

center.  
Things  
cannot hold  
apart;  
Things fall  
apart; not  
The center  
can  
Things fall  
apart;  
Things fall  
The center  
cannot hold  
The center  
Things fall  
cannot hold  
apart;  
The center  
cannot hold

# Poetry for Students

cannot  
Things fall  
apart; Thing  
The center  
cannot hold



*Poetry  
for Students*

# *Poetry for Students*

**Presenting Analysis, Context and Criticism on  
Commonly Studied Poetry**

*Volume 3*

*Marie Rose Napierkowski, Editor*

*Mary K. Ruby, Editor*

*David Kelly, College of Lake County, Advisor*

*Jan Mordenski, Mercy High School, Advisor*

*Foreword by David Kelly, College of Lake County*



**GALE**

DETROIT • NEW YORK • LONDON

# Poetry for Students

## Staff

**Series Editors:** Marie Rose Napierkowski and Mary Ruby.

**Contributing Editors:** Amy Francis, Carol Gaffke, David Galens, Lynn Koch, Marie Lazzari, Mary Onorato, James Person, Jr., Susan Salas, Anna J. Sheets, Diane Telgen, Lawrence J. Trudeau.

**Managing Editor:** Drew Kalasky.

**Research:** Victoria B. Cariappa, *Research Team Manager*. Andy Malonis, *Research Specialist*. Julia C. Daniel, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie A. Richardson, and Cheryl L. Warnock, *Research Associates*. Jeffrey Daniels, *Research Assistant*.

**Permissions:** Susan M. Trosky, *Permissions Manager*. Kimberly F. Smilay, *Permissions Specialist*. Steve Cusack, *Permissions Assistant*.

**Production:** Mary Beth Trimper, *Production Director*. Evi Seoud, *Assistant Production Manager*. Shanna Heilveil, *Production Assistant*.

**Graphic Services:** Randy Bassett, *Image Database Supervisor*. Robert Duncan and Michael Logusz, *Imaging Specialists*. Pamela A. Reed, *Photography Coordinator*. Gary Leach, *Macintosh Artist*.

**Product Design:** Cynthia Baldwin, *Product Design Manager*. Cover Design: Michelle DiMercurio, *Art Director*.

**Page Design:** Pamela A. E. Galbreath, *Senior Art Director*.

## Copyright Notice


Since this page cannot legibly accommodate all copyright notices, the acknowledgments constitute an extension of the copyright notice.

While every effort has been made to secure permission to reprint material and to ensure the reliability of the information presented in this publication, Gale Research neither guarantees the accuracy of the data contained herein nor assumes any responsibility for errors, omissions, or discrepancies. Gale accepts no payment for listing; and inclusion in the publication of any organization, agency, institution, publication, service, or individual does not imply endorsement of the editors or publisher. Errors brought to the attention of the publisher and verified to the satisfaction of the publisher will be corrected in future editions.

This publication is a creative work fully protected by all applicable copyright laws, as well as by misappropriation, trade secret, unfair competition, and other applicable laws. The authors and editors of this work have added value to the underlying factual material herein through one or more of the following: unique and original selection, coordination, expression, arrangement, and classification of the information. All rights to this publication will be vigorously defended.

Copyright © 1998  
Gale Research  
835 Penobscot Building  
645 Griswold St.  
Detroit, MI 48226-4094

All rights reserved including the right of reproduction in whole or in part in any form.

 This book is printed on acid-free paper that meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

ISBN 0-7876-2724-0  
ISSN 1094-7019  
Printed in the United States of America.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

# Table of Contents

<i>Guest Foreword</i>	
“Just a Few Lines on a Page”	
by David J. Kelly	viii
<i>Introduction</i>	x
<i>Literary Chronology</i>	xiii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xvi
<i>Contributors</i>	xix
<i>Any Human to Another</i>	
(by Countee Cullen)	1
Author Biography	1
Poem Text	2
Poem Summary	2
Themes	4
Style	5
Historical Context	5
Critical Overview	7
Criticism	8
<i>A Pièd (by Colleen McElroy)</i>	15
Author Biography Colleen Johnson	15
Poem Text	16
Poem Summary	17
Themes	18
Style	19
Historical Context	20
Critical Overview	21
Criticism	21



Table of Contents

<i>Auto Wreck</i> (by Karl Shapiro) . . . . .	30	Themes . . . . .	110
Author Biography . . . . .	30	Style . . . . .	111
Poem Text . . . . .	31	Historical Context . . . . .	112
Poem Summary . . . . .	31	Critical Overview . . . . .	112
Themes . . . . .	33	Criticism . . . . .	113
Style . . . . .	34		
Historical Context . . . . .	34	<i>Hope Is the Thing with Feathers</i>	
Critical Overview . . . . .	36	(by Emily Dickinson) . . . . .	122
Criticism . . . . .	36	Author Biography . . . . .	122
<i>The Bells</i> (by Edgar Allan Poe) . . . . .	45	Poem Text . . . . .	123
Author Biography . . . . .	45	Poem Summary . . . . .	123
Poem Text . . . . .	46	Themes . . . . .	124
Poem Summary . . . . .	47	Style . . . . .	126
Themes . . . . .	50	Historical Context . . . . .	126
Style . . . . .	51	Critical Overview . . . . .	128
Historical Context . . . . .	52	Criticism . . . . .	128
Critical Overview . . . . .	54		
Criticism . . . . .	54	<i>Hurt Hawks</i> (by Robinson Jeffers) . . . . .	136
<i>Chicago</i> (by Carl Sandburg) . . . . .	60	Author Biography . . . . .	137
Author Biography . . . . .	61	Poem Text . . . . .	138
Poem Text . . . . .	61	Poem Summary . . . . .	138
Poem Summary . . . . .	62	Themes . . . . .	140
Themes . . . . .	63	Style . . . . .	141
Style . . . . .	64	Historical Context . . . . .	141
Historical Context . . . . .	65	Critical Overview . . . . .	142
Critical Overview . . . . .	67	Criticism . . . . .	143
Criticism . . . . .	67		
<i>The Courage that My Mother Had</i>		<i>I Hear America Singing</i>	
(by Edna St. Vincent Millay) . . . . .	78	(by Walt Whitman) . . . . .	151
Author Biography . . . . .	78	Author Biography . . . . .	152
Poem Text . . . . .	79	Poem Text . . . . .	152
Poem Summary . . . . .	80	Poem Summary . . . . .	152
Themes . . . . .	81	Themes . . . . .	153
Style . . . . .	82	Style . . . . .	155
Historical Context . . . . .	82	Historical Context . . . . .	155
Critical Overview . . . . .	84	Critical Overview . . . . .	157
Criticism . . . . .	84	Criticism . . . . .	157
<i>Fern Hill</i> (by Dylan Thomas) . . . . .	90	<i>The Man He Killed</i> (by Thomas Hardy) . . . . .	166
Author Biography . . . . .	91	Author Biography . . . . .	166
Poem Text . . . . .	92	Poem Text . . . . .	167
Poem Summary . . . . .	92	Poem Summary . . . . .	167
Themes . . . . .	95	Themes . . . . .	168
Style . . . . .	96	Style . . . . .	170
Historical Context . . . . .	96	Historical Context . . . . .	170
Critical Overview . . . . .	98	Critical Overview . . . . .	172
Criticism . . . . .	98	Criticism . . . . .	172
<i>High Windows</i> (by Philip Larkin) . . . . .	106	<i>Mother to Son</i> (by Langston Hughes) . . . . .	177
Author Biography . . . . .	106	Author Biography . . . . .	177
Poem Text . . . . .	108	Poem Text . . . . .	178
Poem Summary . . . . .	108	Poem Summary . . . . .	179
		Themes . . . . .	180
		Style . . . . .	181

Historical Context . . . . .	182	Critical Overview . . . . .	250
Critical Overview . . . . .	184	Criticism . . . . .	251
Criticism . . . . .	184		
<i>My Papa's Waltz</i>		<i>[On His Blindness] Sonnet 16</i>	
(by Theodore Roethke) . . . . .	190	(by John Milton) . . . . .	260
Author Biography . . . . .	191	Author Biography . . . . .	260
Poem Text . . . . .	191	Poem Text . . . . .	262
Poem Summary . . . . .	192	Poem Summary . . . . .	262
Themes . . . . .	193	Themes . . . . .	263
Style . . . . .	194	Style . . . . .	264
Historical Context . . . . .	195	Historical Context . . . . .	264
Critical Overview . . . . .	196	Critical Overview . . . . .	266
Criticism . . . . .	197	Criticism . . . . .	267
<i>Nothing Gold Can Stay</i>		<i>On the Pulse of Morning</i>	
(by Robert Frost) . . . . .	202	(by Maya Angelou) . . . . .	274
Author Biography . . . . .	202	Author Biography . . . . .	275
Poem Text . . . . .	203	Poem Summary . . . . .	275
Poem Summary . . . . .	203	Themes . . . . .	278
Themes . . . . .	204	Style . . . . .	280
Style . . . . .	205	Historical Context . . . . .	280
Historical Context . . . . .	206	Critical Overview . . . . .	281
Critical Overview . . . . .	207	Criticism . . . . .	282
Criticism . . . . .	208		
<i>Not Waving but Drowning</i>		<i>Sonnet 116</i> (by William Shakespeare) . . . . .	287
(by Stevie Smith) . . . . .	214	Author Biography . . . . .	287
Author Biography . . . . .	215	Poem Text . . . . .	288
Poem Text . . . . .	216	Poem Summary . . . . .	289
Poem Summary . . . . .	216	Themes . . . . .	290
Themes . . . . .	217	Style . . . . .	291
Style . . . . .	218	Historical Context . . . . .	291
Historical Context . . . . .	219	Critical Overview . . . . .	293
Critical Overview . . . . .	220	Criticism . . . . .	293
Criticism . . . . .	221		
<i>Ode to a Nightingale</i> (by John Keats) . . . . .	227	<i>The Unknown Citizen</i>	
Author Biography . . . . .	228	(by W. H. Auden) . . . . .	301
Poem Text . . . . .	228	Author Biography . . . . .	302
Poem Summary . . . . .	229	Poem Text . . . . .	302
Themes . . . . .	232	Poem Summary . . . . .	303
Style . . . . .	233	Themes . . . . .	304
Historical Context . . . . .	233	Style . . . . .	306
Critical Overview . . . . .	235	Historical Context . . . . .	306
Criticism . . . . .	235	Critical Overview . . . . .	308
		Criticism . . . . .	308
<i>old age sticks</i> (by e.e. cummings) . . . . .	245	<i>Glossary of Literary Terms</i> . . . . .	317
Author Biography . . . . .	245	<i>Cumulative Author/Title Index</i> . . . . .	329
Poem Text . . . . .	246	<i>Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity</i>	
Poem Summary . . . . .	247	<i>Index</i> . . . . .	331
Themes . . . . .	248	<i>Subject/Theme Index</i> . . . . .	335
Style . . . . .	249		
Historical Context . . . . .	250		

## *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 ac-

tually travel to different times and different cultures, but the poems get into our minds, they find what little we know about the places they are talking about, and then they make that little bit blossom into a bouquet of someone else's life. Poets make us think we are following simple, specific events, but then they leave ideas in our heads that cannot be found on the printed page. Abracadabra.

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



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

With all of this in mind, I really don't think I would actually like to have a poet's job at all. There are too many skills involved, including precision, honesty, taste, courage, linguistics, passion, compassion, and the ability to keep all sorts of people entertained at once. And that is just what they do

with one hand, while the other hand pulls some sort of trick that most of us will never fully understand. I can't even pack all that I need for a weekend into one suitcase, so what would be my chances of stuffing so much life into a few lines? With all that *Poetry for Students* tells us about each poem, I am impressed that any poet can finish three or four poems a year. Read the inside stories of these poems, and you won't be able to approach any poem in the same way you did before.

David J. Kelly  
College of Lake County

# Introduction

## ***Purpose of the Book***

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

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

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the poem itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the poem was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the

poem, when available. A unique feature of *PFS* is a specially commissioned overview essay on each poem by an academic expert, targeted toward the student reader.

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

## ***Selection Criteria***

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

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

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

### ***How Each Entry Is Organized***

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

- **Introduction:** a brief overview of the poem which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
  - **Author Biography:** this section includes basic facts about the poet's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the poem in question.
  - **Poem Text:** 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, with interpretation of how these events help articulate the poem's themes. Summaries are broken down with subheads that indicate the lines being discussed.
  - **Themes:** a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the poem. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
  - **Style:** this section addresses important style elements of the poem, such as form, meter, and rhyme scheme; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, and symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
  - **Historical and Cultural Context:** This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the poem was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the poem is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the poem is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads. (Works written after the late 1970s may not have this section.)
  - **Critical Overview:** this section provides background on the critical reputation of the poem, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how poem was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent poems, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
  - **Sources:** an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
  - **For Further Study:** an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.
  - **Criticism:** an essay commissioned by *PfS* which specifically deals with the poem and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work, when available.
- In addition, most entries contains the following highlighted sections, set separately from the main text:
- **Media Adaptations:** a list of audio recordings as well as any film or television adaptations of the poem, including source information.
  - **Compare and Contrast Box:** an "at-a-glance" comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth-century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the poem was written, the time or place the poem was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after the mid-1970s may not have this box.
  - **What Do I Read Next?:** a list of works that might complement the featured poem or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

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

### Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

### Citing Poetry for Students

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

When citing text from *PfS* that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style,

Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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

# Literary Chronology

- ca. 700:** *Beowulf* is composed at about this time.
- 1300–1699:** Humanism as a philosophical view of the world is prevalent in this period.
- 1300–1699:** The Renaissance begins in the 14th century and continues for the next 300 years.
- 1558–1603:** The Elizabethan Age begins with the coronation in 1558 of Elizabeth I as Queen of England and continues until her death in 1603. Elizabethan literature is recognized as some of the finest in the English language.
- 1564:** William Shakespeare is born in Stratford-upon-Avon.
- 1575–1799:** The literary style known as Baroque arises in the late 16th century and remains influential until the early 18th century.
- 1600–1625:** The Tribe of Ben, followers of Ben Jonson, were active in the early part of the 17th century.
- 1600–1799:** The Enlightenment period in European social and cultural history begins in the 17th century and continues into the 18th century.
- 1600–1650:** Metaphysical poetry becomes a prominent style of verse in the first half of the 17th century.
- 1603–1625:** The Jacobean Age begins with the coronation in 1603 of James I of England and continues until his death in 1625.
- 1608:** John Milton is born in London, England.
- 1609:** William Shakespeare's "Sonnet 116" ("Let me not to the marriage of true minds") is published in his collection *Shakespeare's Sonnets*.
- 1609:** William Shakespeare's "Sonnet 130" (My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun) is published in his collection *Shakespeare's Sonnets*.
- 1616:** William Shakespeare dies in Stratford and is buried in the chancel of Trinity Church.
- 1625–1649:** The Cavalier Poets, a group of writers that includes Robert Herrick, Richard Lovelace, and John Suckling, are active during the reign of Charles I of England (1625–1649).
- 1660–1688:** The Restoration Period begins when Charles II regains the throne of England, and it continues through the reign of his successor, James II (1685–1688). Restoration literature includes the first well-developed English-language works in several forms of writing that would become widespread in the modern world, including the novel, biography, and travel literature.
- 1673:** John Milton's poem "On his Blindness" is published in the collection *Poems, Upon Several Occasions: By Mr. John Milton*.
- 1675–1799:** Neoclassicism as the prevailing approach to literature begins late in the 17th century and continues through much of the 18th century.

- 1674:** John Milton dies of gout.
- 1700–1799:** The English Augustan Age (the name is borrowed from a brilliant period of literary creativity in ancient Rome) flourishes throughout much of the 18th century.
- 1700–1725:** The Scottish Enlightenment, a period of great literary and philosophical activity, occurs in the early part of the 18th century.
- 1740s–1775:** Pre-Romanticism, a transitional literary movement between Neoclassicism and Romanticism, takes place in the middle part of the 18th century.
- 1740s–1750s:** The Graveyard School, referring to poetry that focuses on death and grieving, emerges as a significant genre in the middle of the 18th century.
- 1750–1899:** The Welsh Literary Renaissance, an effort to revive interest in Welsh language and literature, begins in the middle of the 18th century and continues into the following century.
- 1775–1850:** Romanticism as a literary movement arises in the latter part of the 18th century and continues until the middle of the 19th century.
- 1795:** John Keats is born in Moorfields, London.
- 1800–1899:** The Gaelic Revival, a renewal of interest in Irish literature and language, takes place throughout much of the 19th century.
- 1809:** Edgar Allan Poe is born in Boston, Massachusetts.
- 1809–1865:** The Knickerbocker School, a group of American writers determined to establish New York as a literary center, flourishes between 1809 and 1865.
- 1819:** Walt Whitman is born on Long Island, New York.
- 1819:** Inspired by a visit to Hampsted, John Keats writes the poem “Ode to a Nightingale.”
- 1820:** John Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale” is published in his collection *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and Other Poems*.
- 1821:** John Keats, dies in Rome after a long battle with tuberculosis.
- 1830:** Emily Dickinson is born in Amherst, Massachusetts.
- 1830s–1860s:** The flowering of American literature known as the American Renaissance begins in the 1830s and continues through the Civil War period.
- 1830–1855:** Transcendentalism, an American philosophical and literary movement, is at its height during this period.
- 1837–1901:** The Victorian Age begins with the coronation of Victoria as Queen of England, and continues until her death in 1901. Victorian literature is recognized for its magnificent achievements in a variety of genres.
- 1840:** Thomas Hardy is born in Higher Bockhampton, Dorset, England.
- 1848–1858:** The Pre-Raphaelites, an influential group of English painters, forms in 1848 and remains together for about ten years, during which time it has a significant impact on literature as well as the visual arts.
- 1849:** Edgar Allan Poe dies in Baltimore, Maryland.
- 1849:** Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Bells” is published in the November issue of *Sartain’s Union Magazine*
- 1850s:** The poets of the so-called Spasmodic School are active in the 1850s.
- 1860:** Walt Whitman’s poem “I Hear America Singing” is published in the third edition of his collection *Leaves of Grass*.
- 1861:** Emily Dickinson’s poem “‘Hope’ is the Thing with Feathers” is believed to be written at this time.
- 1874:** Robert Frost is born in San Francisco, California.
- 1875–1899:** Aestheticism becomes a significant artistic and literary philosophy in the latter part of the 19th century.
- 1875–1899:** Decadence becomes an important poetic force late in the 19th century.
- 1875–1925:** Expressionism is a significant artistic and literary influence through the late 19th century and the early 20th century.
- 1875–1925:** The Irish Literary Renaissance begins late in the 19th century and continues for the next several decades.
- 1875–1925:** The Symbolist Movement flourishes in the closing decades of the 19th century and the opening years of the 20th century.
- 1875–1950:** Realism as an approach to literature gains importance in the 19th century and remains influential well into the 20th century.
- 1878:** Carl Sandburg is born in Galesburg, Illinois.
- 1886:** Emily Dickinson dies.

