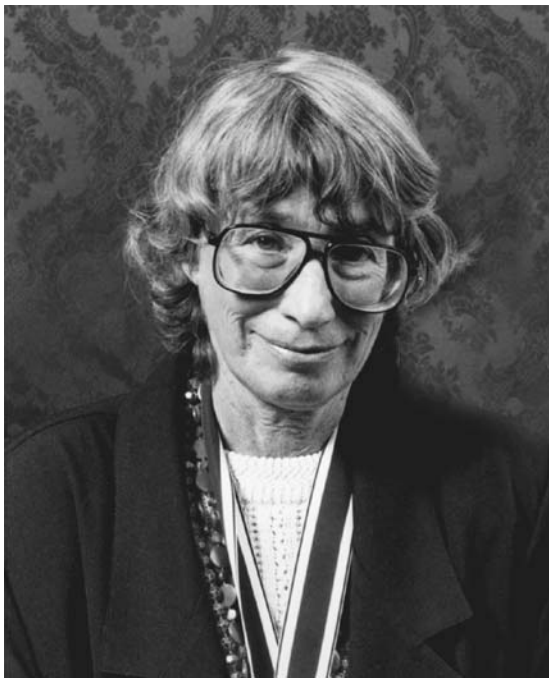
Although the premise of this poem may seem simple, or even trite, the real gut of its message is quite provocative. From its first line—rife with intriguing ambiguity—the poem draws the reader in with a sense of immediacy and a keen awareness of how "you" may be feeling and what "you" may be thinking. This is a brief poem written in casual language, but it still manages to be stimulating and powerful. Not all poets can pull that off, but Oliver is one of the noted few who can.

Author Biography

Mary Oliver was born in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1935. Her father was a teacher and her mother a stay-at-home mom. Oliver knew early on that she wanted to be a writer, and her demeanor, even as a young teen, was serious and determined. When she was fifteen, she sent a letter to Norma Millay Ellis, the sister of the late poet Edna St. Vincent Millay, asking if she could visit Steepletop, Millay's home in upstate New York. Touched by the young girl's admiration of her recently deceased sister, Ellis consented to the visit, and it became only the first of several that Oliver would make to Steepletop. Eventually, she was invited for an extended stay during which time she helped to organize Millay's papers.

From 1955 to 1956, Oliver studied at Ohio State University and then at Vassar from 1956 to 1957. Without earning a degree, she left college and moved to Provincetown, Massachusetts, a noted bohemian community that had earlier attracted Edna St. Vincent Millay. All the while, Oliver had been writing and publishing poetry. Millay's influence was apparent in her work, but it also showed striking original ability for a young poet in her twenties. In 1963, Oliver published her first full-length collection, *No Voyage, and Other Poems*, which was reissued in an expanded edition two years later. Oliver's second collection, *The River Styx, Ohio, and Other Poems*, did not come out until 1972, the same year she accepted the position of chair of the creative writing department at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown. Other distinguished teaching positions followed: poet-in-residence and visiting professor positions at Case Western Reserve University, Bucknell University, the University of Cincinnati, and Sweet Briar College. In 1996, Oliver became the Catharine Osgood Foster Chair for Distinguished Teaching at Bennington College, where she remains today.

For over four decades, Oliver has been a prolific writer of both poetry and nonfiction. She has published some sixteen volumes and has received several prestigious awards, including a National Endowment for the Arts, a Guggenheim fellowship, and, for *American Primitive*, published in 1983, the coveted Pulitzer Prize. Oliver followed this collection three years later with *Dream Work*, which contained the poem "Wild Geese." In 1992, Oliver received yet another prestigious prize—a National Book Award for *New and Selected Poems*—but this acceptance ceremony marked a new era in the poet's life. On stage, she openly thanked supporters, including Molly Malone Cook, whom she called "the light of my life." Over the years, many readers and critics had attempted to find evidence of Oliver's lesbian lifestyle in her work, but this speech was the first time she publicly referred to it. Ultimately, Oliver's sexual preference has made little or no difference in her literary endeavors, and she has remained out of any political spotlight concerning the issue. She and Cook make their home in Vermont.



Mary Oliver

Poem Text

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you
mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the
rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue
air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,

Media Adaptations

- The World Wide Web offers one category match, six web sites, and over four hundred web pages related to Mary Oliver's poetry, as of this writing. Many of the pages contain the full text of "Wild Geese," as well as comments on it.

the world offers itself to your imagination, 15
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and
exciting—
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

Poem Summary

Line 1

The first line of "Wild Geese" is one that many readers recall long after putting the poem aside. The use of the second person "you" may seem generic at first, but later in the poem, the reader understands that he or she is the one directly addressed. This line is ambiguous in meaning because one is not sure if the speaker is saying that "You do not have to be good" in the moral sense of good versus evil, or whether one does not have to be good *at doing* something. The first meaning is probably the one most people believe is intended, and the next two lines of the poem appear to verify it.