- 1887:** Robinson Jeffers is born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.
- 1890–1899:** The decade of the 1890s, noted for the mood of weariness and pessimism in its art and literature, is known as the *Fin de Siècle* (“end of the century”) period.
- 1890:** Emily Dickinson’s “‘Hope’ is the Thing with Feathers” is published posthumously, in the collection *Poems by Emily Dickinson*.
- 1892:** Walt Whitman dies in Camden, New Jersey.
- 1892:** Edna St. Vincent Millay is born in Rockland, Maine.
- 1894:** e. e. cummings is born in Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- 1900–1999:** The philosophy of Existentialism and the literature it inspires are highly influential throughout much of the 20th century.
- 1900–1950:** Modernism remains a dominant literary force from the early part to the middle years of the 20th century.
- 1902:** Langston Hughes is born in Joplin, Missouri.
- 1902:** Stevie Smith (Florence Margaret Smith) is born in Hull, Yorkshire, England.
- 1902:** Thomas Hardy’s poem “The Man He Killed” is published in *Harper’s Weekly*.
- 1903:** Countee Cullen is born in Louisville, Kentucky.
- 1907:** W. H. Auden is born in York, England.
- 1907–ca. 1930:** The Bloomsbury Group, a circle of English writers and artists, gathers regularly in the period from 1907 to around 1930.
- 1908:** Theodore Roethke is born in Saginaw, Michigan.
- 1910s–1920s:** Georgian poetry becomes a popular style of lyric verse during the reign of King George V of England.
- 1910s–1930s:** New Humanism, a philosophy of literature, is influential for several decades, beginning around 1910.
- 1912–1925:** The Chicago Literary Renaissance, a time of great literary activity, takes place from about 1912 to 1925.
- 1912–1922:** Imagism as a philosophy of poetry is defined in 1912 and remains influential for the next decade.
- 1913:** Karl Shapiro is born in Baltimore, Maryland.
- 1914:** Dylan Thomas is born in the Uplands district of Swansea, Wales.
- 1916:** Carl Sandburg’s poem “Chicago” is published in the collection *Chicago Poems*.
- ca. 1919–ca. 1960:** The Scottish Renaissance in literature begins around 1919 and continues for about forty years.
- 1920s:** The Harlem Renaissance, a flowering of African American literary activity, takes place.
- 1920s–1930s:** The label Lost Generation is applied to a generation of American writers working in the decades following World War I.
- 1920s–1930s:** The Montreal Group, a circle of Canadian poets interested in dealing with complex metaphysical issues, begins in the late 1920s and flourishes for the next decade.
- 1920s–1970s:** New Criticism as a philosophy of literature arises in the 1920s and continues to be a significant approach to writing for over fifty years.
- 1920s–1960s:** Surrealism, an artistic and literary technique, arises in the 1920s and remains influential for the next half century.
- 1922:** Philip Larkin born in Coventry, Warwickshire, England.
- 1922:** Langston Hughes’s poem “Mother to Son” is published in the magazine *Crisis*.
- 1923:** Robert Frost’s poem “Nothing Gold Can Stay” is published in the poetry collection *New Hampshire*.
- 1924:** Robert Frost is awarded the Pulitzer Prize in poetry for his collection *New Hampshire*.
- 1926:** Langston Hughes’s first poetry collection, *Weary Blues*, is printed, including the poem “Mother to Son.”
- 1928:** Upon his death, Thomas Hardy is given a public funeral and his ashes are buried in Poet’s Corner of Westminster Abbey, London.
- 1928:** Maya Angelou (Marguerite Johnson) is born in St. Louis, Missouri.
- 1928:** Robinson Jeffers’s poem “Hurt Hawks” is published.
- 1930s–1965:** Negritude emerges as a literary movement in the 1930s and continues until the early 1960s.
- 1930s–1970s:** The New York Intellectuals, a group of literary critics, are active from the 1930s to the 1970s.
- 1931:** Robert Frost is awarded the Pulitzer Prize in poetry for his *Collected Poems*.

- 1935:** Countee Cullen's poem "Any Human to Another" is published in the poetry collection, *The Medea, and Some Poems*.
- 1935–1943:** The Works Progress Administration (WPA) Federal Writers' Project provides federally funded jobs for unemployed writers during the Great Depression.
- 1935:** Colleen McElroy is born in St. Louis, Missouri.
- 1937:** Robert Frost is awarded the Pulitzer Prize in poetry for his collection *A Further Range*.
- 1940s:** The New Apocalypse Movement, founded by J.F. Hendry and Henry Treece, takes place in England in the 1940s.
- 1940s–1999:** Postmodernism, referring to the various philosophies and practices of literature that challenge the dominance of Modernism, begins in the 1940s.
- 1940:** W.H. Auden's poem "The Unknown Citizen" is published in the poetry collection *Another Time*.
- 1943:** Robert Frost is awarded the Pulitzer Prize in poetry for his collection *A Witness Tree*.
- 1946:** Dylan Thomas' poem "Fern Hill" is published in the poetry collection *Deaths and Entrances*.
- 1946:** Countee Cullen dies prematurely of high blood pressure.
- 1948:** W. H. Auden is awarded the Pulitzer Prize in poetry for his collection *The Age of Anxiety*.
- 1948:** Theodore Roethke's poem "My Papa's Waltz" is published in the collection *The Lost Son*.
- 1949:** Edna St. Vincent Millay's poem "The Courage That My Mother Had" is published in the poetry collection *Mine The Harvest*.
- 1950s:** The so-called Beat Movement writers begin publishing their work in the 1950s.
- 1950s:** The Black Mountain Poets, emphasizing the creative process, become an influential force in American literature in the 1950s.
- 1950–1975:** Structuralism emerges as an important movement in literary criticism in the middle of the 20th century.
- 1950:** Edna St. Vincent Millay dies of a heart attack.
- 1953:** Dylan Thomas dies in New York from an overdose of liquor.
- 1957:** Stevie Smith's poem "Not Waving but Drowning" is published as the title poem of her eighth collection of verse.
- 1958–1959:** Robert Frost serves as Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress.
- 1958:** e.e. cummings's poem "old age sticks" is published in the poetry collection *95 Poems*.
- 1960s–1970s:** The Black Aesthetic Movement, also known as the Black Arts Movement, takes place from the 1960s into the 1970s.
- 1960s–1999:** Poststructuralism arises as a theory of literary criticism in the 1960s.
- 1962:** Robinson Jeffers dies in Carmel, California.
- 1962:** e. e. cummings dies in his sleep in North Conway, New Hampshire.
- 1963:** Robert Frost dies in Boston.
- 1963:** Theodore Roethke dies of a heart condition.
- 1967:** Langston Hughes dies in New York.
- 1967:** Carl Sandburg dies in North Carolina.
- 1968:** Carl Sandburg's poem "Auto Wreck" is published posthumously, in the poetry collection *Selected Poems*.
- 1970s–1999:** New Historicism, a school of literary analysis, originates in the 1970s.
- 1971:** Stevie Smith dies in her home in Palmers Green, North London from a brain tumor.
- 1973:** W. H. Auden dies while on a trip to Vienna, and is subsequently buried in Poet's Corner of Westminster Abbey.
- 1974:** Philip Larkin's poem "High Windows" is published in the collection of the same title.
- 1985:** Philip Larkin dies soon after an operation for throat cancer.
- 1990:** Colleen McElroy's poem "A Pièd" is published in the collection *What Madness Brought Me Here*.
- 1993:** Maya Angelou reads her poem "On the Pulse of Morning" at the inauguration of President Clinton.
- 1995:** Robert Hass is elected to serve as Poetry Consultant for the Library of Congress.
- 1995:** Maya Angelou's poem "A Brave and Startling Truth" is written for the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations.
- 1996:** United States of Poetry, a soundtrack mingling spoken word poetry of writers from Allen Ginsberg to Ai with music samples and "found poetry," premieres on PBS.



**1996:** Colleen McElroy is chosen as the poet to represent the state of Washington in the National Endowment for the Arts anthology, *Writing America*.

**1996:** Jorie Graham is awarded the Pulitzer Prize in poetry for the collection *The Dream of the Unified Field*.

**1997:** Lisel Mueller is awarded the Pulitzer Prize in poetry for the collection *Alive Together: New and Selected Poems*.

**1997:** Mouth Almighty Records releases "Closed on Account of Rabies: The Poems and Tales of Edgar Allen Poe", an audio recording featuring readings of Poe's work by entertainment figures from Christopher Walken to Dr. John.

# Acknowledgments

The editors wish to thank the copyright holders of the excerpted criticism included in this volume and the permissions managers of many book and magazine publishing companies for assisting us in securing reproduction rights. We are also grateful to the staffs of the Detroit Public Library, the Library of Congress, the University of Detroit Mercy Library, Wayne State University Purdy/Kresge Library Complex, and the University of Michigan Libraries for making their resources available to us. Following is a list of the copyright holders who have granted us permission to reproduce material in this volume of *PFS*. Every effort has been made to trace copyright, but if omissions have been made, please let us know.

## **COPYRIGHTED EXCERPTS IN *PFS*, VOLUME 3, WERE REPRODUCED FROM THE FOLLOWING PERIODICALS:**

*Boston Review*, v. 21, November, 1996 for "High Windows and Four-Letter Words: A Note on Philip Larkin" by Stephen Burt. Copyright (c) 1996 by the Boston Critic, Inc. Reproduced by permission of the author.—*College Literature*, v. XVII, 1990. Copyright (c) 1990 by West Chester University. Reproduced by permission of the publisher.—*Contemporary Poetry*, v. 3, 1978 for "Stevie Smith and the Gleeful Macabre" by Janice Thaddeus. Reproduced by permission of the author.—*Critical Quarterly*, v. 1, Summer, 1959 for "Dylan Thomas's 'Fern Hill'" by C. B. Cox. Reproduced by permission of the author.—*English Journal*, v. 58, January, 1969. Copyright (c) 1969

by the National Council of Teachers of English. Reproduced by permission of the publisher.—*Keats-Shelley Journal*, v. XXXIII, 1984. Reproduced by permission.—*The Georgia Review*, v. XXXII, Summer, 1978. Copyright (c) 1978 by the University of Georgia. Reproduced by permission.—*The Washington Post*, January 21, 1993. Copyright (c) 1997, Washington Post Book World Service/Washington Post Writers Group. Reproduced with permission.

## **COPYRIGHTED EXCERPTS IN *PFS*, VOLUME 3, WERE REPRODUCED FROM THE FOLLOWING BOOKS:**

Auden, W. H. For "The Unknown Citizen," in *W. H. Auden: Collected Poems*. Edited by Edward Mendelson. Random House, 1940. Copyright 1940, renewed 1968 by W. H. Auden. Reproduced by permission of Random House, Inc.—Baker, Houston A., Jr. From *A Many-Colored Coat of Dreams: The Poetry of Countee Cullen*. Broadside Press, 1974. Copyright (c) 1974 by Houston A. Baker, Jr. Reproduced by permission.—Booth, Stephen. From "Sonnet 116" in *Shakespeare's Sonnets*. Edited by Stephen Booth. Yale University Press, 1977. Copyright (c) 1977 by Yale University. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.—Cullen, Countee. For "Any Human to Another" in *On These I Stand*. Harper & Brothers, 1947. Copyright 1947 HarperCollins Publishers, Inc. Renewed 1975 by Ida M. Cullen. Copyrights held by the Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana. Administered by JJKR Asso-

ciates, New York, New York. Reproduced by permission of the Literary Estate of Countee Cullen.—cummings, e. e. For “old age sticks” in *Complete Poems: 1904-1962*. Edited by George James Firmage. Liveright. Copyright (c) 1958, 1986, 1991 by the Trustees for the e. e. cummings Trust. Reproduced by permission of Liveright Publishing Corporation.—Frost, Robert. For “Nothing Gold Can Stay” in *The Poetry of Robert Frost*. Edited by Edward Connery Lathem. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969. Copyright 1923, (c) 1969 by Henry Holt and Co. Copyright 1951 by Robert Frost. Used by arrangement with Henry Holt and Co.—Gray, James. From *Edna St. Vincent Millay*. University of Minnesota Press, 1967. Copyright (c) 1967 by the University of Minnesota. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.—Hardy, Thomas. For “The Man He Killed” in *The Complete Poems of Thomas Hardy*. Edited by James Gibson. Macmillan, 1978. Copyright (c) 1978 by Macmillan Publishing Company. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher.—Hughes, Langston. For “Mother to Son” in *The Weary Blues*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1926. Reproduced by permission of Random House, Inc.—Jeffers, Robinson. For “Hurt Hawks” in *Robinson Jeffers: Selected Poems*. Vintage Books, 1965. Reproduced by permission.—Kidder, Rushworth M. From the introduction to *E. E. Cummings: An Introduction to the Poetry*. Columbia University Press, 1979. Copyright (c) 1979 Columbia University Press, New York. All rights reserved. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher.—Larkin, Philip. “Frivolous and Vulnerable” in *Required Writings: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983. Copyright (c) 1983 by Philip Larkin. Reproduced in North America by permission of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc. In the United Kingdom by permission of Faber & Faber Ltd.—McElroy, Colleen. For “A Piéd” in *What Madness Brought Me Here: New and Selected Poems, 1968-1988*. Wesleyan University Press, 1990. Copyright (c) 1990 by Colleen J. McElroy. Reproduced by permission of University Press of New England.—McElroy, Colleen. From “If We Look for Them by Moonlight” in *Where We Stand: Women Poets on Literary Tradition*. Edited by Sharon Bryan. W. W. Norton & Company, 1993. Copyright (c) 1993 by Sharon Bryan. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission of the author.—Miller, James E., Jr. From “The Smaller Leaves” in *A Critical Guide to Leaves of Grass*. University of Chicago Press, 1957. Copyright (c) 1957 by The University of Chicago, renewed 1985 by James E. Miller Jr. All

rights reserved. Reproduced by permission of the publisher and the author.—Miller, R. Baxter. From *The Art and Imagination of Langston Hughes*. University Press of Kentucky, 1989. Copyright (c) 1989 by The University Press of Kentucky. Reproduced by permission.—Porter, David T. From *The Art of Emily Dickinson's Early Poetry*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966. Copyright (c) 1966 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. All rights reserved. Excerpted by permission of the publishers.—Pritchard, William H. From *Frost: A Literary Life Reconsidered*. Oxford University Press, 1984. Copyright (c) 1984 by William H. Pritchard. Reproduced by permission of Oxford University Press, Inc., and the author.—Roethke, Theodore. For “My Papa's Waltz” in *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke*. Doubleday, 1942, copyright 1942 by Hearst Magazines, Inc. Reproduced in North America by permission of Doubleday, a division of Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc. In the United Kingdom by permission of Faber & Faber Ltd.—Shapiro, Karl. For “Auto Wreck” in *Selected Poems*. Copyright (c) 1941, 1987 by Karl Shapiro. Reproduced by arrangement of Wieser & Wieser Inc., New York.—Smart, J. S. From an introduction to *The Sonnets of John Milton*. Clarendon Press, 1966. Copyright (c) Oxford University Press 1966. Reproduced by permission of Oxford University Press.—Smith, Stevie. For “Not Waving But Drowning” in *Collected Poems of Stevie Smith*. New Directions, 1972. Copyright (c) 1972 by Stevie Smith. Reproduced by permission of New Directions Publishing Corporation.—St. Vincent Millay, Edna. For “The Courage That My Mother Had” in *Collected Poems*. HarperCollins, 1954. Copyright 1954, 1982 by Norma Millay Ellis. Reproduced by permission of Elizabeth Barnett, Literary Executor.—Stovall, Floyd. From the introduction to *The Poems of Edgar Allen Poe*. Edited by Floyd Stovall. The University Press of Virginia, 1965. Copyright (c) 1965 by the Rector and Visitors of the University Press of Virginia. Reprinted with permission of The University Press of Virginia.—Thomas, Dylan. For “Fern Hill” in *The Poems of Dylan Thomas*. New Directions. Reproduced by permission of David Higham Associates.—Wright, George T. From *W. H. Auden*. Revised Edition. Twayne Publishers, 1981. First edition copyright (c) 1969 by Twayne Publishers, Inc. Revised edition copyright (c) 1981 by G. K. Hall & Co. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission of Twayne Publishers, a division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

**PHOTOGRAPHS AND ILLUSTRATIONS  
APPEARING IN PFS, VOLUME 3, WERE  
RECEIVED FROM THE FOLLOWING  
SOURCES:**

Angelou, Maya, photograph. AP/Wide World Photos. Reproduced by permission; Angelou, Maya (suit and sweater), photograph. AP/Wide World Photos. Reproduced by permission; Auden, W. H., photograph. Jerry Bauer. Reproduced by permission; Cullen, Countee, photograph. Corbis-Bettmann. Reproduced by permission; cummings, e. e., photograph. Archive Photos, Inc. Reproduced by permission; Dickinson, Emily, photograph. The Granger Collection, Ltd. Reproduced by permission; Frost, Robert, photograph. Archive Photos, Inc. Reproduced by permission; Hardy, Thomas, photograph. Corbis-Bettmann. Reproduced by permission; Hughes, Langston, photograph. The Bettmann Archive/Newsphotos, Inc./Corbis-Bettman. Reproduced by permission; Jeffers, Robinson, photograph. AP/Wide World Photos. Repro-

duced by permission; Keats, John, photograph of drawing. The Bettmann Archive. Reproduced by permission; Larkin, Philip, photograph. Fay Goodwin's Photo Files. Reproduced by permission; McElroy, Colleen, photograph by Eleanor Hamilton. Reproduced by permission of the author; Millay, Edna St. Vincent, photograph by Carl Van Vechten. The Library of Congress; Milton, John, illustration. The Library of Congress; Poe, Edgar Allen, (scarf around collar), photograph. AP/Wide World Photos. Reproduced by permission; Roethke, Theodore, photograph by Imogen Cunningham. AP/Wide World Photos. Reproduced by permission; Sandburg, Carl, photograph. AP/Wide World Photos. Reproduced by permission; Shakespeare, William, illustration. Archive Photos, Inc. Reproduced by permission; Thomas, Dylan, photograph by G. D. Hackett. Archive Photos, Inc. Reproduced by permission; Whitman, Walt, photograph by Mathew Brady. National Archives and Records Administration.

# Contributors

**Gerald E. Brennan:** Writer living in San Francisco, CA, with book in progress on the publication of William Burrough's *Naked Lunch*. Entries on *The Courage That My Mother Had*, *The Man He Killed*, *Ode to a Nightingale*, and *On His Blindness*.

**Craig Dworkin:** Poet and assistant professor of English, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ. Original essay on *On the Pulse of Morning*.

**Dana Gioia:** Poet and critic whose books include *The Gods of Winter* and *Can Poetry Matter?* Original essay on *Nothing Gold Can Stay*.

**Brent Goodman:** Published poet and writer based in Madison, WI. Teacher in English, composition, and creative writing at Purdue University. Former poetry editor, *Sycamore Review*. Entries on *High Windows*, *Hurt Hawks*, *Not Waving but Drowning*, and *On the Pulse of the Morning*.

**R. S. Gwynn:** Writer and faculty member in department of English and foreign languages, Lamar University, Beaumont, TX. Original essay on *High Windows*.

**David Kelly:** Writer and instructor at Oakton Community College, Des Plaines, IL. Co-founder of creative writing periodical at Oakton Community College. Entries on *Any Human to Another*, *A Pièd*, *Auto Wreck*, *The Bells*, *Chicago*, *Fern Hill*, *I Hear America Singing*,

*Mother to Son*, *Nothing Gold Can Stay*, and *The Unknown Citizen*. Original essays on *A Pièd*, *The Courage That My Mother Had*, and *On His Blindness*.

**Tyrus Miller:** Published poet and of teacher comparative literature and English at Yale University, New Haven, CT. Original essays on *Fern Hill*, *The Man He Killed*, and *Not Waving but Drowning*.

**Bruce Meyer:** Published poet and director of the creative writing program, University of Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Original essay on *The Unknown Citizen* and *High Windows*.

**Annemarie S. Muth:** Editor, graphic designer, and freelance writer. Original essay on *Sonnet 116*.

**Marisa Anne Pagnattaro:** Writer and teaching assistant at the University of Georgia, Athens. Book review editor and editorial board member, *Georgia Bar Journal*. Original essay on *My Papa's Waltz*.

**Mary Potter:** Freelance writer based in Chicago, IL. Entries on *"Hope" is the Thing with Feathers*, *old age sticks*, and *Sonnet 116*.

**Sean Robisch:** Writer with a Ph.D. in American Literature from Purdue University. Instructor in composition and literature. Original essays on *Chicago*, *I Hear America Singing*, *"Hope" is the Thing with Feathers* and *old age sticks*.

**David Rothman:** Poet, critic, journalist, and English teacher. Original essay on *Hurt Hawks*.

**Chris Semansky:** Freelance writer and published poet with Ph.D. in English from Stony Brook University. Original essays on *Auto Wreck*, *The Bells*, *Chicago*, *I Hear America Singing*, and *old age sticks*.

**Fraser Sutherland:** Writer based in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Original essay on *Ode to a Nightingale*.

**Aidan Wasley:** Writer and instructor at Yale University, New Haven, CT. Original essays on *Any Human to Another* and *Mother to Son*.

# *Any Human to Another*

Countee (pronounced “count-tay”) Cullen struggled throughout his artistic career to be regarded as a poet, instead of being categorized as a “Negro poet.” Earning fame during the height of the Harlem Renaissance, an artistic movement that originated in a section of New York City that was primarily populated by African Americans, Cullen was at the forefront of artists who gained national prominence during the 1920s and early 1930s. In “Any Human to Another,” Cullen discusses the human condition and the issue of equality. The poem is from Cullen’s last book of verse, *The Medea, and Some Poems*, published in 1935. Because Cullen was an African-American writer who often addressed racial themes, there is probably much about his experience of bigotry that influenced this poem, although racial issues are not directly mentioned. As the title indicates, Cullen believed that he was writing about a universal topic, and therefore the poem is not a study of any particular person, event, or time.

*Countee Cullen*

1935

## *Author Biography*

Cullen was born Countee Leroy Porter in Louisville, Kentucky, in 1903 and raised in New York City by his grandmother. Following her death in 1918, he was adopted by the Reverend and Mrs. Frederick Cullen. Reverend Cullen had helped found the National Urban League and served as president of the local chapter of the National As-





*Countee Cullen*

---

sociation for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). An excellent student, Cullen attended DeWitt Clinton High School, New York's premier preparatory school, before enrolling at New York University in 1922. During high school and college Cullen placed poems in several publications and won numerous literary prizes. *Color*, his first volume of poetry, was published in 1925, the same year he graduated from New York University. After completing a graduate degree at Harvard University, Cullen returned to New York, where he was already considered a leading literary figure of the Harlem Renaissance, and began writing a column on literary and social issues for *Opportunity*, the journal of the National Urban League. He published several volumes of poetry and edited *Caroling Dusk: An Anthology of Verse by Negro Poets* (1927). In 1928 he received a grant to study in France. Before he left, he married Yolande Du Bois, daughter of W. E. B. Du Bois. The marriage was a brief one; Yolande stayed with Cullen in France only a short time before returning alone to the United States. They were divorced when he returned in 1930. During the late 1920s and early 1930s, Cullen's poetic output declined as he turned to other forms of writing. He published the novel *One Way to Heaven* (1932) as well as stories and verse for children. Although he was offered a teaching position at Dillard University in New Orleans

in 1934, he declined to relocate to the South; instead, he became a creative writing teacher at Frederick Douglass Junior High School in New York, a position he held for the remainder of his life. In the mid-1940s Cullen collaborated with Arna Bontemps on a play, *St. Louis Woman* (1945) and began preparing a collection of those poems he considered his best. This book, *On These I Stand: An Anthology of the Best Poems of Countee Cullen*, was published in 1947, the year after his death.

### *Poem Summary*

#### **Line 1:**

Unnamed troubles cause the speaker sadness. Without more information, the reader is unable to determine whether the troubles are physical, emotional, or spiritual. Furthermore, the troubles might be personal, those of others, or of the world.



**Line 2:**

In the first line, the speaker seemed to be an isolated individual. However, in the second line we learn that the speaker is linked with others in some way. The link might be shared sorrow, but we cannot be sure, having read only two lines.

**Line 3:**

Again, lack of information leads to ambiguity: the reader is unable to determine if the arrow in the simile of this line represents the ills or those people associated with the speaker. Most likely the arrow stands for the "ills" because ills and an arrow shot in battle are similar, with harm typically resulting from both.

**Line 4:**

By line 4 it becomes clear that the arrow represents ills that have harmed the speaker and others to their marrow, or the core of their being. "Arrow" and "marrow" are symbols suggesting that the ills and suffering are very real and that the resulting pain is so intense as to be like a physical injury caused by a weapon.

The first stanza uses a confusing sentence structure: the verb "pierce" is delayed until the fourth line, making the reader wonder for longer than expected about the effect of the "ills" mentioned in the first line. The idea in this stanza is fairly simple—the ills cause deep pain to people—but the complex sentence structure causes the reader to slow down and contemplate while reading.

**Lines 5-6:**

Images of fat and bone are part of the speaker's continuing effort to convey the concreteness and physicality of the damage done to people by the ills that he is describing.

**Line 7:**

Here the speaker addresses the reader directly, acknowledging that they both feel grief. This grief is likely from the same source, the ills spoken of above.

**Line 8:**

Here the speaker is either strongly advising that grief be shared or is stating that the nature of grief is such that it cannot be experienced independently, and necessarily must be shared.

**Lines 9-11:**

The simile begun in line 9 compares the grief of individuals to rivers flowing to the sea. Just as

## Media Adaptations



- A record album titled *Anthology of Negro Poetry* was edited by Arna Bontemps and is available from Folkways Records.
- Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee perform on *To Make A Poet: The Best Poems of Countee Cullen*, which is available on either audio cassette or record album from Caedmon.
- A web page devoted to Countee Cullen is located at <http://drum.ncat.edu/~drwww/cul.html>.

separate rivers combine in a single body of water, the grief of each person becomes part of the grief suffered by all humanity. An image of seas and rivers covering the earth reinforces the notion that all people around the world are part of this community of grief. However, use of the words "mingle" and "diverse" indicates that we retain our individuality and uniqueness even while acknowledging that we are "fused" and "single" because of our common bond.

**Line 12:**

By addressing the entire human race, the title of the poem implies universality. Similarly, this line strengthens the sense of universality and absoluteness in the speaker's message.

**Line 13:**

The speaker offers a warning against pride, which is considered to be one of the seven deadly sins that is fatal to spiritual progress.

**Line 14:**

Though confidence is often thought of as a positive quality, in the context of this discussion it has a connotation of arrogance, pomposity, or self-importance—traits that go against the poem's theme of equality and universal fellowship.

**Lines 15-19:**

In lines 15 through 19 the speaker sarcastically uses the metaphor of a life lived alone in a tent in

a private meadow to express his feelings about an isolated, self-centered existence apart from the rest of humanity. Use of the word “little” in lines 16 and 19 indicates the speaker’s contempt for those people who deny their connection to others.

### **Lines 20-21:**

By describing “Joy” with such terms as “shy” and “friendly,” the speaker sets up a contrast with “Sorrow” in line 22. Much in the same way that a person might be selective about whom they take as a friend, joy is observed to be very selective and unpredictable, affecting some people but not others.

### **Lines 22-24:**

The speaker presents “Sorrow” as capable of the human feeling of scorn and of the human ability of speech. In contrast to joy, which is “shy” and “friendly to a few,” sorrow is very outgoing. “Sorrow never scorned to speak to any who were false or true” means that sorrow affects everyone, because we are all either false or true, good or bad. In other words, sorrow—unlike joy—affects everyone, regardless of the kind of lives that they lead. We are reminded of the title of the poem, which addresses all people.

### **Lines 25-28:**

The speaker asks to feel the grief of the reader, even though grief will “strike [the speaker] down” like a weapon. Shared grief is given a noble quality when described as “shining and unsheathed” like a polished sword.

### **Lines 30-31:**

After the speaker accepts the sorrow of the reader, the reader must accept the sorrow of the speaker. Acceptance of another person’s sorrow is difficult (“bitter”) yet healing (“aloes”). In the last line, the reader becomes king-like for accepting the sorrow of the speaker. The last line also may contain Christian imagery that links the reader to Jesus Christ. According to the Christian tradition, Christ suffered for the sake of others and was crowned with thorns before being crucified.

## **Themes**

### **Identity**

The speaker of this poem is drawing attention to a fact of our existence that is often recognized but seldom emphasized: that we all identify our-

selves as individuals but, at the same time, also as human beings. He makes this point most directly in line 11, with the words, “Diverse yet single.” Usually, a person defining him- or herself will focus on the aspects that make an individual life unique, such as special talents, circumstances, or ideas that seem as if no one else has ever or will ever experience them. Somewhere within that self-definition, though, is the assumption that one is a human being, and it is this identity—which touches all individuals equally—that the poet is concerned with here. To some extent, it seems as if he is promoting a falsehood by mixing the definition of the individual so freely with the definition of the species. It defies common sense: although he tells us that we suffer when others suffer, we are all more familiar with ignoring others’ problems and having our own ignored. To argue against Cullen’s point, one could extend the same reasoning to a similar case, pointing out, for instance, that when one chair collapses all other chairs stay strong. This argument would say that Cullen could show no identifiable way in which one person’s grief carries to another who does not experience it. Cullen’s likely counter argument would be that human intelligence makes us aware of our identity in a way that no other object or animal can be. One cannot experience another’s suffering, and may even try to keep it out of mind, but being conscious of humanness means one cannot escape the knowledge that being human connects everybody.

### **Ethics**

The basis for religious, ethical behavior is that humans should all treat each other the way that God wants them to. The foundation for humanist ethical behavior, which tries to determine what we should or should not do without working the idea of God into the balance, has always been that we should treat each other as we think we should be treated ourselves. This bond of recognition is, of course, what “Any Human to Another” is all about. In this poem, Cullen centers on the idea that sorrows *are* transmitted from one human to another, but he does nothing to suggest what we ought to do about this fact. The obvious consequence of the situation described in this poem is that we should be good to each other in order to lighten our own portion of sorrows. This conclusion is so obvious that there is no reason for the poem to even mention it. Cullen uses five carefully crafted stanzas, with the most eloquent language imaginable (which helps convince the reader that these are intelligent and sensitive thoughts) and a rhyme scheme that

intertwines the same way he says that human lives intertwine. In short, he spares no poetic technique in order to make readers feel the truth of his claim that our fortunes are all mixed up together. It is not enough for readers to agree; they must believe what he says deeply within their hearts. When readers believe what he says, ethical behavior must necessarily follow.

### Civil Rights

It would be wrong to assume that Countee Cullen, being from a racial minority, *always* focused on the struggle for social equality in his writings. Still, whether it was his intention or not, this poem does touch upon the root cause of much of society's ills. The foundation of social inequality is that somebody in a position of power feels that somebody else is less deserving than they. Throughout history, the question of who is and who is not "deserving" has troubled politicians and social planners. As early as 400 B.C., when Plato's *Republic* was recorded, the greatest minds have grappled with the concept of justice, or the matter of everyone getting what they deserve. Different reasons have been given for excluding people from society's privileges. Some of the most common are, first, criminal behavior, and then laziness and ignorance. In today's society, for example, we jail criminals and we also accept the idea of large salaries for those people who we feel either have worked particularly hard or who have special knowledge that most people lack. Civil rights become an issue when a group of people is denied social benefits for no good reason. In such cases, the people who do the denying must show a certain callousness or lack of feeling toward the people they are oppressing. In this poem, Cullen does not address the question of who "deserves" to be treated with less respect in society; he leaves social injustice to be examined by hundreds of other poets. Instead, Cullen is reminding the privileged—who might be fortunate enough to avoid suffering—of the responsibilities they have for other humans. Those who have distanced themselves from the suffering of others are the ones who need to remember the rights of others.

### Style

"Any Human to Another" is a 31-line poem, with five stanzas: two 7-line stanzas, two 6-line stanzas, and one 5-line stanza. Each stanza has its own dis-



- Does the person described in the third stanza remind you of anyone you know? Write a description of a day in the life of a person who thinks he or she is "allowed / A little tent / Pitched in a meadow / Of sun and shadow / All his little own."
- Develop a creative piece—a short story, a painting, a collage of images, an audio tape, etc.—that shows people who are purposely being ignorant of the suffering of others.
- What, specifically, are the ills that a black intellectual of the 1930s like Cullen would "sorrow at"? In what ways are these problems yours?

inct rhyme scheme (abccab, aabccb, ababcc, and abacabc, respectively). By employing rhyme and a regular verse structure while at the same time varying the rhyme schemes and stanza lengths, Cullen combined unity and diversity in the form of the poem. Similarly, the theme of the poem emphasizes our common humanity while recognizing the worth of the individual. The five stanzas are, as line 11 puts it, "diverse yet single," each of them treating the theme of fellowship in different ways.

### Historical Context

On October 29, 1929, after a decade of postwar growth and prosperity, the U.S. stock market collapsed. This event was followed by the cycle of poverty known as the Great Depression that lasted throughout the 1930s. There are dozens of theories about what caused the Depression, but most of them agree about the importance, to various degrees, of several key points: that the confidence of U.S. investors was so shaken by the stock market crash that they kept their money out of circulation, which hindered economic recovery; that the failures of some banks put strain on the banks remaining, which then shut down, taking unheard-of

## Compare & Contrast

- **1935:** Soil erosion was an enormous problem in the United States. Loose soil blowing off of farms created dust storms that could turn day into night, closing schools and stopping traffic. The newly formed Soil Conservation Service estimated that erosion cost the country \$400 million per year.

**Today:** Although erosion is still a problem in places where the land will not accept plant life, scientific farming techniques have helped keep the problem under control.

- **1935:** German Chancellor Adolph Hitler ordered a new selective breeding program, to be administered by the Nazi SS, encouraging women to contribute their services to having children with SS officers in order to produce blonde, blue-eyed children with Nordic features.

**1945:** Hitler committed suicide as the Allied forces were moving in to defeat Germany.

**1963:** Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gives his famous speech in which he states, "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

**1994:** A famous and controversial book, *The Bell Curve*, by American educators Richard Her-

nstein, Charles Murray, and others, asserted that whites are intellectually superior to blacks because of their genetic makeup, but went on to explain, "We cannot think of a legitimate argument why ... whites and blacks need be affected by the knowledge that an aggregate difference in measured intelligence is genetic instead of environmental ..."

**Today:** Racism and sexism are socially unacceptable, but people still misuse scientific evidence to support their prejudices.

- **1935:** Nylon—a synthetic fiber with the texture and appearance of natural fibers, but with stronger tensile strength—was developed. In addition, polyethylene, the first true plastic, was developed in a British laboratory.

**1941:** Nylon stockings were introduced the previous year and proved to be immensely popular, but after the invasion of Pearl Harbor all available nylon was immediately put to use in parachutes for the war.

**Today:** Because the use of plastics is so widespread and the materials are so durable, recycling programs have been developed across the country to keep discarded materials from polluting the land and water.