Lines 2–3

The religious connotation in lines 2 and 3 supports the notion that you do not have to be a "good" person if you do not want to be. The "walk on your knees" phrase implies someone praying or displaying worship, and the addition of "for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting" implies suffering and a willingness to be punished for sinful behavior. In general, the idea of crawling through a desert on one's knees infers humility and an acceptance that one must "pay" for future comfort and happiness with present pain and sacrifice. More specifically, the notion refers to the forty days that Jesus spent in the desert without food or water, being tempted by Satan.

Lines 4–5

Lines 4 and 5 contain the first comparison of the human being to the natural world. The speaker claims that "your body" has a "soft animal" within it, and that you need to let it "love what it loves." This idea of self-indulgence and personal pleasure is directly opposed to the previous description of self-abasement and repentance. Therefore, while the first three lines tell you what you "do not have to do," these two lines explain what you "only" have to do.

Line 6

Line 6 now brings the reader specifically into the poem. If the "you" seemed generic before, here the direct address is unmistakable. Note how the placement of the words in this line emphasizes the address: "Tell me about despair, yours." If the line read, "Tell me about your despair," think of how much weaker, and perhaps still generic, the second person would seem. As is, however, the speaker makes a very poignant request, calling attention to human despair and showing a strong willingness to share stories of it with the reader in particular.

Lines 7–11

These five lines imply that despair is a strictly *human* quality. While human beings may sit around and bemoan their misfortunes and hopeless states, "the world goes on." The "world" here, however, belongs to nature. It is the world of sun and rain "moving across" earth's various landscapes, "the prairies and the deep trees, / the mountains and the rivers."

Lines 12–13

So far, the poem has addressed nature in somewhat general terms, but in these lines, a specific animal is identified. Like the sun, rain, and landscapes, however, the wild geese are going about their business, oblivious to human despair. The portrayal of a flock of geese flying "high in the clean blue air" is a pleasant scene, one that humankind could benefit from if people would pay more attention to the events in nature happening all around them.

Line 14

Line 14 is another direct address to the reader, and it is clear that at least one form of despair the speaker fears "you" may be feeling is loneliness.

Although the speaker may not know the reader personally, she says that "whoever you are," if "you" are lonely and despairing, this poem is for "you."

Lines 15–16

In these lines, the speaker reveals the method by which humans can relate to nature. The "world" here may be either the natural world or the human world, for both are available for whatever "your imagination" would like to make of them. This does not necessarily mean that people should live in imaginary worlds instead of trying to cope in the real one. Instead, by being *creative* and *thoughtful*, individuals can start to appreciate things they may have previously ignored and to see the beauty in nature to which they used to be blind. Line 16 compares the world that awaits your imagination to the calls of the wild geese, "harsh and exciting." Although, the word "harsh" typically has a negative connotation, here it seems to imply only loud and determined.

Lines 17–18

The final two lines of "Wild Geese" are an assurance to readers that they are not alone in their loneliness. The speaker implies that the world is adamant about welcoming everyone into it, for it calls out "over and over announcing your place / in the family of things." Here the "family" consists of all of nature—the sun and rain, rivers and mountains, and every member of the animal kingdom, including wild geese and human beings. One needs only to have a receptive imagination to find a place to belong.

Themes

Nature and Humankind

The reader does not have to know that Mary Oliver is a nature poet to know that "Wild Geese" is a nature poem. That fact resonates throughout the work, as it compares nature's condition to the human condition. As with most poems that make this comparison, nature comes out on top. One should not dismiss the work as another tirade on how bad people are and how good animals, plants, mountains, and so forth are. The person addressed here is lonely but not necessarily bad. Although the speaker declares up front that "You do not have to be good," there is no indication that "you" are anything other than despairing and lonely. That description, of course, evokes more pity for the human condition than anger or animosity.

Topics for Further Study

- Write an essay giving your interpretation of the line "the world offers itself to your imagination" from "Wild Geese." Consider why the offer is to "your imagination" instead of "your heart" or "your mind" and explain the difference.
- Some people believe that there is such a thing as "writing too much for too long"—that a poet like Mary Oliver who has published more than sixteen books, many of them with a similar theme and subject matter, risks becoming stale. How do you feel about it? When, if ever, is it time for a writer to stop writing?
- Loneliness has been linked not only to mental depression in humans, but also to various physical ailments as well. Read some research on the subject and write an essay on one or two theories of overcoming loneliness. Do you have your own theory that differs from the ones researchers suggest?
- Rewrite the poem "Wild Geese" so that it begins with the opposite meaning of the real work. That is, your first lines are, "You have to be good / You have to walk on your knees," and so forth. At what point does it get difficult to continue and why? Is the sentiment toward nature the same in your poem as it is in Oliver's? Why or why not?

"Wild Geese" is also different from many other natural world vs. human world poems in its portrayal of nature's response to humanity. Sometimes poets describe nature as indifferent or superior to people, essentially ignoring human suffering and rebuffing any attempt by an individual to be more compassionate about it. But in Oliver's poem, nature—"the world"—is both sympathetic and welcoming to human beings. It uses the voices of wild geese to call out to individuals in despair and to let them know that there is a place for them in nature's family. The overall theme, then, is not that nature is superior to humankind, but that humans could be

just as content, just as carefree as nature if they wanted to. This sentiment, obviously, oversimplifies the poem's main premise, but the bottom line is that the troubled human condition could be eased somewhat by letting "your imagination" be more creative and natural.