---

sums of money out of circulation and overburdening the economy; and that similar financial disasters in other countries, many of them the consequences of the World War that had ended in 1918, kept America from recovering quickly from what could have been a slight economic downturn. The effects of the Great Depression are easier to note, by examining the lives of people in the 1930s. It is estimated that by 1932, the height of the Depression, 12 million Americans were unemployed. This huge figure becomes an even larger percentage when we realize that the U.S. population then was only 124 million, less than half of what it is today, and that women were rarely part of the customary

workforce and would therefore not have been counted in unemployment statistics. Although actual starvation was scarce during the Depression, malnutrition rose dramatically: people struggling to obtain food could not be too finicky about maintaining a well-balanced diet. People who once had been employed in prestigious occupations—stock brokers, teachers, and business owners, for example—would walk ten miles or more to wait in line for hours, just to be considered for a job opening. Middle-class families lost their houses when they were unable to keep up with the mortgage payments, and they moved into increasingly smaller apartments and worse neighborhoods. Those who

could not afford to pay any rent at all moved in with relatives. It was not uncommon to have three or four families living under one roof. Because money was tight, the country had no need for anything but the barest basic services, so the jobs that were still available were mostly in manual labor. A trained, experienced professional might find it a mark of honor to be hired as a grill cook or gas station attendant, avoiding the even greater shame of being idle.

In and around cities, people at least had neighbors and community organizations to turn to for support. In rural areas (and one quarter of America was rural at the time), poverty was devastating. At the same time that the Depression was driving down the prices that consumers could afford for food, a drought hit several key farming states. This area was settled quickly in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, and because the inexperienced farmers had used improper farming techniques, the soil eroded when the drought hit. Parts of Oklahoma, Kansas, Texas, New Mexico, and Colorado became so dry and barren that they were referred to as the Dust Bowl. While Dust Bowl farmers were unable to produce anything from their land, other U.S. farms were producing more than the marketplace could buy. Prices fell and surplus food that consumers could not pay for rotted in storage. Farmers who could not pay back the money that they had borrowed for seeds and feed for livestock lost their homes and moved to cities, which already had more unskilled workers than they could use. Some families stayed on their land, ate what they could grow without hired workers, and did without products that had to be bought with money, such as clothes or heating oil.

In 1932, the country elected Franklin Delano Roosevelt to the presidency for the first time (Roosevelt eventually won four presidential elections before his death in 1945). Beginning in 1933, his first year in office, Roosevelt's administration began introducing new programs that used federal money to help the poor, the unemployed, and the homeless. Collectively, Roosevelt's programs to handle the depressed economy were referred to as "The New Deal." A limited amount of money went directly to unemployed people in the form of "relief" payments. The New Deal also established programs that put the unemployed to work: the Civilian Conservation Corps put three million men to work in the national forests, planting trees and building observation towers and laying telephone lines; the Tennessee Valley Authority, which was to develop the Tennessee River and its tributaries and which pays

for itself to this day with the sale of electricity from Hoover Dam; and the National Industrial Recovery Act, which authorized the Public Works Administration to hire citizens to construct roads, buildings, dams, and other public structures.

In 1935, the year this poem was published, a second "New Deal" was announced. This one contained policies that especially bothered many of the rich people who had not lost their money. Taxes on the rich were raised. Privately owned utility companies, which provided necessary services, were subject to government regulation. The National Labor Relations Act assured the rights of organized labor, and the Fair Labor Standards Act established minimum wages and maximum working hours. The Social Security Act introduced the program that we use to this day to make sure that non-working senior citizens and the handicapped will not be destroyed by poverty. "Any Human to Another" was written at a time in this country's history when circumstances put millions of people in need of help, and the government responded, even though the same complaints of "government interference" and "welfare cheats" that are heard today were also common then.

The Depression ran its course by the end of the 1930s and was over when war broke out in Europe in 1939. Producing weapons and consumer goods for the countries involved in the war boosted economic conditions in the United States, which did not enter the war until 1941. Due to increased production during World War II and the continuation of New Deal policies afterward, the United States has been fortunate enough to avoid another depression since.

### *Critical Overview*

It is difficult to find a critical response to Cullen's work that does not call attention to his African-American identity, for, as Arthur P. Davis put it in a 1974 essay, "Though he rebelled against being labelled a 'Negro poet,' he is, if not the finest, certainly one of the best poets of the New Negro Renaissance." Alan R. Shucard added, "So central to Countee Cullen's world view is his inescapable race consciousness that it is really no easy matter to differentiate in a great deal of his poetry between racial and nonracial themes." Here we see the paradox of Cullen's life work: with poems like "Any Human to Another" he sought to call attention to the universality of human experience so that it

## What Do I Read Next?



- This poem is published in a book of poems chosen by Cullen to represent his best, *On These I Stand*, published after his death in 1947. A larger collection of his works is the 1991 Anchor Books paperback, *My Soul's High Song: The Collected Writings of Countee Cullen*, edited with an introduction by Gerald Early.
- One of Cullen's peers during the Harlem Renaissance and beyond was Langston Hughes, who continued to write about African-American issues after Cullen had stopped concentrating on that issue. During the 1930s Hughes wrote very little poetry, but throughout his lifetime his output was tremendous, and he wrote some of the most influential poems of the century. Of all of the collections of Hughes's works, *The Selected Poems of Langston Hughes*, first published—with an introduction by the author—in 1959, is a good place to start.
- There is no denying Cullen's significance to the Harlem Renaissance, the artistic movement of the 1920s that gave many black artists their first national and international attention. Cary D. Wintz's 1988 history of the time, *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance*, is a scholarly work that explains those exciting years.

would be recognized by all people, but critics almost always try to find racial commentary in his poetry.

### Criticism

#### Aidan Wasley

*Aidan Wasley is a writer and instructor at Yale University. In the following essay, Wasley examines Cullen's belief that all people share experiences and are bound together by common threads of pain and suffering regardless of race, age, or gender.*

Countee Cullen's poem "Any Human to Another" presents, on first reading, a vision of community based on the universality of suffering and grief. The title suggests that the words of the poem are not simply those of the poet himself, but could instead be spoken by "any human to another," and that regardless of apparent differences like age, sex, creed, class, or race, what binds us all together is our shared experience of life's pain:

Joy may be shy, unique,  
Friendly to a few,  
Sorrow never scorned to speak  
To any who  
Were false or true.

Not everyone feels joy in their lives, says Cullen, but no one escapes sorrow. It is this commonality that defines us all as human.

This is an old idea, but Cullen's poem moves beyond the traditional assertion that human life is, in the customary phrase, a "vale of tears." The pain and grief that Cullen speaks of are not passively suffered, as if they were unavoidable facts of life. Rather, they are actively inflicted, by "any human" on another. Sorrows are imagined as weapons, "arrows" which "pierce to the marrow," driven not by nature or some divine force which decrees that we must suffer, but by other men:

Your every grief  
like a blade  
Shining and unsheathed  
Must strike me down.

What makes us a community then is not just that we all suffer pain, but that we inflict that pain on each other. We are bound together by our capacity to hurt one another.

Cullen expresses this sense of fraught interconnectedness in various ways throughout the poem. The speaker addresses the reader, telling him:

Your grief and mine  
Must intertwine  
Like sea and river,  
Be fused and mingle,  
Diverse yet single,  
Forever and forever.

The griefs of one "must intertwine" with those of another: what one suffers, the other must also suffer. The formal structure of the poem supports this idea of sensations being "fused and mingled," as it avoids a fixed rhyming scheme in favor of a shifting, fluid form full of internal rhymes ("sorrow"/"arrow") and varying metrical patterns. The rhymes "intertwine" with one another, as in the first stanza's abccab scheme, while the insistence of the

rhymes themselves suggest the force of a connection that transcends differences. The rhymes connect lines that can be next to one another and with similar stress patterns ("be fused and mingle, / diverse yet single"), or which are many lines apart and with different metrical values ("The ills I sorrow at" / "Through the fat"). What one line sings, another often very different line echoes.

Just as one line echoes another, so too is Cullen's theme of shared experience and responsibility an echo of a well-known passage from the New Testament in which Christ tells the damned at the Last Judgment, "Whatsoever you do to the least of my brothers, that you do unto me" (Mt. 25.40). Cullen, the son of a Methodist minister, is alluding to, and adapting, the Christian notion that sins against one's fellow man are sins against God. In doing so, Cullen places the speaker of the poem in the position of Christ, and engages in a subtle reversal of the Biblical passage. The Christ-like speaker of Cullen's poem tells his reader, in effect, "Whatever you do to me, you do to yourself": "Of bitter aloes wreathed, / My sorrow must be laid / On your head like a crown."

The image of the persecuted Christ is an extremely important one for Cullen, who uses it again and again in his poetry as a complex symbol for the plight of blacks in America. In a poem written six years before this one, Cullen describes the lynching of a "Black Christ," presenting the hanging of an African-American man in the racist South in terms of the Biblical crucifixion. Similarly, in "Heritage," Cullen's most famous poem, he addresses Christ, wishing he were black: "Surely then this flesh would know / Yours had borne a kindred woe." In "Any Human to Another," Cullen's identification of the speaker with Christ encourages us to read this poem as a kind of parable about the relationship between blacks and whites in the United States. The martyr-Christ figure of the speaker represents the history of African-American oppression by whites, whose arrows "pierce" their victim just as the crucified Christ's side is pierced by a spear. But Cullen's reversal of Christ's message—his insistence that persecution places a figurative "crown" of thorns not on the victim but on the oppressor—suggests that the relationship between blacks and whites is an inextricably "intertwined" one. In this community of pain, the poem implies, all are bound together and, in hurting blacks, whites only hurt themselves.

The poem enacts a delicate balance between awareness of the injustices done to blacks by

whites, and a desire to move beyond that antagonistic relationship toward one of peaceful, color-blind equality. Cullen simultaneously recalls the African-American history of "sorrow" and "grief" at the hands of whites, while arguing that men should learn to speak, not as blacks or whites, but as "any human to another." The tension inherent in this poem between the speaker's consciousness of his race and his wish to transcend it, illustrates a dilemma Cullen faced throughout his poetic career. It is a dilemma which W. E. B. Du Bois, the noted scholar and critic (and Cullen's father-in-law), saw as characteristic of the condition of living as an African-American in a white-dominated culture. In 1903, in his book *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois famously wrote: "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder." Du Bois argued that to be black in America was to be forever caught in the conflict between proud acknowledgment of one's racial heritage and the desire to be seen not as black, but simply as an American.

As a poet, Cullen experienced this inner conflict even more acutely. Torn between the expectation of his audience—both white and black—that he represent his race, and his ambition to be read not as a "Negro" poet but as an "American" one, Cullen's sense of his own "double-consciousness" led him, in two famous lines from an early poem, to lament, "Yet do I marvel at this curious thing: / To make a poet black and bid him sing!" ("Yet Do I Marvel"). To make a poet black is, says Cullen, to condemn him to a state of artistic limbo, forever struggling to escape his limiting role as "Negro" poet.

For Cullen, a Harvard-educated scholar, his response to this dilemma throughout his career took the form of his identification with the dominant tradition of white American and European poetry, in contrast to contemporary black poets like Langston Hughes who found their inspiration in the native African-American tradition of spirituals, blues, and jazz. By asserting his alliance with Anglo-American literature, Cullen was staking his claim as a writer who refused to be restricted by the color line. He wanted to be a poet who was seen to soar above and beyond questions of race, who was judged by

“One cannot, and, in the imperative language of the poem, ‘must’ not forget that the history one shares with others, however painful, forges a mutual relation, a connection that cannot be broken.”

the merits of his words, and his relation to past poets, not by the color of his skin.

Yet while Cullen sought to distance himself from preconceived notions of what a black poet could or could not do, one finds evidence of Du Bois’s notion of “warring ideals” even in poems like this one, which self-consciously echoes canonical English poets like Donne in its evocation in the third stanza of Donne’s famous claim, “No man is an island,” and in that stanza’s first line which recalls the language of Donne’s lyric, “Death be not proud.” (Indeed, if one traces Cullen’s imagery back to poems like “The Ecstasy,” which speak of two lovers’ souls being “intergrafted” such that what one feels the other does as well, one might make an argument that this poem be read as a revision of a Donnean love lyric.) “Any Human to Another” is a poem full of dualities and oppositions, from the central theme of “intertwined” sorrows, to the dichotomies the poem draws between pairs like “sea” and “river,” “sun” and “shadow,” “joy” and “sorrow,” and “false” and “true.” Even the final image of the “crown” is an ambiguous one, as this symbol of victory and triumph is, as we have seen, converted into a symbol of shame and sorrow.

“Let no man be so proud,” says Cullen, “To think he is allowed / A little tent . . . / All his own.” In light of the poem’s concern with its own “unreconciled strivings,” as Du Bois puts it, we can read these lines as a comment on the desire to stand alone, to break from the community of pain that the poem, and African-American history, describes. The lesson, the poem suggests, is that such an escape is never possible. No man can ever truly retreat to his “little tent.” One cannot, and, in the imperative language of the poem, “must” not forget

that the history one shares with others, however painful, forges a mutual relation, a connection that cannot be broken. One’s identity is a product of that history, and while that too may be divided and “unreconciled,” it is that very conflict that makes us who we are. To be “any human,” just as it is to be an African-American poet, is to be forever engaged in the conflict between our sense of our own uniqueness, and our place within the larger community of history and culture. Our relationship with “other humans” is always in tension with our individuality. No matter who we are, each of us, says Cullen, is always “diverse yet single.”

Source: Aidan Wasley, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 1998.

### Houston A. Baker, Jr.

In the following excerpt, Baker explains and defends Countee Cullen’s position within the Black literary tradition.

What is the task of the Black American author and by what standards is he to be judged?

If this query is placed in an historical context, it is relatively easy to gaze back on turn-of-the-century America and see that the odds were stacked against the Black writer who decided that he would give an unflinching portrayal of Black America, that he would make no compromises, and that he—like William Lloyd Garrison—would be heard. There were simply too many Jim Crow laws and lynchings (and too few courageous publishers) for such honesty to exist. And Black creativity, which was to flower in the 1920s, faced many of the same handicaps. The age that witnessed the deportation of Marcus Garvey, the heroic but unsuccessful efforts of James Weldon Johnson to secure the passage of an anti-lynching bill, and the arrest of Ossian Sweet was scarcely one of interracial harmony. Although the chronological span between the end of Dunbar’s career and the publication of Countee Cullen’s first volume of poetry, *Color* (1925), is almost infinitesimal, critics have seemed unable to bring these twenty years into perspective. Some make it appear that the Harlem Renaissance was a self-willed affair, springing forth from the Black American consciousness like Athena from the brow of Zeus....

Black American literature came of age during the 1930s and 1940s when proletarian art was in its heyday, and Richard Wright was one of the first Black American authors to achieve overwhelming national and international success. If one adds to this fact the growth of an educated Black reading



public, it is not difficult to understand why many writers of the fifties and sixties looked upon Wright as a paradigm for Black literature and included the 1920s in the nonage of their tradition. Wright's early fiction was read approvingly by many white Americans and Europeans, and his themes and aims were often in harmony with a socialistic ideal: propagandistic, oriented toward change, and conceived in accordance with a specific social philosophy. Though the Black American reaction to *Uncle Tom's Children* and *Native Son* was not entirely favorable ... he could feel a great deal more assurance than, say, Claude McKay or Langston Hughes in beginning their careers that Black America was amenable to proletarian art.

This historical and aesthetic perspective is necessary if one is to understand the position that Countee Cullen, who was called by contemporaries the poet laureate of the Harlem Renaissance, occupies in the gallery of writers that is being contemplated by today's artists, critics, and academicians. The space assigned to Cullen seems describable as a dimly lit and seldom-visited chamber where genteel souls stare forth in benign solicitude. [In the book *In a Minor Chord*,] Darwin Turner, for example, calls him "the lost Ariel," and Nathan Huggins [in *Harlem Renaissance*] speaks of Cullen clinging "quite tenaciously to the genteel tradition." Such phrases only indicate that Cullen did not march to the beat of the drummer who has "boomlay, boomlay, boomlayed" us into the 1970s. But critics are often embarrassed by the poet who is out of step with the age, as though someone had brought out a picture of a nonpartisan ancestor and shown it to their most committed colleagues. There follow tacit dismissals, vague apologies, and overweening defenses.

Of course, the disconcerted responses of Black critics faced with the life and work of Countee Cullen are predicated upon certain progressivistic assumptions; e.g., the poet does not "lead" to the point at which Black authors find themselves today.... Cullen did not think of art in Saint-Simonian or Caudwellian terms; his guiding mode was not the realistic but the romantic, and he believed the poet was a man in tune with higher spiritual forms rather than a social tactician. The romantic mode implies a world charged with wonder and suspends the laws of probability—there is unlimited expectation. Though piety and devotion are operative, the prevailing motive is love. Cullen's canon reflects all of these characteristics and contains the distinction between a dark romanticism of frustrated love and infidelity and a bright one of

harmony and enduring friendship. The mode, or preshaping impulse, of his work is in harmony with his overall conception of the poet as a man who dwells above mundane realities; for Cullen, the poet is the dream keeper, the "man ... endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness," the individual who is "certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affection and the truth of Imagination." These quotations from Wordsworth and Keats are descriptive; they capture in brief the a priori mandates of the romantic poet.... Cullen defines the poet as a creator of immortal beauty, a man still in harmony with the mysterious and the ideal in an age "cold to the core, undefied," a person who wraps his dreams in "a silken cloth" and lays them away in "a box of gold." Such an author is far removed from the ideal social artist and can hardly be compared to many of today's Black artists, who compose as though our lived realities were contingent upon their next quatrain. What we have, then, is not a difference in degree but one in kind. To apply the standards of a socially oriented criticism to Countee Cullen and dismiss him is to achieve no more than a pyrrhic victory. To expect the majority of his work to consist of the type of idiomatic, foot-tapping, and right-on stanzas that mark much of the work of Langston Hughes and Don Lee is not only naive, but also disappointing. Moreover, to search always for the racial import in the writings of an artist who believed the poet dealt (or, at least, should be able to deal) above the realm of simple earthly distinctions is to find little. To examine the writings of Countee Cullen in detail, however, and attempt to understand both his aesthetic standpoint and the major ideas in his poetry is to move closer to an intelligent interpretation of both the man and the tradition to which he belongs.

The starting point of such an examination is the realization that every notable author in the Black American literary tradition, Cullen included, has been dependent to some extent on the white American literary establishment—that complex of publishers, patrons, critics, scholars, journals, and reviews that can either catapult a writer to success or ignore him....

[Cullen's] first published poem, "To the Swimmer," appeared in *The Modern School* during his sophomore year at De Witt Clinton High School.... Throughout his high school career, Cullen contributed to the literary magazine and continued to hone his poetic talent. He read Paul Laurence Dunbar and the British and American Romantic poets and resolved to be a writer.

After graduating from De Witt Clinton, he entered New York University, and here he came of age as a poet. He won prizes in the Witter Bynner and *Crisis* poetry contests, and by 1924, "it seemed that no literary magazines could bear to go to press without a Countee Cullen poem" [according to Blanche E. Ferguson in *Countee Cullen and the Negro Renaissance*]. In the fall of 1925, Cullen entered the M.A. program at Harvard University; he came bearing fame and a Phi Beta Kappa key. During the same year, *Color* was published by Harper and Brothers, and its seventy-odd poems secured the poet's place as a leading figure of the Harlem Renaissance. The acknowledgments page—which contains such exalted names as *The American Mercury*, *The Bookman*, *Harper's Magazine*, *The Nation*, *the Crisis*, and *Poetry*—reveals Cullen as one of the first Black American poets after Dunbar to gain national celebrity....

Early in the 1930s—the decade of the Great Depression that ended the Harlem Renaissance—Cullen decided to take a teaching job at Frederick Douglass Junior High School. This post turned into a career. Though *One Way to Heaven* (a novel, 1932) and *The Medea and Some Poems* (1935) both received kind reviews, by the mid-thirties Cullen's days as a serious writer were past....

Arna Bontemps writes [in an article titled "The Harlem Renaissance" in *Saturday Review*]: "Cullen was in many ways an old-fashioned poet. He never ventured very far from the Methodist parsonage in which he grew up in New York. A foster child, drawn into this shelter at an early age, he continued to cherish it gratefully." Although Cullen always returned home to Harlem no matter how far he journeyed, the implications of Bontemps' statement seem questionable; the poet lived in harmony with his adopted parents and is deemed old-fashioned because he never experienced a stage of Freudian revolt. One can see how Cullen would be considered the exception in an age that brought Wallace Thurman, Bontemps himself, and a host of others from all over the country to seek fame and fortune in Harlem. Cullen was already there. Moreover, he was the first to achieve monumental success as an author and to substantially express what many of the Renaissance writers felt. Cullen is old-fashioned, I think, only to the revisionist who feels he must divide the past into neat blocks and firmly ensconce his favorites.

In many ways, the Harlem Renaissance was simply the artistic extension of the socio-political activities of Black Americans during the 1920s. Its

end was integration into the mainstream, and its means were not very different from those of white creative artists. Financial success, acknowledgment by literary figures such as H. L. Mencken, Sara Teasdale, and Witter Bynner, and the acclaim of newspapers like the *New York World* and the *Times* were considered worthy rewards by all American authors. Countee Cullen was not out of step with his age when he gratefully received any of these. And unlike a number of Black American authors, Cullen refused to be wooed and won by white patrons. He firmly rejected Carl Van Vechten's offer to secure a publisher for him and steadfastly refused to be channeled into a narrow stream.

Most often criticized is Cullen's choice of the romantic mode and his reliance on a long-standing poetical tradition. And if his detractors stuck to these charges, there would be little conflict. Most, however, go beyond them and assume that, say, Langston Hughes and Jean Toomer were more forthright, "modern," and independent than Cullen....

In short, Cullen can be placed in the Harlem Renaissance camp that viewed the Black writer's objective of universal success as one strategy for lessening the great American dilemma....

Countee Cullen ... understood better than most the aims of his articulate Black contemporaries. W. E. B. Du Bois wrote [in his article "Our Book Shelf" in *Crisis*]: "In a time when it is the vogue to make much of the Negro's aptitude for clownishness or to depict him objectively as a serio-comic figure, it is a, fine and praiseworthy act for Mr. Cullen to show through the interpretation of his own subjectivity the inner workings of the Negro soul and mind." And Alain Locke felt the poet blended "the simple with the sophisticated so originally as almost to put the vineyards themselves into his crystal goblets." The final member of that revered Renaissance triumvirate, James Weldon Johnson, said [in *The Book of American Negro Poetry*]:

Cullen is a fine and sensitive lyric poet, belonging to the classic line.... He never bids for popular favor through the use of bizarre effects either in manner or subject matter.... All of his work is laid within the lines of the long-approved English patterns. And by that very gauge a measure of his gifts and powers as a poet may be taken. The old forms come from his hands filled with fresh beauty. A high test for a poet in this blasé age.

Cullen was not destined to go unsung like Toomer nor was he subject to the kind of disillusionment that overtook Hughes. One of the most

accomplished literary representatives of a majority point of view, he received both the lavish (and, at times, inordinate) praise and the ironical discomfort that accompany such a position.

With the wisdom of hindsight, one might glance back on Cullen—and the Harlem Renaissance in general—and talk of the myopia of the 1920s. Many Black American artists and critics felt the millenium had arrived. While this was certainly not true, it seems excessively critical to speak of their faulty vision. A view of Cullen's aesthetic statements reveals that one of his chief demands was the freedom of the Black American artist. Like James Weldon Johnson, Cullen was interested in liberating Black American poetry from the shackles of the past and in developing a strong literary tradition. In a 1926 *Crisis* article [titled "The Negro in Art"], he wrote: "I do believe ... that the Negro has not yet built up a large enough body of sound, healthy race literature to permit him to speculate in abortions and aberrations which other people are all too prone to accept as truly legitimate." This sounds, on the one hand, like a Victorian moralist calling for fresh air and sunshine in art, but it seems, on the other, wise advice to the poets of an era prone to bizarre tangents. A firm tradition could be established only if the writer exercised meet selectivity. Cullen says:

Let art portray things as they are, no matter what the consequences, no matter who is hurt, is a blind bit of philosophy. There are some things, some truths of Negro life and thought, of Negro inhibitions that all Negroes know, but take no pride in. To broadcast them to the world will but strengthen the bitterness of our enemies, and in some instances turn away the interest of our friends.... Put forward your best foot. [Tucker, *In a Minor Chord*].

This enjoinder was not prescriptive, however; unlike Jessie Fauset and others, Cullen did not believe the field of the Black artist should be severely limited. His statement is a call for what all fine art must possess—authorial discretion. The specific subject matter is the choice of the individual artist.... [O]ne must beware of interpreting the response as the bourgeois artist's apology for his subjects and techniques. Cullen never urged Black writers to turn away from the ghettos of the land and lose themselves in learned epithets....

Given Cullen's views on the liberty and discretion of the Black artist, it is not surprising that he considered artistic diversity a norm in the Black experience....

Cullen points out, however, the Black American's double consciousness does not present a sim-

ple problem. Though he made a strong case for the Black artist's freedom from limiting categories (hoping that any merit that might reside in his own works would "flow from it solely as the expression of a poet—with no racial considerations to bolster it up"), he found himself insensibly drawn into writing racial verse. In 1926, he said [according to Stephen H. Bronz in his *Roots of Negro Racial Consciousness*]:

In spite of myself ... I find that I am actuated by a strong sense of race consciousness. This grows upon me, I find, as I grow older, and although I struggle against it, it colors my writing, I fear, in spite of everything I can do. There may have been many things in my life that have hurt me, and I find that the surest relief from these hurts is in writing.

And in an interview for the *Chicago Bee* during the following year, he said:

Most things I write, I do for the sheer love of the music in them. Somehow or other, however, I find my poetry of itself treating of the Negro, of his joys and his sorrows—mostly of the latter, and of the heights and the depths of emotion which I feel as a Negro.

The apologetic tone of these statements is considered gratuitous by our own generation, but in a poet as concerned with widening the horizons of the Black author as Countee Cullen, the sentiments are genuine. Cullen himself wanted to be an accepted poet, and he hoped that his example and advice would lead to the instatement of others in the hall of acknowledged American authors. He realized that from one point of view his task was far from simple.... "In the twenties the Negro's gifts were still departmentalized. There were poets in the United States, and there were Negro poets" [according to Arna Bontemps in "The Harlem Renaissance"]. During the 1920s ... the "Negro poet" was automatically deemed inferior to "the Poet." It is one thing to say that Cullen should never have fallen prey to such speculations; it is quite another to realize that he was torn by the dichotomy and that in the process of working it out he made some of the strongest statements on Black artistic freedom that emerged from the Harlem Renaissance. His apologies can surely be seen as lamentations that America produced a kind of schizophrenia in the Black artist and made it impossible for him to translate his highest ideals into a unified and consistent body of poetry that would rank with the canons of John Keats and Percy Shelley. Moreover, they can be viewed as his painful realizations that the Black man is often so scarred by his experiences in America that it is difficult for him to sustain the romantic point of view that Cullen felt most

conducive to poetry. The question here is not disillusionment, but having all roads blocked from the outset. A careful reading of Cullen's aesthetic dictates reveals a man with his mind set on freedom, but one who—like the creatures in George Orwell's *Animal Farm* or like Ellison's protagonist in *Invisible Man*—was confused by the relativity of the term. The inconsistency of Cullen's canon—its peaks and deep valleys—is understandable within this context. A fine, militant racial poem is sometimes followed by popularistic verse urging a hedonistic Black existence, and skillful lyrics detailing the beauty of spring precede the most trite and unimaginative stanzas on despair. Cullen was certain that he did not want to be hemmed in—that he wanted to be accepted as just a poet—but he was not sure what constituted the most daring and accomplished freedom for an American author who happened to be Black. [In *The Book of Negro Poetry*] Johnson succinctly captures his situation:

The colored poet in the United States labors within limitations which he cannot easily pass over. He is always on the defensive or the offensive. The pressure upon him to be propagandic is well nigh irresistible. These conditions are suffocating to breadth and to real art in poetry. In addition he labors under the handicap of finding culture not entirely colorless in the United States....

Countee Cullen never achieved the "Vision Splendid." He can be classified as a minor poet whose life and poetry raise major problems. If we condemn him for his lack of independence and his rise to fame through the agency of noted American critics and periodicals, we are forced to do the same for a host of others. If he is judged and sentenced to exile on the basis of his aesthetic, a number of excellent statements on the Black artist's tasks and difficulties are lost. If he is upbraided for his lack of directness and his reliance on a longstanding tradition, our evaluation of the entire corpus of Black American poetry must be modified. It is possible that we are now whirling about fiercely in the maelstrom of a Black poetic revolution, but a careful view of Countee Cullen brings doubt. There is much continuity between the career of the Harlem Renaissance poet and the generations that have followed. As one glances from Cullen to present works and back, it is sometimes hard to tell the difference. In short, Cullen offers a paradigm in the

Black American creative experience, and summary appraisals of his work lead to obfuscation rather than the clarity we so sorely need. He wrote a number of outstanding romantic lyrics and contributed racial poems that will endure because they grant insight into the Black American dilemma.

Source: *A Many-Colored Coat of Dreams: The Poetry of Countee Cullen*, Broadside Press, 1974, 57 p.

### Sources

Davis, Arthur P., "First Fruits: Countee Cullen," *From the Dark Tower: Afro-American Writers 1900-1960*, Howard University Press, 1974, pp. 73-83.

Garraty, John A., *The Great Depression*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1986.

Hickok, Lorena, *One Third of a Nation: Lorena Hickok Reports on the Great Depression*, Richard Lowett and Maurine Beasley, editors, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1981.

Shucard, Alan R., *Countee Cullen*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984, 185 p.

### For Further Study

Auerbach, Jerold S., "The Depression Decade," in *The Pulse of Freedom: American Liberties, 1920-1970s*, Alan Reitman, editor, New York: W.W. Norton Company, 1975, pp. 65-104.

This section of a book on civil liberties concentrates on the problems faced by political dissenters, especially radical labor activists. It provides an interesting look at a sector of society too often left out of regular histories.

Schwarz, Jordan A., *The New Dealers*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993.

A meticulously detailed political history of many of the men in power in Washington during the 1930s who made the New Deal happen by appealing to the nation's empathy for the victims of the Depression.

Turner, Darwin T., *In a Minor Chord: Three Afro-American Writers and Their Search for Identity*. Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971.

Turner presents brief analyses of the careers of Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston, and Cullen. His claim that Cullen's career never lived up to its early promise is debatable, given that "Any Human to Another" is one of the poet's last works.

# A Pièd

*Colleen J. McElroy*

1990

"A Pièd," from the French phrase "to travel by foot," is one of a series of "shoe" poems Colleen McElroy published in 1990 in her collection *What Madness Brought Me Here: New and Selected Poems, 1968-1988*. Because of her self-described "triangular, three-quarter feet ... a B width at the front and AA at the back," the poet explains, her feet "won't fit the forms of a factory-built last, and shoe manufacturers are not interested in nonstandard feet." Therefore, "shoes were, for me, quite political." McElroy writes in her essay "When the Shoe Fits: Myth in the Modern Mode" that "it is only natural that my poems, usually addressing subjects outside of the mainstream anyway, should take on shoes." "A Pièd" begins when the poet spots a single shoe "on a highway in northern California, a lone shoe in six lanes of traffic with cars veering way from it." This curious and disturbing sight causes the poet explore a series of questions throughout the poem, wondering how the shoe got there: Was it through horrifying accident? Was it simple abandonment? In a series of loosely related images and similes, McElroy takes the reader on a journey from the simple object found in a road to larger questions of loneliness, uncertainty, and relationships.

## *Author Biography*

McElroy was born on October 30, 1935, in St. Louis, Missouri, to Jesse and Ruth Long Johnson.



## Poem Text

one shoe on the roadway presents  
 its own riddle of so much left  
 unsaid regardless of the condition:  
 scoured, unpolished and crumpled  
 like a drunk forever missing the next step  
 the tongue bent inward like some church  
 gossip who has said finally too much  
 and snapped that last accusation in public  
 the absence of laces or any restraints  
 and how everyone passing lurches away  
 from any entanglement

all roads at some time or other  
 have held a single shoe—the forlorn  
 reminder of someone careless enough to be trapped  
 like a teenager in the wash of fast travel  
 the incongruous one shoe out of step  
 without foot or wheels or movement  
 yet so commonplace as to almost  
 be forgotten by what is missing:  
 the left leg dangling bare  
 the child crying to be forgiven or the family  
 car careening on its mission of terror

one shoe on the road leaves it all  
 unsaid—the something that lies  
 without comment or recognition  
 in the heaviest of traffic or mid-lane  
 and turned sideways near the center  
 strip as if waiting for someone  
 to answer its description  
 if, as my father would say, the shoe fits  
 but this thing, so ordinary, cannot be  
 explained so easily like those strips  
 of rubber from burst tires

we'd soon as not remember how anyone  
 like a shoe may be lost in a crowd  
 or how part of what we know to be our lives  
 can become a stray digit or decimal point  
 an unrelated member of a set  
 yet any child from a divorce can tell  
 you how it feels to be abandoned  
 midstream

while the family makes a fast break  
 for the nearest off-ramp—and we've all  
 heard of the countless armies

scattered like shoes in the traffic of war  
 along roads where city families once  
 took their Sunday country outings  
 but one shoe without ballroom or battleground  
 can never question the hurry of passing:  
 it bends finally into its own loneliness  
 and unanswered questions of what might have  
 happened  
 to its owner or what horror has befallen the other  
 shoe

She attended Kansas State University, receiving a bachelor's degree in 1958 and a master's in 1968. In the interim between working on her degrees she worked with the speech impaired at the Rehabilitation Institute in Kansas City, Missouri. She married David F. McElroy on November 28, 1968, and the couple eventually had two children. From 1966 to 1973 McElroy was an assistant professor of English at Western Washington State College. McElroy continued with her education and was awarded a doctorate from the University of Washington at Seattle in 1973. She became an assistant professor at the University of Washington at Seattle in 1973 and currently holds the position of professor of English.

McElroy published her first collection of poems in 1973 and has produced several volumes since then. Among her numerous awards are creative writing residencies in 1984 and 1986; the Before Columbus American Book Award in 1985; a creative writing residency in Yugoslavia on a Fulbright Fellowship in 1988; the Washington State Governor's Award for Fiction and Poetry in 1988; an NEA Creative Writing Fellowship for Fiction in 1991; and a Fulbright Research Fellowship to Madagascar in 1993.

## Poem Summary

### Lines 1-3:

In these first lines of "A Pièd," the poet introduces the image that triggers the rest of the poem: she glimpses a single shoe in the middle of a busy highway. Of course, this odd scene raises the question of how, under what circumstances, it got there and where the other shoe might be. By calling the shoe a "riddle" and stating there is "so much left / unsaid," the poet is helping set up the purpose of rest of the poem, which, through a series of loosely associated images, attempts to explore the possible reasons why a shoe, "regardless of the condition" it's in, would be abandoned in the road. This attempt to answer the riddle, as we will see, only leads her to more questions.

### Lines 4-5:

Here the poet describes the condition of the single shoe, battered and probably run over many times by speeding cars. Moving into a series of similes to help us imagine the scene more vividly, the poet first compares the single shoe to the awkward stumbling of a drunk, giving the otherwise inanimate object a sense of movement.

### Lines 6-8:

The poet continues to invent comparisons in an attempt to explain the riddle of the shoe in the road; she plays with the pun "tongue bent inward," which literally describes the tattered inner flap of the shoe while at the same time, perhaps, figuratively suggests a gossiping old lady in church who can't keep a secret.

### Lines 9-11:

Noting the shoe is missing its laces, here McElroy closes the list of comparisons by suggesting people are afraid of getting too close to the shoe for fear of becoming entangled. "Everyone passing lurches away" perhaps describes the drivers in their cars trying to avoid the minor road obstruction.