Hedonism

Hedonism is defined as the pursuit of things that bring pleasure, especially pleasure to the senses. The first five lines of "Wild Geese" suggest a favorable response to this philosophy. Although the first line may appear ambiguous, at least one of its meanings is clear: you do not have to be "good" in the religious or moral sense of showing humility, contrition, and repentance as exemplified throughout religious teachings. In other words, you do not have to be like Jesus of the New Testament who proved allegiance to God by spending forty days in the desert refusing temptations by Satan. Lines 4 and 5 capture the essence of the hedonistic belief that seeking personal, physical pleasure should outweigh any spiritual endeavors. The speaker implies that the surest avenue to happiness is "to let the soft animal of your body / love what it loves." Animals, after all, do not think in terms of morality or of good and evil. They simply follow their natural instincts, which are comprised of built-in survival tactics. *Staying alive* is the goal of wild geese, cows, elephants, oak trees, petunias, and so on, but human beings must contend with something more—something called a *conscience*. It is unlikely that the intent of this theme is to promote abandoning the checks and balances that the human conscience places on behavior in favor of total self-indulgence and physical pleasure. It seems apparent, however, that an occasional delve into hedonism is recommended, at least for the sake of relieving a bit of despair and loneliness.

Style

Lyric Poetry

Lyric poets attempt to appeal to human emotions and intellect without falling into pathos or confessional poetry. Oliver's soft, sensual tone speaks directly to the reader, as though to create an intimate bond for at least as long as she has the reader's attention. In "Wild Geese," the lines are unrhymed but still melodic in rhythm and repetition. Listen to the rhythm in the three lines that begin with "You": "You do not have to be good," "You do not have to walk," "You only have to let." The same effect is heard in the three lines that begin with "Meanwhile": "Meanwhile the world goes on," "Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles," "Meanwhile the wild geese." Repeating the words lends a quiet, hypnotic quality to the speaker's voice, luring the reader with its gentleness but at the same time stimulating the intellect with their meaning.

Oliver's images are rarely provocative or surprising. Instead, she uses clear, simple language that, alone, may not seem compelling, but crafted into a complete work becomes seductive and rewarding. The image of a flock of wild geese sailing across the sky is not complex, but it is gratifying when set against the backdrop of sun and rain "moving across the landscapes" of prairies and forests and mountains. Oliver uses the same geese image to describe the world calling out to lonely people—again, not complex, but an intriguing metaphor all the same. She may be called a poet of understatement, but she can't be labeled unsophisticated or dull. Instead, her traditional lyric style maintains old-fashioned gracefulness while incorporating contemporary thought on nature and humanity. Perhaps Oliver says it best herself in "The Swan" chapter from her semi-autobiographical book, *Winter Hours*:

> I want every poem to "rest" in intensity. I want it to be rich with "pictures of the world." I want it to carry threads from the perceptually felt world to the intellectual world. I want each poem to indicate a life lived with intelligence, patience, passion, and whimsy (not my life—not necessarily!—but the life of my *formal self*, the writer).

Historical Context

The decade of the 1980s in America was dominated by a cultural, social, and political turn toward conservatism. Ronald Reagan's two-term presidency, beginning in 1980, marked a general shift in societal values, from the emphasis on social justice that characterized the 1960s and 1970s, towards a concentration on individuality and material gain. Reagan's agenda included reducing the size of the federal government and abolishing federal regulations to free up business—big and small—to produce mass quantities of goods and services for a high-consumption economy. On the social and cultural level, a return to conservatism meant an attempt to undo the counterculture lifestyle of previous years,

Compare & Contrast

- **1980s:** In a blow to the previously fervent Women's Movement, the Equal Rights Amendment fails to be ratified. Afterwards, the movement falls into a period of upheaval with many former supporters and members of the National Organization of Women (NOW) abandoning the cause, at least on the political level.

  Today: Concerned Women for America (CWA), with members in 50 states, is the largest public policy women's organization in the nation, surpassing NOW. Many American women are more attracted to CWA's discussion of such issues as religious persecution around the world, protecting children from pornography, breast cancer prevention, and morality in America than to NOW's more political agenda, which deals primarily with the empowerment of women.
- **1980s:** Researchers develop the first commercial application of recombinant DNA (or genetic engineering) when they produce human insulin for the treatment of diabetes. To provide insulin in the quantities needed for medical use, they isolate the gene that produces human insulin and transfer it to bacteria. The bacteria multiply, producing the protein insulin as they grow.

  Today: An international consortium of genetic researchers, collectively known as the Human Genome Project, announce that they have completely mapped the genetic code of a human chromosome, raising an abundance of medical, legal, and ethical questions.
- **1980s:** The discovery of a hole in the Earth's protective ozone layer spurs an outcry from environmentalists who claim that modern lifestyles and technology are destroying the ecology that all life depends upon. The hole was apparently caused by chlorofluorocarbon refrigerants drifting up into the atmosphere.