### Lines 12-15:

Widening the scene from the specific to a more mythic sense, these lines suggest this odd shoe is really more common than we'd expect. Every road has held a single shoe "at some time or nother"; literally, the poet reminds us that perhaps every road has been the scene of a horrible accident where some pedestrian was unfortunate and "careless enough to be trapped," injured or killed. Perhaps all poetry attempts to describe experience in a way

that is both personal and public at once, and here the poet relates this experience to us by figuratively suggesting the shoe is like an abandoned reminder of those fast paced and turbulent adolescent years we all have experienced, our lives trapped "in the fast lane."

### Lines 16-19:

Calling the shoe "incongruous," which means "incompatible," in these lines the poet returns to the central riddle: how did this single shoe end up here? It seems so illogical—there's no trace of its owner. She also uses these lines to restate the two sides of the poem's central paradox: this abandoned shoe is both strange and "commonplace," odd enough to stir her curiosity, yet common enough to be "forgotten by what is missing."

### Lines 20-22:

Because the poet is free-associating so quickly in these lines, images passing in fragments, it might be more helpful to note what mood or emotion is being expressed here rather than to try to understand exactly what is happening at the dramatic level. The images we're given—a single leg, crying child, a careening car "on its mission of terror"—perhaps accumulate a sense of fear, horror, something terribly wrong. On a literal level, these images point toward the most disturbing explanation of how the shoe ended up in the middle of the road: the possibility of a child thrown from a car into the middle of careening traffic; or perhaps a child wandered out into the road and was struck.

### Lines 23-27:

Here the poet returns again to the poem's central question, describing the shoe alone in the middle of the road, rephrasing herself in the repetitive fashion of someone obsessed with a topic. By using generalizing words like "all" and "something," here again the poet is helping relate this specific event to a larger sense of myth and anything that might remain unsaid "without comment or recognition."

### Lines 28-30:

Beginning another string of associations, these lines introduce the possibility of someone perhaps looking for the shoe, similar to the way a missing person is located and identified by "fitting the description." In a humorous turn, this also reminds the poet of how her father would use the common expression "if the shoe fits, wear it."

**Lines 31-33:**

Here again, McElroy points out the simultaneity of something both “ordinary” yet mysterious and enigmatic, unlike burst tires, which are also commonly found along highways but much more easily explained.

**Lines 34-35:**

As her series of associations move further and further away from the triggering event, exploring and widening outward to different topics, the poet compares the shoe to a person “lost in the crowd.” Note how she begins this simile. It suggests “we’d soon as not remember” the idea of how isolated a person can be in the world perhaps because it is too painful to think about.

**Lines 36-38:**

Continuing the theme of personal isolation from the previous lines, these lines remind us how easily we can “become a number” and lose our individuality in our crowded world—an “unrelated member of a set.” In our fast-paced and increasingly impersonal world, the poet is perhaps suggesting how easy it is for us to “become a statistic.”

**Lines 39-43:**

Here the poet moves from a general idea of how easily we can “become a statistic” to the specific example of children of divorce, which is such a common trend in America recently because studies show more than half of all marriages fail. McElroy uses the highway as a metaphor for the commonly used “road of life,” comparing the break-up of a family to a car making “a fast break for the nearest off-ramp” while the child, like the shoe, is left abandoned and alone.

**Lines 44-47:**

These lines compare the lost shoe to the disturbing images of modern warfare, corpses “scattered like shoes” along roads where residents once lived undisturbed and peacefully, going on “country Sunday outings.” Just as the rest of the poem thus far asks why no one stops to question how the shoe got there in the road, perhaps the poet is also asking how come so many people can be killed during war without a similar questioning.

**Lines 48-49:**

After widening out to questions of individuality vs. impersonality, the break-up of family and modern warfare, here the poet returns again to

where she began, the single shoe alone in the road, restating for perhaps the fourth time the poem’s central question.

**Lines 50-52:**

Working much like a frame around a painting, these closing lines describe the battered shoe still in the road, same as it was in the beginning of the poem, all the “questions of what might have happened to its owner” still unanswered. By not answering the question herself at the end, McElroy is perhaps turning the riddle over to the reader, forcing us to continue thinking about it long after we finish reading.

## Themes

***Alienation***

The reason that the speaker of this poem finds one shoe in the road so mysterious is precisely because it is a shoe, and not some other item or article of clothing, such as a shirt or a hat, that would not look strange if seen alone. Shoes come in pairs. One shoe by itself is obviously missing something, as glaringly incomplete as anything that is only half present. Seen by itself, any object can evoke a sense of loneliness, but one shoe alone is particularly isolated and unnatural. Once the poem has conjured up this uncomfortable idea, it goes about transferring what we feel about the lone shoe to circumstances that are more human, such as people in violent domestic situations, or soldiers in war, or even to moods that are less distinct, where the feeling of strangeness descends for no good reason upon one’s life or “part of what we know to be our lives” (line 36). The poem tells us that there is something about the lone shoe that implies a violent separation, but even if we disregard how the shoe came to be alone, we all can still recognize the feeling of being set apart from any group we belong to. Alienation has been called the problem of the twentieth century. As the population of the world has multiplied (from 1.6 billion in 1900 to 5.9 billion in 1998) we are physically closer to each other, but paradoxically people feel less connected to each other than they did when the nearest neighbor was a mile or more away. To illustrate how one can feel alone in a crowd, this poem uses the lone shoe on the highway, contrasting the bustle of the cars racing in each direction with the shoe’s lack of purpose, now that it is alone.



## Meaning of Life

"A Pièd" does not pretend that it can explain the meaning of life to its readers, but it does help us search for meaning by showing us a life that is meaningless. Throughout the poem, the speaker establishes the similarity between a lone shoe on the highway and modern life, sometimes pointing out the relationship directly with a simile and sometimes implying it metaphorically. We can logically explain how a line such as "like a drunk forever missing the next step" draws the connection between people and lost shoes, or how "anyone / like a shoe may be lost in a crowd" is using the shoe's situation to point out something that happens to us, but then there are times that the speaker does not claim to be drawing a connection. In these cases the poem just describes the shoe's mystery clearly, such as the fact that it "leaves it all unsaid—the something that lives without comment or recognition in the heaviest of traffic ..." (lines 23-25). When the poem does not tell us directly that the shoe's predicament parallels our own, we still know that it does, and it is therefore reasonable to assume that life is a riddle like the shoe is, and that it remains a riddle to the poem's speaker. Life is given no explicit meaning here, but we are told things to avoid: most notably, the powerful words "terror" and "horror" are used to describe the car and the shoe that have left this shoe behind. Life is worse when we are separated from those we are close to, this poem implies. That observation may not give life meaning, but it does give life some sense of direction, and, given this poem's willingness to accept some amount of uncertainty, that may be the best that it can offer us.

## War

Although it is not the first or the most striking image that the poem compares to an abandoned shoe, war is possibly the most significant. One reason for this is its strangeness, appearing as it does in the last line of the fourth stanza, just when it looks as if all of the points to be made about the shoe have already been made and the poem is winding down to its conclusion. Also, the stanza break that comes in the middle of the thought, between "armies" and "scattered," is more abrupt than any technique used earlier in the poem, which lends more importance to the comparison to war than it otherwise would receive. Finally, there is the huge nature of war itself and how it touches all ages of humanity, a universal significance that we would not have thought possible of a beaten, discarded shoe until the poem pointed it out. The emphasis in this poem is not on

## Topics for Further Study



- Write a long poem in free verse explaining some phenomenon, like one shoe on the road, that is common but that you have never heard talked about or seen written about. Keep writing until you have explored all the meanings of your subject.
- Some people might say that something as commonplace as a discarded shoe is not an appropriate subject for a poem. Do you think that the job of poetry is to describe ordinary things, or should it concentrate on beautiful things? Write an essay defending your position.
- What do you think is worse for an abandoned shoe: the loss of the person who wore it, or the loss of the matching shoe? How is the author using this situation to express her ideas about life?

---

the glory of war, its violence, or its role in the balance of nations, but only on the wastefulness of it. The poet could have shocked us with vivid descriptions of dead soldiers left to decay on the battlefields, but instead refers to the corpses with the abstract word "armies": still, the detail of the battlefields being "where city families once / took their Sunday country outings" highlights the ironic contrast between the violence of war and a picnic. The parallel between dead bodies and discarded shoes is doubled by the mention of "the traffic of war," showing the reader how each case has passivity within activity, reminding us how easy it is to forget about anything that is left behind if there is a lot of distracting commotion. War is not the first metaphor we think of when contemplating a shoe on the highway, but it may be the most fitting way to emphasize the poet's sense of pity.

## Style

"A Pièd" is written in free verse, which means the form is not determined by a preset rhyme scheme

or certain number of syllables and metric feet per line, as in formal verse. Instead, this poem's form grows from its content, much in the same way a river shapes its own banks. Reflecting the fast pace and rushed feeling of the images—the poet free-associates, trying to understand how this shoe could have ended up in the middle of the highway—McElroy uses very little punctuation throughout, which would slow down the reader's eye. Similarly, every line is enjambed, which literally means "to run over"; the lines flow together without pause from a comma or a period at the end. Lines that do end with a punctuation mark are called end-stopped lines. In addition, the poet uses fairly long lines and lengthy stanzas (8-11 lines each); perhaps to reinforce the overall "rushed" and "breathless" feel of the subject-matter, the images are arranged closely together rather than separated by shorter lines and stanzas.

### *Historical Context*

This poem's subject is eternal, equally applicable to all cultures throughout the centuries: it is easy to imagine that some poetically minded individual stood on the road to Damascus hundreds of years before the rise of the Roman Empire and wondered about a stray sandal in the dust. Most readers have a good sense of what everyday life was like in 1990, recent as it was, but it is interesting, given the poem's theme of separation, that many of that year's most significant world events had to do with political reorganizations that separated or reunited entire countries. Early in the year, in February, the Supreme Soviet, which was the body that ruled the Soviet Union, agreed to give up its absolute control and to allow other political parties oppose it in elections. The Soviet Union had been in existence since 1917, when the Russian Revolution led to the government's replacement by the Congress of Soviets. In 1939, the Soviet Army joined with the German Army in the invasion of Poland, the event that started World War II (the Soviets switched sides later in the war when Germany abruptly attacked Russia). The invasion of Poland started a new expansionist phase for the Soviet Union. In Europe, it took the Baltic nations of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia by force, and when the war ended in 1945, Germany was divided into two parts, East and West, and the Eastern part became another satellite of the Soviet Union. When years of mounting protests forced the Supreme So-

viet to accept democratic reforms in 1990, though, the alliances that had been forced upon the smaller countries were quick to fall apart. In March, Lithuania's Parliament voted the country's independence from the Soviet Union: Soviet tanks were moved into the Lithuanian capitol of Vilnius to intimidate the citizens, but Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev decided that the troops should not fight with the demonstrators. Independence was granted the following year. In October of 1990, East Germany and West Germany were reunited as one country, the Federal Republic of Germany. The most significant symbol of this reunification, and of the Soviets' new open policies in general, was the fall of the Berlin Wall, which had been erected in 1949 to keep people from leaving the communist East part of the city for the democratic West. In December, Poland held its first free elections since being invaded before World War II, and Lech Walesa, the leader of the labor union that had brought the world's attention to the struggle of all Communist countries for freedom, was elected President.

Other countries changing their political allegiances in 1990 include Namibia, which in March gained independence after being under the rule of South Africa since 1915 and under German rule before that since 1884; Yemen, where the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen and the Yemen Arab Republic, which had been separate countries since 1849, reunited in May; and Haiti, where the military government was forced to resign in December and allow the elected President, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, to return from exile and take up his duly elected position.

In August, Iran made a momentous move in the opposite direction of the democracy that was breaking out around the world by attempting to annex the neighboring country, Kuwait. The administration of President George Bush had promised the Iraqi government that it would not act to protect Kuwait, but after the invasion Kuwaiti officials who had been driven into exile became very vocal in the world media, drawing public outcry against the sort of colonial expansionism that Iraq was attempting. The United States led an international military in Operation Desert Shield, designed to stop Iraq from advancing any further. In January of 1991, with United Nations approval, the alliance went to war in Operation Desert Storm, to drive Iraq from Kuwait. The attack began on February 22 and lasted 100 hours until the Iraqi forces were defeated.

## Compare & Contrast

- **1990:** The Americans with Disabilities Act was signed into law by President Bush

**Today:** Many public facilities and employers' hiring practices have been changed in the past few years to include disabled Americans. Despite warnings from opponents of the act that the changes would create economic catastrophe, negative impact has been minimal.

- **1990:** The National Maximum Speed Limit (NMSL) was 55 miles per hour, or 65 on rural highways.

**Today:** States are allowed to set their own maximum speed limits. The highest limit that has been set is 75 miles per hour, although in some places there is no speed limit, and motorists are responsible for driving at "reasonable and prudent" speeds.

- **1990:** Inflation on the United States was 5.5 percent.

**Today:** U.S. inflation has been kept relatively low in recent years, with the inflation rate currently hovering around 2.5 to 3 percent.

### Critical Overview

Although not much has been written specifically about "A Pièd," many critics praise the collection it was published in, drawing attention to McElroy's often "breathless" voice; her ability to balance the serious with the humorous. A *Publisher's Weekly* commentator characterizes McElroy's poetry as emphasizing "stream-of-consciousness and rifts in association." Referring to the series of "shoe poems," the *Virginia Quarterly Review* notes, "Feet ... are important to the selection of new poems" which range "from witty to downright funny; from playful to thoughtful to sensual." Jewelle Gomez writing for *The Kenyon Review*, cites the "energy, sensuality, and excitement" in McElroy's works, pointing out that in this collection, "one can see the seeds of many of her stories and taste the flavor of her mythology."

### Criticism

#### David Kelly

*David Kelly is a freelance writer and instructor at Oakton Community College and College of Lake County, as well as the faculty advisor and co-founder of the creative writing periodical of Oakton Community College. In the following essay,*

*Kelly describes how McElroy is able to make a "shoe an appropriate symbol of human vulnerability."*

Of all of the products that roll off of assembly lines and exchange hands through stores each year, clearly those that are most entwined with human identity can be found in the category of clothing. Artistic works can outwardly express the thoughts and emotions of their creators, and thoughtful cooking combines outward expression with inwardly directed consumption; cars are said to tell us about their owners, but many consider them to be nothing but tools; even the furniture in a home, although it conforms to the shape of its owner after years of contact, is also used to host visitors when they stop by. Clothes are personal and intimate, touching the skin more and more often than any other product affects any other sense. In modern society, with temperature controls to protect all but the most unfortunate from dangerous exposure, most of the clothes we wear are primarily chosen as ways to decorate our bodies with a fair balance of comfort, but shoes add to the balance of fashion and comfort a responsibility for protection as well. Attribute it to gravity: one can actually avoid physical contact with almost anything by using ingenuity and patience, but shoes always touch the ground, and when they do the whole weight of the body is borne upon each shoe, with each step.

## What Do I Read Next?



- Much of Colleen McElroy's best work can be found in her collection *What Madness Brought Me Here: Selected Poems, 1968-1989*.
- One of McElroy's contemporaries is Nikki Giovanni, who came to national attention in the early 1970s and whose works are sometimes thematically similar. A 1996 collection of her works, *The Selected Poems of Nikki Giovanni*, gives an overview of the poet's career up to now.
- Colleen McElroy is also active in other forms of writing, in addition to poetry. In 1997 she published a collection of travel memoirs called *A Long Way from St. Louis*, combining her unique imaginative powers with actual sights from the American landscape.
- Although the subject matter of this poem does not reflect the gender of its author, it still is interesting to compare McElroy's view of the world shown here with that of other female poets throughout history. A good source for this is Alik Barnstone and Willis Barnstone's 1992 compilation *A Book of Women Poets from Antiquity to Now*.

---

McElroy's "A Pièd" takes humans' dependency upon shoes for granted, giving it no specific mention and yet using that crucial unmentioned relationship to give additional poignancy to the poem's central situation. Because it is functional and not just decorative, a shoe is a pathetic thing—the body's workhorse, its slave—, but for this very reason we are reminded of our own frailty to see the shoe exposed and vulnerable. It is a traditional maneuver for art to show us the strength in those normally considered weak and to show the vulnerability of those whose strength we take for granted. A shoe abandoned in a road touches readers in somewhat the same way as a story about a king or president brought down, reaching the deep-seated fear that anything we do to assure our protection might just easily crumble. Once the poem has

stirred this discomfort in its readers, it goes about transferring that feeling onto different human situations, approaching the plights of others indirectly, by way of how their circumstances resemble those of this most familiar article of clothing. This poem may or may not have been inspired by the bizarre but all-too-frequent event of a shoe in a road, but McElroy's gift is that she has been able to go beyond the physical occasion and find human conditions that an event can be made to illuminate.

One other key factor in making this shoe an appropriate symbol of human vulnerability is the metaphoric coupling of one shoe to another, similar both to the way that humans join together in pairs and also to the way we conceptually divide the world into halves. The dichotomies, or divisions into two, that we use to understand the world are countless, including good and bad, male and female, heaven and earth, static and kinetic, and, of course, left and right, which are the names that we usually use to identify the members of a pair of shoes. The adjective "pièd" used in the title actually means a patchy color design, but usually refers to a combination of two colors, emphasizing from the very start of the poem the duality that is at stake here. In this case, the coupling itself is doubled into a square of relationships, since each shoe not only sees its identity reflected in the other shoe, but also in the foot that is matched to it, that it shields, and that it cradles and serves. With such strong, close connections involved, the shoe's sudden appearance alone in the roadway becomes even more mysterious than it seemed at first, which was itself quite a mystery. The poem takes several different approaches to this strange aloneness, but nowhere does it combine the shoe's situation with human loneliness and the deep-running human fear of abandonment as powerfully or directly as it does in the last lines of stanza 2: "the left leg dangled bare" implies vulnerability, "the child crying to be forgiven" raises this state to fear, and "the family car careening on its mission of terror" intensifies the feeling further still.