  Today: Most scientists agree that a recovery of the ozone layer in many regions of the world should be detected within the next fifteen to forty-five years, based on full compliance with the Montreal Protocol. The Protocol is an international agreement aimed at phasing out ozone-depleting chemicals, and most developed countries have adopted it. Many developing nations, however, have not complied for economic reasons.

bringing back old-fashioned values and moral standards. For many Americans, this turn translated into less tolerance for individuals and groups that did not fit the prescribed right-wing model, including various racial and ethnic groups, feminists, and gays and lesbians. Political factors that helped support cultural conservatism included the failure of the Equal Rights Amendment in 1982, large funding cuts in social and affirmative action programs, an increase in antiabortion legislation, and an initial disinterested response from government toward AIDS—the new and devastating disease that many Americans initially ignored, in the mistaken belief that it affected only homosexuals.

Oliver's poetry reveals nothing about how it may have been influenced by 1980s conservatism, and her *Dream Work* collection, which came out in the heart of the decade, does not appear to have been based on a response to any right-wing backlashes, including those against the gay and lesbian communities. Instead, Oliver's work, then as before, centered on nature and the human relationship to the natural environment.

Interestingly, the 1980s saw not only shifts in social attitudes and political movements, but also in the fields of science and technology, which had a profound impact on what human beings have always perceived as "natural." During the Reagan administration, some of the resources diverted from social programs and government went to fund what became known as "big science," especially from its critics. Astronomers and physicists lobbied for billions of dollars to support building large-scale particle accelerators, and NASA fueled an ongoing

Wild geese flying in formation

campaign for its long-projected space station. Although both these projects had their funding severely cut by the end of the decade, neither was as controversial as Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative, or "Star Wars," as it was dubiously termed. The effort's aim was to construct an impenetrable "space shield" to protect the United States from a nuclear attack, but the sheer mathematics of stopping thousands of enemy missiles simultaneously, coupled with an estimated one-trillion-dollar price tag, grounded the project before it got too far off the ground. Two other wake-up calls for big science—tragic, in these cases—came in 1986 with the explosion of the *Challenger* space shuttle, which killed all on board, and the meltdown at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant in the Soviet Union, which claimed the lives of at least 8,000 people.

Although technological advances and defeats during the 1980s provoked loud opinions on both sides of the issues, perhaps the most controversial scientific "achievements" were made in the area of biological manipulation, which gave mankind the ability to alter nature at its very core. The discovery in the 1970s of how to recombine genetic material into new life forms spurred research scientists at universities and corporations in the 1980s to produce new genetic codes and to begin to map the three billion nucleotides that make up human DNA. Proponents of biological engineering touted the possibilities of developing stronger, longer-lasting food sources, including not only fruits and vegetables, but also grains, beef, pork, and chicken. They dreamt of curing deadly diseases once and for all, and of creating life forms that could be used in special cases, such as lab animals genetically coded for cancer in order to help scientists understand the disease better.

Opponents, however, viewed those same possibilities as dangerous and unethical, if not immoral. They pointed to the disasters in technology that occurred in the 1980s and wondered if the same tragedies might not happen in biology. What if modified produce and meats became toxic and greatly depleted the food supply? What if a genetically engineered virus escaped the boundaries of the lab and introduced an incurable plague into the general population? What if the godlike power to alter human genes fell into the wrong hands—the hands of someone who wanted to destroy certain races and strengthen others? These questions may at first sound as though they have been lifted from the pages of a science fiction thriller, but biological manipulation is now a fact of life; therefore, many feel that questioning how far humankind is willing to go in this volatile direction should be taken just as seriously.

Fears about physical calamities are not the only basis for opponents to speak out against genetic engineering. Many also fear, and detest, the idea of altering nature to suit human desire. Perhaps they fear, as well, a future in which a poet would not be able to write of lonely individuals finding their place "in the family of things." The family, after all, may someday be unrecognizable due to modern changes.

Critical Overview

Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of the critical reception of Oliver's work is that she has been both commended and denounced for the same things—her simple, clear language and her predominant use of nature as a subject. Some critics find her treatment of the natural world not necessarily provocative, but intellectually stimulating all the same. Writing for the *Kentucky Review*, Robin Riley Fast says that

> A strong sense of place, and of identity in relation to it, is central to [Oliver's] poetry. Her poems are firmly located in the places where she has lived or traveled . . . ; her moments of transcendence arise organically from the realities of swamp, pond, woods and shore.

Other critics appreciate Oliver's emphasis on nature, too, but also recognize that there are those who do not. In *Papers on Language and Literature*, Vicki Graham writes that

> Oliver's celebration of dissolution into the natural world troubles some critics: her poems flirt dangerously with romantic assumptions about the close association of women with nature that many theorists claim put the woman writer at risk.

For centuries, romantic nature poetry has been considered the domain of male poets, and even feminists have tended to shun Oliver's work, believing that a strong female voice gets lost in praise for nature.

The biggest complaint about the language in Oliver's poetry is that it is too "plain" and describes conventional imagery instead of unusual takes on nature. The poet, however, finds no need to manipulate or spruce up what already speaks for itself in terms of beauty, elegance, and power. More often than not, critics who have made negative comments about her poetry end up admitting that her lyrical style is still captivating, and that she has managed to deal with commonplace subjects without lapsing into sentimentality. The number of awards her poetry has received is certainly evidence of her power as a poet, despite mixed critical response.