Because the condition of the shoe in the roadway is being used here as a metaphor for the human condition at its extreme, it might be fair to consider a religious aspect to "A Pièd." Religious themes are not mentioned overtly, but the philosophical issue of how a person can relate to the surrounding world, which is at heart a religious question, is metaphorically examined in detail here. It is likely that the poem's title is a reference to Gerard Manly Hopkins' 1877 poem "Pied Beauty," which begins, "Glory be to God for dappled

things," and ends with the line, "Praise Him". Hopkins's piece examined the godliness of "all things counter, original, spare and strange," while McElroy's thrusts an everyday mystery at us. "Pied Beauty" celebrates the diversity of God for making things with two colors, pied, while "A Pied" mourns the separation of two shoes and what it tells us about our lives together.

"A Pièd" certainly does not look like a religious poem, if superficial first impressions are to be used in judging. Taking us beyond superficiality, however, is one of the main reasons that poetry sits so isolated on the page—floating far from the margins, energizing readers' minds as they wonder simultaneously about both form and content. The lost shoe is strange, of course, but most people who encounter one (and most people actually have) can explain its existence to their own satisfaction with something simple and dismissive, such as, "someone probably dropped it." Our culture finds it hard enough to think through things that were done intentionally and scarcely encourages curiosity about the broader significance of things that probably happened by chance. Newspapers might mention "senseless" deaths, but then they will go on to explain the circumstances and issues that led to the event, giving it "sense." Likewise, much that happens is dismissed by people who walk away shaking their heads. "tsk-tsk"-ing, declaring what they have seen a waste, but a poet cannot allow her- or himself to use such a vague word as "waste," because that word implies that the end results do not follow logically from what came before them. Instead, the poet has to force a sense of understanding and try to put things into a perspective as if they interrelate with one another.

In coping with daily life, we accept seeing a lost article such as a shoe in the road because it stands to reason that the shoe's owner has learned to accept this loss. Different circumstances promote different levels of acceptability when it comes to loss. The loss of any physical object is more acceptable than estrangement from one's loved ones, such as the loss suffered by the child of divorce who in this poem feels "abandoned midstream," or the forlornness of the shoe, personified in the poem as "waiting for someone to answer its description." Beyond personal separation, when the issue becomes loss of articles, the different levels of acceptability become harder to measure. A shoe sighted in the trash does not move one to pity because it is most likely there on purpose (although an extremely sensitive observer might make up the story of a wasteful person who would throw away

a useable shoe and pity them for lacking economy). A pair of shoes in the trash together leads to the even more certain conclusion that they were not ripped from someone's life too early, but that their loss was entirely acceptable; their time had come. In the physical world, we have garbage removal for practical, hygienic purposes, but there is also a metaphoric understanding of garbage as well: made of the items that have been cast off once they have served their functions, garbage represents not just uselessness and decay, but also a cleansing process, or the physical remains that humans leave behind their day-to-day travails the way a snake sheds its skin when it starts anew. "A Pièd" merely approaches this sense of the discarded shoe as an acceptable loss when it describes the shoe in detail as "scoured, unpolished and crumpled." It is then, for a fleeting moment early in the poem, that readers see the shoe only as a used-up object and not as a symbol of what might become of us all.

In choosing to write about this particular phenomenon in "A Pièd," a mystery that is unusual and yet happens all the time, paradoxically weird every day, McElroy has grasped a potent symbol of what it is to be human and of one of the most human of experiences: being lost. If her imagery inclines toward violence, abuse, and war, it serves the purpose of glossing over the chasm that separates the inanimate shoe from the motion of ordinary life. This poem is actually quite reverent and religious in a sense, raising grand questions about what solitary humans might mean in a world that speeds by as quickly as cars on a highway.

**Source:** David Kelly, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 1998.

### **Colleen McElroy**

*In the following essay, McElroy relates the myriad experiences that contributed to her emergence as a poet confident in her feminine, African-American voice.*

It is almost too simplistic to begin this essay with a line I've used so frequently in the past to describe my first contacts with poetry, but here goes: I was educated in a school system that led me to believe all writers were male, white, and dead,—three conditions I had no wish to assume. There, I've said it. What I consider tradition does not fall within that formula. Those literature courses I could endure presented poems as exacting, technical little snippets of obscurity and abstraction. Those courses neglected my world and the people in it, all the women in my family—my grandmother, my mother and her sisters—women

who wove wonderful tales of truth and love, life and death. Yet it is because of those women that I have become a poet, or more precisely, a storyteller.

I grew up with women who were storytellers. They talked in parables and never answered a question with a simple “yes” or “no.” All my mother needed was a key word to begin a quote from Shakespeare: Can I go out? What is that? Where are you going? Any of those brought forth passages from the bard as my mother answered: “Out, out brief candle.” “What is this I see before me,” “Where upon I take my leave....” And her sisters, sitting around my grandmother’s oak table almost every weekend, viewed all subjects as fair game for a story: the way rice was meant to be cooked, why so many flies hung around a certain neighbor’s door, my grandfather’s job at the Anheuser Brewery, a cousin’s surprise pregnancy, or the secrets of Farrow, the neighborhood grocer. Their stories were full of secrets, at least where I was concerned. If she thought I was listening too intently, my mother would say, “The walls have ears,” and the women would start talking in metaphors.

Under the guise of offering a recipe for some dish they knew I wouldn’t like, they’d abandon old man Farrow in a sea of okra—“Slimy as all get out,” they’d mutter. On other days, they’d condemn a wayward cousin to a lifetime of tripe and pigtales. “Some folks just cozy up to any old thing,” one would say. “Un-hun, I hear that,” another would answer.

Then they’d look for me, squatting under the table, its legs as brown and thick as theirs, a box of crayons and a coloring book in my lap as I pretended to be busy. I’d look up, big-eyed, feigning innocence, then go back to filling in the lines. Later, with my paperdolls, I’d imitate the entire conversation, complete with its nuances and cadences, intonations and inflections. In fact, when I couldn’t remember the exact words, I relied on the rise and fall of syllables, making up words but letting the rhythms carry the meaning of all those adult secrets. With their sweet fondness for metaphor and storytelling, how could I not have become a poet?

Wait. All of that seems too clean, told as if there were a one-to-one connection between what went on in my grandmother’s parlor and how I came to write poetry. Think again. There was still school to be reckoned with, and the women in my family believed in education—with a vengeance. They coached me in the manner in which they had

been trained at Normal School—if there was anything normal about a system that set as its goals turning girls into proper young women who were “fit” for teaching. Along with my lessons on manners, I was taught to memorize, memorize, memorize. If those women had had their way, I would have memorized whole books. But I was a stubborn child, and to this day I resist memorizing anything. Was it the ritual, or the material? Perhaps it was simply being pulled away from my friends and into the house, my legs covered with scabs and the hem of my dress unravelling from spills I’d taken on my bike racing down the gravel path of the all-white cemetery. Yes, I knew I had a recitation in class the next day, but how could some old dead poet compete with the thrill of racing down Ash Hill? And how many times could anyone recite yet another tedious verse? I wanted excitement, like those stories I heard on the radio, with mystery and love, good guys and bad guys. Maybe that’s why I took it upon myself to learn whole passages from Alfred Noyes’ “The Highwayman”: ...

“I want you to imagine England,” the teacher said. “Imagine the gardens alive with spring blooms. The profusion of blossoms redolent with the smells of peonies and sweet william. Roses and lilacs. The full blush of calla lilies and violets. I want you to think of those English gardens, the country smells of hay and foxglove. Then I want you to imagine a poet walking past those gardens into the churchyard where tombstones stand in quiet repose. And imagine the poet’s thoughts. What do you think he was thinking?”

Poet? Garden? Churchyard? Tombstones? The only graves I’d ever seen were in the cemetery at the end of the block. And we entered only when my friend, Bumpy, dared the rest of us to slide down the gravel of Ash Hill and streak past the main gate in a hail of pebbles and out again before the gatekeeper yelled: “Get out! Get out! No coloreds. No Jews.”

Maybe that white man in England was writing poems about how to keep colored folks out of his cemetery. That answer got me sent to the counselor’s office, where I was told, once again, to remember the values of a good education.

In English classes, poetry and grammar were coupled like naughty children who had to be put in their proper place or else they might break the rules and run on, run loose, run wild. Sentences were tamed with diagrams, and any poem worth its salt could be scanned. I couldn’t scan, but I could versify and signify, and on summer evenings when

fireflies danced in and out of hedgerows, the boys waited to see how sassy the girls could be.

Once a year, we had Negro History Day. The world hadn't moved as far as Negro History Week or Month, and no one yet had thought to include our African roots in that celebration. We heard about Phillis Wheatley, and we memorized Paul Lawrence Dunbar and, when I was older, Langston Hughes. But when the holiday had passed, they were replaced by Coleridge and Wordsworth and Keats. Under Miss Crutcher's rule, we intoned every line without missing a beat. Miss Crutcher was tight-lipped and dyed her hair purple. Miss Crutcher believed in elocution. I swore she had a metronome buried inside her. How else could she recite all those poems—*tick tock, tick tock*—with idiot precision? Under her practice, I learned to hate iambic pentameter and all those forms that fixed words to the page so tightly, they seemed forever out of my reach. I swore off meter and rhyme and lines that hit on the measure. "When this class is over, I'm never gonna look at another poem," I said. But nothing is as easy as a promise....

My mother tells me I learned to read when I was three. She says she didn't know how well I could read until one day when we were on the trolley. In those days, preschool children could ride the trolleys for free, and my mother had announced when we climbed aboard, "My daughter's only three." The trolley was full, so we'd had to stand in the aisle. There were placards above the windows advertising all manner of things: Ipana toothpaste, Trushay (the before-hand lotion), Old Dutch Cleanser, Lux Radio Theater. I started at one end, reading just the big words because I was too nearsighted to see the others. But that wasn't the real problem. The real problem was that I read aloud, proud of my ability to pronounce every word correctly.

"That'll be a nickel," the driver told my mother. "If she's reading, she's paying."

I don't think I remember a time when I didn't know how to read. I read everything. I read voraciously and indiscriminately: Nancy Drew novels, romance and detective magazines, and comic books. After I was too old to crawl under the dining room table when the women came to visit, they'd find me hiding somewhere in the house—"Nose in a book," as my mother would say. One day my Aunt Jennie found me, once again, huddled over a comic book, a pile of them at my side. She snatched the book from me. "Girl, what're you reading?" she asked. But even she had to admit I'd

shown good taste. Most of the books were "classic" comics, with a few, like *Wonder Woman*, thrown in to satisfy my need to find a heroine who, if not dark-skinned, at least had dark hair.

"Go in the front room and read some of those good books I got in there," my aunt said. And so I discovered Boccaccio and Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Zane Gray. Under the topsoil of literary language, those stories were every bit as daring as the talk I'd heard at my grandmother's. I rooted for heroines cast in the shadowy realms of those risqué tales. And I cried when, typically, they lost the battle. At least *Wonder Woman* had the powers of Hera.

Sprinkled among the novels were a few anthologies of poems—*Best Loved* and *Greatest* the titles declared—all of them resplendent with elegies and odes from the likes of Shelley, Keats, and Wordsworth. I tried imagining those poets walking through the black section of town, *thee*-ing and *thou*-ing their way past the rows of brownstones and whitewashed stoops, past Bumpy and that gang of boys who hung around old man Farrow's grocery store and the cemetery, past the vacant lots and poolhalls, past Miss Crutcher and Charles Sumner High. But I couldn't imagine those men grabbing their poems and coming down to earth anywhere near that spot I called home. The step from page to real life seemed too great. So while my teachers threatened me with failure if I did not live up to my potential, and my family warned me to get a "good education, something you can fall back on," I looked for books that competed with the world I saw around me—or, at least, with the world depicted in Saturday movie matinees, where the good guys and bad guys were easily identified and women were swept off their feet in heart-stopping romances. Those were the kinds of adventures that made the bawdy *Tales of the Decameron* all the more exciting. Even after I found Phillis Wheatley, almost hidden among the leather-bound books way down at the end of the bookshelf, I was too engrossed in Alexander Dumas' *Three Musketeers* and Pushkin's poems to fight my way through the stilted language of Wheatley's plaintive verse. Still, it was the excitement, not racial identity, that drew me to those adventures. It would be years before I discovered that Dumas, like Pushkin, had African ancestors.

Weekends, my mother's sisters gathered at my grandmother's house to sort out the world according to the stories they held. They sat around the oak table, the one my grandfather had ferried upriver

on a flatboat, and talked about women who had defied tradition. In English classes, what few women we read seemed, somehow, variations of the same woman. After all, how far was Dickinson in her cultivated seclusion from the fragile Wheatley, who in privileged slavery was bound in servitude to the same class system? And the Millay I was offered served up dainty prophecies like elegant cups of tea. Their poems were whispers among the loud voices of male poets.

And how could "The Highwayman" ever have been the favorite poem of a black girl growing up in St. Louis? What seems clear is that in those years I had been so hungry for images of dark women that I had settled for Bess, the landlord's daughter, death braided into her black hair. And why not? Most romantic stories I'd read, from magazines to classics, wove true love and death as if they marched hand in hand, like Romeo and Juliet, Frankie and Johnnie. Like Bessie Smith's blues. Or Billie Holiday's sweet melancholy.

Between high school and my graduate years in college, my world erupted in sit-ins and demonstrations staged by coalitions of Black Power, SNCC, and women's liberation. Even Miss Crutcher, who had had a poem for every holiday, could not have found suitable verse in the old texts for these turns of events. Where could I have placed Phillis Wheatley, with her genteel rebuke of General Washington? Somewhere during that time I put aside the voice of Miss Crutcher and searched for other, more assertive voices: ...

By the time I stumbled on women poets other than Emily Dickinson and Phillis Wheatley, twenty years had passed since my aunt had chased me out of comic books and into the leather-bound volumes lining her living room shelves. By then, I had fallen in love with a poet, and had taken it upon myself to please him by finding a poem to add to the wedding vows we were writing. I searched the old volumes, the *Best Loved* and *The Greatest*, for suitable verse. I'd settle for no more dark-haired women for want of seeing some part of myself on the printed page. I wanted women who took no stuff, like the ones my family had chewed on while I was growing up. But weeks later, I would have settled for a line, or even a phrase that would have brought me closer to home. Finally I came upon Georgia Douglass Johnson's "I Want to Die While You Love Me." It was the first time I'd read a love poem written by a black woman. Something, I thought, something for me. A black woman who wrote about matters close to the heart. A sister

whose language sang with all the elegance of any poet I'd ever read. A sister who saw herself in love and on fire with the joy of it all. But die? I swear I heard my grandmother's daughters sucking their teeth over yet another woman who had fallen victim to her own heart....

In the sixties I moved from the midwest to the west coast, from a landscape flat as an ironing board to mountainous country where fog hovered at the beeline like lace curtains, and the smell of the ocean engulfed the room where I sat, facing the window and an endless sky, while my poet husband read poems aloud. Romantic? Yes, but the poems were no romantic contemplations of nature, no poets on sublime walks through gardens. The language of these poems was direct, jazzy, and sometimes brutal, a world where beauty was as delicate and dangerous as walking a tightrope without a net. At first, the idea of a poet who still breathed the air of this planet was as unimaginable as the notion that I too would begin to write poems. At first I feigned interest, more entranced by the sound of my husband's voice, by the music of language, than by the poems themselves. Though I did not know it, my attention to the music and language was a first step toward becoming a poet. I was much more aware of the second step.

At least twice a month I attended poetry readings, some no more than coffee-shop gatherings of students and artists, some an overflow crowd paying homage to a celebrated poet passing through town on a reading tour. Caught up in the excitement of seeing poets whose publicity, like that of movie stars, preceded their appearance, I joined the groups of habitués for intense discussion over cups of coffee, and reviews of anthologies with titles like *Making It New* and *New Naked Poets*.

Indeed, everything seemed new, but for me something was wrong, and one evening as I listened to yet another white poet claim to be speaking for all people—"white, black, green, or in between" is the phrase I remember—I realized I had not moved very far from most of the poets I'd read in Miss Crutcher's class. Despite the down-to-earth language, the black people who occupied the poems—from Negro gardeners and cooks to black boys running in gangs or hunted by angry mobs—were included with the same degree of significance as the scenery. They were cardboard figures with vaudeville dialects full of apostrophes to indicate missing sounds. They existed only for the immediacy of the poem and color of their skin, their inclusion no more than a cosmetic attempt to shift



perspective from white to black. But where were the families? Where were the neighborhoods? Where were the heroes, the foolhardy explorers, the women like my grandmother's daughters? "Those are the stories I want to hear," I complained. And my complaints grew so strident, I was told to either shut up or write.

Perhaps I am fortunate. Aside from Miss Crutcher, I have had no classroom teachers to indoctrinate me into the art of poetry. My habits and traditions, good or bad, are those I've pulled off the path of self-discovery rather than the result of years of male-centered training. True, the poets I studied in college were almost always white, and most often male, their poems as predictable as a three-piece suit. And true, some black poets rightfully claimed their place in this enclave, pushing against their white counterparts by turning the language of white poets to the advantage of the black experience, as Sterling Brown did in transforming Carl Sandburg's line: "The young men keep coming on" into "Strong men keep a'comin' on / The strong men git stronger" [in his *Negro Caravan*, 1973]. But even while Carl Van Vechten sang Countee Cullen's praises, and Winston Churchill quoted Claude McKay's poem "If We Must Die" in a speech rallying Britain to war—"Pressed against the wall, dying, but fighting back!"—the works of Cullen and McKay never received the attention in this country that their writing warranted. Historically, black male poets have been set aside as examples of racial differences, lauded for their use of dialect or polysyllabic rhythms, but ignored in discussions of verse that was destined for the white male canon.

Black women writers have fared even worse. Like all women, they have been subsumed under the heading: Mankind. Furthermore, they are expected to confine themselves within a referential sphere where the black woman is depicted as mammy—namely, home and children—or whore—the hipswinging, fast-talking, sassy heifer. The more "universal" subjects of politics, culture, and religion are reserved for men. Thus, genderless, women shoulder the added weight of racism, "de mules of de world," as Zora Neale Hurston has written. It is a wonder that black women writers have continued to work at all under this double yoke, some plodding forward like Wheatley, some taking the bit in their teeth and shaking off that yoke as they walk toward a collective consciousness. None of this is without reciprocity, for just as Wheatley has been dismissed for not speaking in the voice of her people, writers like Sonia Sanchez

have been criticized for having a voice too close to that of her people (and thus, not seriously literary). At a recent conference on African-American expatriates and Europe, the major premise of a male scholar's paper on Rita Dove was her so-called literary schizophrenia, brought about, he said, by her insistence on using "standard English" in poems about family and racial identity—as if language and the use of poetic forms were genetically determined. This same charge of literary schizophrenia has been leveled against such writers as Anne Spencer, Angelina Grimke, and Margaret Walker. Get back in that kitchen, girl.