Criticism

Pamela Steed Hill

Hill is the author of a poetry collection, has published widely in literary journals, and is an editor for a university publications department. In the following essay, Hill questions the necessity of advocating profane self-indulgence in an otherwise serene, benevolent poem of natural beauty and human kindness.

Mary Oliver's "Wild Geese" is a difficult poem to like and an even more difficult poem to dislike. Its initial ambiguity is cleared up all too soon, and the apparent message leaves some readers unsettled: you do not have to be a good human being. Instead, you can opt for whatever physical pleasure you desire and not have to worry about feeling guilty nor have a need to repent. Once this sentiment is out of the way in the first five lines, however, the remainder of the poem expresses a kind gesture from the poet to the reader—an invitation to share his or her loneliness and despairing thoughts and to come to understand that there is a place in nature's family for everyone. Even the imagery shifts from a philosophical, allusion-based metaphor in the first few lines to a more concrete, direct description throughout the rest of the work.

It seems, then, that "Wild Geese" is really two poems in one. The first suggests hedonism and the pursuit of pleasure as a remedy for human depression and loneliness. The other recommends paying attention to the beauty of nature and to using your imagination to see how you really do fit into "the family of things." Simply because the latter theme is allowed more space in the poem, one may think it is the work's "true" message, but the very provocative idea that "You do not have to be good" cannot be ignored. If the latter theme *is* the real point here, the poem would have echoed it much more strongly without the first five lines.

The largest concern a doubtful reader may have is this: why it was necessary for Oliver to include the notion about not being good, going so far as to link "good" to biblical references regarding Jesus and, perhaps, Moses and the Israelites. It's a good question. First, one can probably dispel any idea that the poet is completely anti-religion and

There is something more than conversational, in fact something deeply personal, about two people speaking intimately of their own despair, and that is the relationship between poet and reader that Oliver desires."

advocates reckless, pleasure-seeking behavior in place of traditional values set forth in the doctrines of good versus evil. Nothing else in the poem, or in any of Oliver's other known works, supports such a claim. In fact, many of her poems point to a concern for immortality and thankfulness for the natural wonders and loved ones she has encountered as a mortal being. Atheism and evilness aside, then, what is the motive behind saying, "You do not have to be good" and that "You only have to let the soft animal of your body / love what it loves"? Perhaps by addressing an intangible, philosophical ideal—goodness—and handily casting it aside at the outset of the poem, Oliver is better able to highlight the remarkableness of the tangible—prairies, trees, mountains, rivers, and wild geese. Or perhaps she recognizes that human beings, especially lonely or troubled ones, are more apt to grasp the beauty of things they can see and touch than some intellectual concept. Yet, this poem, like so many of Oliver's, is based on human intellect and the connection between the human mind and the natural world. Given that, one can only assume that these two possible answers are pure speculation, at best. Unfortunately, this means that the question regarding the purpose of including the first five lines remains unanswered.

Telling people they "do not have to walk on [their] knees / for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting" seems to fly in the face of traditional morality. Most world religions teach followers that humility and worship are not just looked upon favorably by a supreme being, but are *required* of the truly faithful. That is why the self-serving, possibly heretical lines that open "Wild Geese" are so disturbing to many readers. How, then, does one account for the fact that this poem is one of Oliver's most popular? The answer to that probably lies in the sentiment she expresses in the rest of the poem.

By far, the dominant force of "Wild Geese" is the speaker's—or the poet's—benevolent attitude toward the reader, offering to listen to his or her troubles and suggesting a heartwarming solution. The immediacy of the poet's words is aided by her addressing "you" directly, a style that many readers find appealing. There is something more than conversational, in fact something deeply personal, about two people speaking intimately of their own despair, and that is the relationship between poet and reader that Oliver desires. To use a popular phrase, she *feels your pain*. More importantly, she wants to help the reader get rid of it.

So far, the discussion here has centered on the psychological, philosophical, and intellectual concerns of the poem—all very intangible. Yet Oliver is known for creating nature poems, works full of descriptions of things one can see, hear, and touch, and she stays true to her reputation in "Wild Geese," using the natural world as a vehicle to explain her solution to despair and loneliness. By portraying "the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain," the prairies, "deep trees," mountains, and rivers as lovely, carefree entities, she offers, metaphorically, a picture of how the reader's own life could look. Assuring "you" that "the world goes on" and that the wild geese "are heading home again" provides the reader with a model to imitate, as well as a reason to open "your imagination" to the world that "offers itself" and "calls to you like the wild geese." This is what makes Oliver's poem so attractive. She uses simple language and soft descriptions to drive home a powerful point: the reader, too, has a place "in the family of things"—a thought that sounds like it comes from the mouth of a homey grandmother.

It is the friendly, inviting tone and message in the middle and end of this poem that makes the reader forget—or, perhaps, forgive—the beginning. A casual, light reading of "Wild Geese" probably elicits kind appreciation and brief pondering on the part of the reader, and little more. In the world of poetry, that is enough to make a work popular. But one who lingers on Oliver's poem a little longer or one who studies it carefully, line by line, may be nagged by the apparent profanity of its opening. By *themselves*, the first five lines are not disturbing, and if they opened a poem that carried

through the same sentiment to its end, they still would not be disturbing. But in "Wild Geese," they seem strange and out of place. The bold notion that "You do not have to be good" is misleading when followed by such strong examples of the speaker being just that—*good*. Still, the positives in this poem outnumber the negatives based on line count alone. For each reason not to like it, there are two or three to like it quite a bit.

Source: Pamela Steed Hill, Critical Essay on "Wild Geese," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Wendy Perkins

Perkins teaches American and British literature and film. In this essay, Perkins examines Oliver's call for a sympathetic union between the self and nature.

Commenting on Mary Oliver's body of work, Janet McNew writes in an article for *Contemporary Literature*, "at its most intense, her poetry aims to peer beneath the constructions of culture and reason that burden us with an alienated consciousness to celebrate the primitive, mystical visions" of the natural world. In "Wild Geese," Oliver explores how we have been oppressed by these "constructions of culture" and offers us fruitful, fresh alternatives. In her clear and eloquent voice, she privileges the power of the imagination to help us break free from the confines of society and so be able to reconnect with our more elemental, natural selves.

The poem begins with the speaker urging an unnamed listener to separate him or herself from social notions of "goodness." She does not identify the gender of the speaker or the listener in an attempt to include all in the experience of the poem. By refusing to define oneself according to accepted standards, one would therefore not have to accept punishment for disregarding those standards. One would not need to repent by walking on one's knees "for a hundred miles through the desert.''

The speaker suggests that a separation from the social be followed with a union with nature, where one could recover one's elemental connection with natural creatures. Vicki Graham, in her article,"'Into the Body of Another': Mary Oliver and the Poetics of Becoming Other," argues, "rooted in the binary oppositions that structure Western thinking, Oliver can never fully escape the teaching of her culture that . . . identity depends on keeping intact the boundaries between self and others." Colin Lowndes in a review of Oliver's work for the Toronto *Globe & Mail* seems to contradict Graham when he insists that Oliver is "a poet of worked-for reconciliations" who focuses on the "points at which opposing forces meet." In "Wild Geese," Oliver accommodates both of these points of view in her establishment of an ironic juxtaposition of individual and collective, insisting that we first need to establish our independence from cultural constructions of value before we can open ourselves to more natural unions. We could reestablish this attachment by allowing "the soft animal" of our bodies to "love what it loves" without any direction from artificial sources. Thus, as a strong sense of place shifts from the social to the natural world, so too does identity in relation to place.

As we allow 'the soft animal' of our bodies to emerge and discover our animal essence, in a revelatory moment, we can become wild as the geese."

The process of becoming another, more primitive self depends on first establishing a direct association with the natural world. We must love through our bodies not our minds to establish the connection we need to effect a change in ourselves. By seeing and touching, we identify with and therefore become a part of nature.

This union with nature would be enhanced by a connection with the community of mankind as articulated through the speaker's suggestion that "despair" should be expressed and shared. As the speaker and listener communicate their suffering to each other, they align themselves with the ebb and flow of nature. The "world goes on" around them; the sun and the "clear pebbles of the rain" move "across the landscapes."

Oliver insists that we begin to pay attention to what nature can offer us as she offers her insight through observations of a delightful world. As she focuses on the luminous qualities of nature, "the clear pebbles of the rain" and the "harsh and exciting" wild geese, she shows us how to take note of and savor the entirety of an experience with the natural world. She illustrates the extent of the potential for a harmonious communion with nature in her delineation of the landscapes that stretch from

What Do I Read Next?

- Published in 1992, Oliver's *New and Selected Poems* is a great overview of three decades of the poet's work. This collection received the National Book Award for Poetry in 1992.
- In 2000, Clare Walker Leslie and Charles E. Roth published a helpful, interesting guide for anyone who enjoys being close to nature and wants to record the experience. *Keeping a Nature Journal* helps readers create ongoing journals for all seasons, describes simple ways to capture the natural world in words and pictures, and inspires readers to make "nature journaling" a part of daily life.
- Any reader interested in animal biology and animal habitats will enjoy Bruce Batt's *Snow Geese: Grandeur and Calamity on an Arctic Landscape* (1998). Batt describes the natural history of the snow goose, its migratory paths and stopovers, and how the growing population of these birds is causing long-term degradation on their Arctic breeding grounds. He offers a revealing explanation of how this population growth affects not only snow geese but a number of other Arctic-dwelling animals as well.
- A contemporary of Mary Oliver, poet Maxine Kumin often writes of nature and of her home life in the backcountry of Vermont. Like Oliver, she also writes prose, and in her memoir *Always Beginning: Essays on a Life in Poetry* (2000), Kumin offers an intriguing look at modern country life, her experiences as both a mother and an artist, and her eighteen-year friendship with poet Anne Sexton.

prairie to forest to mountain to river. The potential depth of the communion is expressed by the reference to the landscape of "deep trees." In the twelfth line, Oliver reinforces our connection to nature by imagining wild geese "heading home again." She suggests that if we reclaim our original bond with nature, we can fly like the wild geese, free of social constrictions "in the clean blue air." Nature becomes a mirror through which we can discover a new, truer perspective of ourselves.

The redemptive power of nature becomes evident in the next line when the speaker reassures the listener that the loneliness caused by the limits of the social world can be alleviated and transcended through an imaginative connection with the natural world. By opening ourselves to natural experience, by responding to the "harsh and exciting" calls of the universe, we, like the wild geese, can maintain our identity, our "place," yet at the same time understand our inherent connection with the "family of things." This fusion with nature reestablishes our core self, which becomes more open and encompassing than our social selves. As we allow "the soft animal" of our bodies to emerge and discover our animal essence, in a revelatory moment, we can become wild as the geese. As a result of this transcendence, we become open to the possibility of experiencing a profound satisfaction and joy.

Marilyn Chancler McEntyre, in her assessment of the poem in the *Santa Barbara Review* writes that through the poem, Oliver invites us to "enter into the gentle, humble, wild, free, authoritative work of the imagination," and shows us how to "learn the language of the inarticulate natural world and hear its message, reiterated in every sentient thing," a message telling us "to be is the holiest thing." Oliver avoids sentimentality in this transcendent moment by maintaining her clear vision of this "harsh and exciting" world.

Oliver structures the poem into three movements employing present tense to provide readers with a more dynamic experience. First, she directs us to explore our present situations, specifically how social constructions have restricted us and separated us from the natural world. Then, only when we throw off cultural restraints can we begin to come to a heightened awareness of nature and our relation to it. This readiness to investigate ways to redefine ourselves leads to an epiphany. As we envision ourselves in an individual and a collective sense through an imaginative response to our world, we reestablish our natural selves. We go beyond knowing into being. This process moves us from guilt, despair, and loneliness to a sense of completion and happiness. The speaker communicates with the readers by speaking in the second person, which helps us break through the social boundaries we have allowed to form around us, separating us from nature, and establish a real connection with humanity and our world.

Oliver's poetic vision is expressed through pleasing rhythms and a thoughtful, finely tuned merging of statement and image. The construction of short lines helps to reinforce the parallels she makes between self and world. Her conversational tone as she enumerates the abundance of nature and the possibilities for our union with it reinforces the sense of peace achieved by the end of the poem.

In her article in *Women's Review of Books*, Maxine Kumin writes that Oliver is an "indefatigable guide to the natural world . . . particularly to its lesser-known aspects." She admits that she trusts whatever Oliver tells her "about moths and marsh marigolds, fingerlings and egrets." Kumin declares that as Oliver "stands quite comfortably on the margins of things, on the line between earth and sky, the thin membrane that separates human from what we loosely call animal," she creates poems that move us "deeply." One such poem is "Wild Geese," which calls us simply and eloquently to a more intense and thus satisfying connection with our world.

Source: Wendy Perkins, Critical Essay on "Wild Geese," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Mary Potter

Potter is a writer of fiction and screenplays. In this essay, Potter shows how the interplay of elements of incantation reveals the theme of Oliver's poem.

Chanting, casting a spell, prophesizing the future—*incantation* in poetry and music uses rhythm and repetition to evoke emotion rather than to appeal to one's sense of humor or reason. In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, for example, witches recite their recipe in an incantation, summoning forth the spirits. Incantation has its literary roots in the Bible, popular examples are found in the Psalms, when the Hebrew poets call out to God, lamenting their fortune or praising his goodness.

An example of incantation in American poetry lies in Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself," which twentieth-century poet Allen Ginsberg also played upon in "Howl." These poems exhibit the long, rolling lines set off by shorter lines that are characteristic of incantation. The meter of these lines is not regular like iambic pentameter; rhyme is not regular either. Instead, Whitman and Ginsberg use repeated words and phrases and parallel structure (similar grammar) in their poems to evoke the American spirit of their times.

> *"Once lonely, Oliver's reader finds not only a place with the geese in the order of the universe but a unique place, too, because, unlike the geese, the reader has an imagination."*

Whitman's incantation-like repetition is evident in the first few lines of "Song of Myself":

> I loafe and invite my soul,
> I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.

"Loafe" is repeated, and the second line of "Song of Myself" is long, unfurling easily. Both lines are parallel, beginning with "I."

Ginsberg employs a similar tactic in the opening lines of "Howl":

> I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked,
> dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix,
> angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night,

Ginsberg's incantatory lines run even longer than Whitman's. Other ready examples of incantation are the lines spoken by the chorus in Greek drama, Gregorian chant, or the mantras of yogis.

Like the above, Mary Oliver's "Wild Geese" uses repetition and parallel structure in an incantation to the human spirit. Giving her fellow human beings hope when they feel hopeless, she addresses her readers with a poetic meditation.

"Wild Geese" falls into three sections, the first set off by the repetition of "You" three times in the first five lines; the second, by "Meanwhile" three times in the next seven lines. The third section of five lines then states the theme of the poem.

In the first section, Oliver addresses the reader directly, using "you" to open. She alludes to religions that preach goodness; specifically, Judeo-Christian practices of repentance, of Jesus Christ fasting and praying for forty days in the desert. The first two lines are similar in their sentence struc-

ture, beginning with "You do not have to." This sets up the third line, for if you do not have to "be good" or "walk on your knees in the desert," what do you have to do? Oliver says in a lush incantatory line, "You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves."

But she follows this with a shift: "Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine." This shorter line achieves its emphasis for a couple of reasons. She places "yours," referring to the reader, in the middle, and then refers to herself, "I will tell you mine." Using a kind of parallelism called *antithesis*, the two clauses mirror each other and draw Oliver into the dialogue she is having with her reader. Although not marked as a stanza, the first five lines fall together, using repetition, the movement of three lines that roll with greater speed toward the fourth line, and the fifth antithetical line that both summarizes the first four and serves as a transition to the next section.

The second section also uses repetition, as "Meanwhile" begins three of its seven lines, three of Oliver's thoughts on despair. Thus, while "you" and "I" are talking about despair, Oliver writes, "the world goes on," her use of a cliché expressing the emotion of despair. The second instance of "Meanwhile" begins what is a long sentence broken into four lines. The word itself points not only to the movement of time, but in Oliver's poem, space, too, as lines 6–12 take the reader through a panorama of the world: "the clear pebbles of the rain / are moving across the landscapes." Then "Meanwhile" begins the line that introduces the central image of the poem, the wild geese, who are "heading home again," as the reader watches, alone, still despairing. These lines, full of movement, set the stage for the statement of the poem's theme that comes at the beginning of the third and final section.

Oliver stops her reader in lines 13 and 14 with a clear statement: "Whoever you are, no matter how lonely, / the world offers itself to your imagination." This is the poet's answer for loneliness and despair: the imagination. For how can people be lonely if they have the world to observe and the imagination to do their dreaming? Part of being human is feeling lonely from time to time, yet another aspect of human nature is being able to use the imagination to reach beyond oneself.

So the imagination offers hope. Oliver, through her imagination and her poetry, gives the reader a picture of the world and the beauty of nature. Through two curious juxtapositions, the placement of "clear" next to "pebbles" and "deep" next to "trees," the wonder of the natural world is evoked. Perceived imaginatively, rain can look like clear pebbles, and trees can both have deep-reaching roots and be deep green in color. Only the human imagination can comprehend that the world calls "like the wild geese, harsh and exciting," that, yes, "over and over" existence is "harsh and exciting"; and over and over, one can find his "place in the family of things." But imagery is not the only creation of the imagination, for the body feels rhythm, moves the body, and suddenly Oliver uses it to drive her theme. "Harsh and exciting" establishes a regular rhythm for the first time in the poem. It continues in "over and over announcing your place" and concludes the poet's statement of theme with "in the family of things." The final sentence, made up of the final five lines, brings the reader "home" again, too, through its rhythm and the central image of the geese. Once lonely, Oliver's reader finds not only a place with the geese in the order of the universe but a unique place, too, because, unlike the geese, the reader has an imagination.

With "Wild Geese," Mary Oliver both evokes hope for a hopeless reader and comforts the lonely by placing him among his fellow creatures in the natural world. Like a magician casting a spell, or someone praying aloud, the poet calls to readers of her poem to embrace not institutionalized religion but a different kind of spirituality, the prize of nature, the human imagination. Not through repentance but through love, not through a poem with meter and rhyme, but through the repetition and rhythms of incantation, Mary Oliver summons forth her own gods.

Source: Mary Potter, Critical Essay on "Wild Geese," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

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Further Reading

Daniel, John, ed., *Wild Song: Poems of the Natural World*, University of Georgia Press, 1998.

This recent collection of poems by over a hundred nature poets provides a thorough look at the treatment of the natural world in verse. Although the subject is one of the most common in poetry, this book shows how uniquely it can be presented by different poets.

Oliver, Mary, *The Leaf and the Cloud*, Da Capo Press, 2000.

Oliver's most recent publication, this book-length poem continues on the theme of nature, and contains some of the poet's most striking imagery yet. For example, she depicts vegetables growing in a garden with: "The green pea / climbs the stake / on her sugary muscles," and "The rosy comma of the radish / fattens in the soil."

———, *A Poetry Handbook*, Harcourt Brace and Co., 1994

Oliver has authored two books on the "how to" of poetry writing, and both are wonderfully written and helpful, even for those who do not care much for the subject. In this book, she deals with both traditional and contemporary verse; discusses tone, voice, and imagery; and gives a bit of the history of both American and English poetry.

———, *Rules for the Dance: A Handbook for Writing and Reading Metrical Verse*, Houghton Mifflin, 1998.

This is Oliver's second "how to" book, but it deals only with metrical verse, as opposed to free verse. In it, she covers everything from breath and line length to rhyme and "image-making." Anything *but* a dry treatise on poetry writing, the book includes chapters titled "Release of Energy along the Lines," "Mutes and Other Sounds," and "The Ohs and the Ahs," to name a few.

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 liter-

ature 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 antihero 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. Today poets working in projective verse are referred to 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 an-

guish. 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 sin-

gle 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 liter-

ature. 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 1970s. 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 antinovel over the novel and the antihero 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 corrupt 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 antihero.

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 overly ornamental style.

Romance:

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 nineteenth 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 deliv-

ered 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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