Once, at a reading in Portland, Oregon, when I was one of the two women slated to appear, several well-known black male poets held forth during a dinner party prior to the reading. If the women offered a comment, the men waited until they had finished, then resumed the conversation as if there had not been an interruption. We were not asked to bring in the coffee, proudly served by the host, who pointed out how well he had taken over a woman's role, but we were not expected to contribute to the discussion either. After the reading, we were told our poems were "interesting." No further explanation seemed necessary. I still say that word with the bitter aftertaste of rudeness and burnt coffee....

When I began writing in the sixties, I genuinely believed I had set out on a lonely road. I was writing poems, but I did not fit the fraternity of poets present at readings I had attended. Even when the reader was a woman, she was not a woman of color, and no matter how passionately she attempted to speak of slavery or the drudgery of day work, it was from the privileged position of an observer. For want of living examples, I turned to the library to find poems written by black women. I believe I devoured every anthology of *Negro Poetry* I could find, and as soon as the anthologies of *Black Poets* began to appear, I devoured them as well. The works of Anne Spencer, Alice Dunbar Nelson, Gwendolyn Brooks, and a host of others began to nourish me. And when I read poems by young black women in newly published anthologies, it was as if I had uncovered some extraordinary *rarae ayes*. Those poems seemed to leap from the page and take flight in words that spoke directly to me. I wanted to celebrate. I wanted those women to take me away and teach me their language, words that were *brave and water clean*. I wanted to shout: *The wonder is that you are here!* But I was too busy. There was too much to read, too much catching up to do after years of elevated verse filled with the



*The trick for me is to stay true to my own style while I stroll through the mess of assumptions about how women write."*

---

concerns of Mankind, or poems in which pale women were drawn as some "quivering female thing."

Now I began to discover more and more women poets: Anne Sexton, Muriel Rukeyser, Erica Jong, Denise Levertov, May Sarton. And, wonder of wonders, they wrote about taboo and female subjects: Sexton's "Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator," Millay's "Menses," Kizer's "Pro Femina." In the course of these discoveries, I also began to uncover African American women who seemed to step out of my past, as in: Gwendolyn Brooks' "Bronzeville Woman in a Red Hat," Lucille Clifton's "To My Last Period," Mari Evans' "A Good Assassination Should Be Quiet," Nikki Giovanni's "Nikki Rose." Had I come home at last?

I grew up in a world where images of African Americans were fraught with stereotypes. I began writing, late in life, because I wanted to break through those stereotypes, to show how varied and complicated the black experiences (yes, plural) are in this country, on this continent, on this planet. Over the years, I have learned to understand what was said between words, with body language and inflection, and most of all, with the music of language. Sometimes, when I labor over the rhythms of a poem, I still see Miss Crutcher, her brown face crowned in a halo of pale purple hair.

Lately, I have taken to reading mostly women writers. I do not avoid male writers. How could I? Indeed, why should I? We have a shared history. When Melvin Tolson [in his poem "Mu"] evokes the images of "Hideho Heights ... / Frog Legs Lux ...", and "A willow of a woman, / bronze as knife money ...," I truly believe his poem becomes, as he says, "... dangerous to / the Great White World." I know the urban chaos found in Ishmael Reed's poems, and when Al Young baits the reader with the up-in-your-face philosophy of O. O. Gaboogah, I am once again reminded of the biting sarcasm ris-

ing out of the stories my aunts told about the white women they worked for. Those stories armed me with a sense of language that I could not have gleaned solely from books.

I don't remember how old I was when I saw Marlene Dietrich in *The Blue Angel*, but it was the year the film was released, and I do remember sitting in a segregated theater, time and the bigotry of the outside world held in check while I watched Dietrich stroll across the screen in a man's suit, her fedora pulled low over one eye. The scene left me breathless. There was a woman breaking the rules, and I sat there in the dark imagining my own rebellion, right down to snitching my grandfather's fedora from the top shelf of the chifferobe. Writing has much the same effect on me, but whatever I do requires more than imitating someone else's style.

In writing, I hold time at arm's length and move into an imaginative world equipped with cadences and metaphors that are particular and peculiar to the life I know. But I am also aware of the temptation to imitate what I admire in others, or succumb to the conventions and expectations of some style that is deemed popular and acceptable. The trick for me is to stay true to my own style while I stroll through the mess of assumptions about how women write. Breaking the barriers of the canon is more than tailoring a man's perspective for female views. More importantly, as a black woman writer, I must resist attempts to define the writings of African American women only from the perspective of white women writers. The black writers who help shape my sense of tradition are not always found in the literary canon, but they are everywhere. As Ntozake Shange says in *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf*, they are outside Chicago, Detroit, Houston, Baltimore, San Francisco, Manhattan, and St. Louis. St. Louis, my hometown, where my writing began, not formally but spurred by echoes of stories I heard when I was young.

When I write about the women in my family, I am all too aware of the world that waited for them when they left the safety of my grandmother's house. How could I not be? As a black child growing up during wartime segregation, a daughter in a family hungry for sons, I knew my world was held together by women. I may not have found black writers and African American experience in the books I read then, but I had my mother's sisters, my cousins and neighbors, an extended family of storytellers: shouldering, blaming, shining, falling,

feisty, and good—and all of them feeding me tales full of identifiable heroes. That is also my tradition.

There are many of us now, black women bound to the sisterhood of poetry. The work of these women renews my insight and beckons me to share their sense of place and purpose. Our literary history, despite censorship and lack of recognition by those who espouse a canon, is strong and deeply rooted. But laying claim to a literary sisterhood is not an easy task. We must fight against both racist and sexist assumptions. We must cultivate our gardens, as Anne Spencer and Alice Walker urge, and we must also preserve our histories, oral and written, as Margaret Walker and Rita Dove have shown us. And like our sisters of spirit—Joy Harjo, Wendy Rose, Nellie Wong—we must recall our ancestors. Our poems must stride across the page, like Lucille Clifton's and Maya Angelou's, proud of their womanness, aiming to be warriors in the manner of Sonia Sanchez, Ntozake Shange, Audre Lorde, and Jayne Cortez. And if I have not mentioned some of my other literary sisters, it is not because I have fallen, once again, under the spell of canon-makers. I know you are there, rising on ribbons of moonlight, laughing, water-clean and strong.

**Source:** "If We Look for Them by Moonlight" in *Where We Stand: Women Poets on Literary Tradition*, edited and with an introduction by Sharon Bryan, Norton, 1993, pp. 125-37.

## Sources

Gomez, Jewelle, "Homeward Bound," in *The Kenyon Review*, Vol. XIII, No. 4, Fall, 1991, pp. 226-31.

McElroy, Colleen J., "When the Shoe Fits: Myth in the Modern Mode," in *Poets' Perspectives: Reading Writing and Teaching Poetry*, edited by Charles R. Duke and Sally A. Jacobsen, Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1992, pp. 37-45.

"Notes On Current Books," in *Virginia Quarterly Review*, Vol. 67, No. 3, Summer, 1991, p. 100.

*Publisher's Weekly*, December 14, 1990, p. 62.

## For Further Study

*Triumph Without Victory: The Unreported History of the Persian Gulf War*, written by the staff of U.S. News and World Report, New York: Times Books (division of Random House), 1992.

Meyer, Marvin W., ed., *The Ancient Mysteries: A Sourcebook*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987.

"A Pièd" raises philosophical questions by studying a modern mysterious phenomenon. This book, which reveals similar questions that ancient cultures posed to the world in which they lived, can provide students much to think about.

Ackerman, Diane, *A Natural History of the Senses*, New York: Random House, 1990.

Ackerman is a poet and a naturalist, and this book, published the same year as "A Pièd," takes a similarly inquisitive approach to the ways that we perceive the world around us that McElroy takes to the inexplicable shoe.

# Auto Wreck

*Karl Shapiro*

1968

Karl Shapiro won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1945, when he was 32. Early on, he was recognized for the precision he brought to his work, avoiding the contrivances and intellectualism applied to poetry by other artists. He has been lauded as producing some of the finest war poetry ever written by an American poet, written during the 1940s, when Shapiro was enlisted in the army. "Auto Wreck" was published in Shapiro's *Selected Poems*. The connection between this poem and war poetry is clear: the focus in human fragility and on the shattering effect violence has on reason, are frequent themes when contemplating war. Shapiro takes this sensibility and puts it into a domestic setting, a situation that most Americans would be familiar with from their own experiences. Perhaps one reason Shapiro found an auto wreck to be the equivalent of war, matching it for nonsensical violence, was that when this poem was written the interstate system was new, and man's capacity for high speed travel (and therefore for devastating accidents) had advanced much more quickly than safety devices. With the ability to write poetry in a variety of styles, Shapiro continually expanded his poetic voice to reinvent his observations of the world.



## *Author Biography*

Shapiro was born in Baltimore, Maryland, on November 10, 1913, to Joseph Shapiro and Sarah Omansky Shapiro. Because of his self-conscious-

ness as an adolescent concerning his Russian-Jewish heritage, Shapiro considered changing his name, but only went so far as to legally change the spelling of his first name from Carl to Karl. He had a life-long belief that he was destined to be a poet and despite his conviction in the 1930s that an Anglo-Saxon name would facilitate publication of his work, he decided to keep his family name. This decision, he believed, reinforced his identity as a Jew and provided a theme for subsequent poems. In 1935 Shapiro published a volume of verses which won him a scholarship to Johns Hopkins University. He attended the university for two years but took no degree. In 1941 he was drafted into the army, and during the next four years he wrote four volumes of poetry. While he was serving in the South Pacific as a medical corps clerk, poems from his collection *Person, Place and Thing* were published in *Poetry* magazine and were awarded the Levinson Prize. In 1944, while Shapiro was stationed in New Guinea, his collection *V-Letter and Other Poems* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. Largely because of the Pulitzer, Shapiro was named consultant in poetry to the Library of Congress. On March 25, 1945 he married Evalyn Katz, the literary agent who had sent his poetry to press during the war years. They had three children.

In 1948 Shapiro became an associate professor of writing at Johns Hopkins. In the 1950s he served as editor of *Poetry* and the *Newbery Library Bulletin*. In 1956 he accepted a professorship in the Department of English at the University of Nebraska; additionally, he was editor of the journal *Prairie Schooner* until 1966, when he resigned both positions over a disagreement with administration and journal staff. Divorced from his first wife in 1967, he married Teri Kovach that same year. She was the inspiration for his cycle of love poems, *White-Haired Lover* (1968). That volume and another published that year, *Selected Poems*, were awarded the 1969 Bollingen Prize for Poetry, which Shapiro shared with John Berryman. After a two-year sojourn at the University of Chicago, Shapiro joined the faculty at the University of California at Davis, where he still teaches.

### Poem Text

Its quick soft silver bell beating, beating.  
And down the dark one ruby flare  
Pulsing out red light like an artery,  
The ambulance at top speed floating down  
Past beacons and illuminated clocks  
Wings in a heavy curve, dips down.

And brakes speed, entering the crowd.  
The doors leap open, emptying light;  
Stretchers are laid out, the mangled lifted  
And stowed into the little hospital.  
Then the bell, breaking the hush, tolls once,  
And the ambulance with its terrible cargo  
Rocking, slightly rocking, moves away.  
As the doors, an afterthought, are closed.

We are deranged, walking among the cops  
Who sweep glass and are large and composed.  
One is still making notes under the light.  
One with a bucket douches ponds of blood  
Into the street and gutter.  
One hangs lanterns on the wrecks that cling,  
Empty husks of locusts, to iron poles.

Our throats were tight as tourniquets,  
Our feet were bound with splints, but now,  
Like convalescents intimate and gauche,  
We speak through sickly smiles and warn  
With the stubborn saw of common sense,  
The grim joke and the banal resolution.  
The traffic moves around with care,  
But we remain, touching a wound  
That opens to our richest horror.  
Already old, the question Who shall die?  
Becomes unspoken Who is innocent?

For death in war is done by hands;  
Suicide has cause and stillbirth, logic;  
And cancer, simple as a flower, blooms.  
But this invites the occult mind,  
Cancels our physics with a sneer,  
And spatters all we knew of denouement  
Across the expedient and wicked stones.

### Poem Summary

#### Lines 1-2:

A red flare is used to denote danger or an emergency. This is in direct contrast to the first line's gentle, alliterative phrase of a "soft silver bell beating."

#### Line 3:

The ominous tone continues as an analogy is drawn between the flare and a part of the human body—an artery pulsing out red light, or blood, would be an artery cut open.

#### Lines 4-7:

The ambulance is seen as quick and efficient, almost otherworldly in the way that it "floats down." Line 5 has two instances of the poem's symbolic use of light: the beacons and the illuminated clocks represent the rationality of the human world that this auto wreck intrudes upon.

## Media Adaptations



- A record album titled *Elegy for a Dead Soldier* was released in 1954 by the Library of Congress Recording Laboratory.
- An audio cassette titled *Karl Shapiro*, part of the Poets in Person series, was released in 1991 by the Modern Poetry Association.
- Spoken Arts released an audio cassette titled *The Spoken Arts Treasury of American Poets, Volume XI*, edited by Paul Kresh, in 1978.
- The record album *The Tenor*, an opera in one act by Hugo Weisgel with the libretto by Karl Shapiro and Ernst Lert is available from Composer Recordings.

---

### Lines 8-10:

The doors open and pour out light, illuminating the chaotic, dimly-lit scene with clarity. The ambulance is called a “little hospital” in line 10, bringing the order, sterility and control of the hospital environment to the crash scene.

### Lines 11-14:

The “tolling” of the bell implies church bells, whose tolling is commonly an announcement of death. This is confirmed in line 12’s reference to a “terrible cargo,” and in the way the doors are closed only as “an afterthought,” implying that there is no need for gentleness and care with the patients in the ambulance, implying that they are dead. The detached, inhumanly efficient movements of the ambulance (its crew is never mentioned) establishes a mood that will be contrasted in the coming stanzas.

### Lines 15-21:

Unlike the way the medical situation was described in the first stanza, the authority figures in charge of human behavior, the police officers, are not sharp and efficient. They are not even referred to by their formal designation, but familiarly as “cops,” and the description of them is not one that

inspires confidence. Their actions—sweeping, making notes, hanging lanterns and “douching” (the word Shapiro uses for “rinsing”) are almost laughably ineffectual. In contrast with all of the sources of light associated with the ambulance, the lanterns the policeman raises seem a particularly flimsy source of light.

### Lines 22-27:

This stanza uses imagery that compares the witnesses of the accident with the injured victims: “tourniquets,” “splints,” “convalescents,” and “sickly.” Line 27 adds to the sense of confusion at the auto wreck scene by using adjectives that contrast with the nouns they modify: jokes, of course, should be anything but “grim,” and the word “resolution” implies a fullness that leaves one feeling satisfied, while “banal” indicates that the conclusion is insignificant.

### Lines 28-32:

Line 30 again uses the technique of placing a contrasting adjective and noun together: the implication of “richest” is almost as positive as the implication of “horror” is negative. This adds to the general sense of confusion. In lines 31 and 32, the poem’s central philosophical problem is posed by the difference in the two questions asked: “Who shall die?” is a matter of fact, having to do with the mechanical workings of the organs, but “Who is innocent?” tries to derive spiritual value from the physical occurrence. As the final stanza of the poem will show, the point of “Auto Wreck” is to examine how reason can accept the physical world’s inconsistencies.

### Lines 33-37:

The speaker gives examples of terrible physical maladies and says that they have their reasons, that they are logical outcomes of processes. But the violence of an auto wreck creates a gap in logic, a break in the sequence of one cause following another. Such an occurrence, unrelated to the natural order, is what the “supernatural” is all about, and therefore line 36 says it “invites the occult to mind.”

### Lines 38-39:

The “denouement” of a dramatic work is its conclusion, the place where a writer is supposed to explain and tie up all of the loose ends. There is no such neat, orderly conclusion in a violent accident: good people are punished, evil may escape unharmed, and preparation counts for nothing. The poem brings back an image of the car accident

("splatters ... across the ... stones") to help convey his ideas, using the stones to represent all facts of nature. The adjectives used in the last line to describe the stones actually oppose each other: "expedient" means efficient, implying a logical process toward achieving a deliberate goal, while "wicked" is just uncaused malevolence.

## Themes

### *Order and Disorder*

This poem is structured to make the most of the contrast between order and chaos, and to make readers think about how humans counteract a confusing situation with an overabundance of reason. Order and disorder are not given equal representation here because the chaotic action, which may have only taken a few seconds anyway, is over when the poem begins: the actions that we do see are taken to gain control over the chaos. On the side of disorder, the poem mentions: "the mangled"; "terrible cargo"; the "deranged" participants; "ponds of blood"; and, most graphically, the wound "[t]hat opens to our richest horror." The fact that these all have a gruesome aspect to them gives readers an idea of what our society thinks about disorder, how we associate chaos with death, due to their common sense lack of control. To make up for the lack of control, our society responds to an accident like this one with a routine that is overly formalized, restoring the sense of order at the same time that it responds to the medical emergency. The bells, the flare, the ambulance and the illuminated clock all give the feeling that someone is in control of the situation; the "large and composed" police officers shed light on the scene and wash away the blood and glass that are the evidence of something having gone wrong. The one thing that cannot be fixed by early, careful crisis control is death. The speaker is bewildered—even somehow annoyed—by the care that everyone is taking to restore order because it contradicts the basic fact that order can never be fully restored once the line of death has been crossed.

### *Guilt and Innocence*

"Denouement" is a French word meaning "an untying," most often used in discussions of literature to indicate the point at which a story's comes to its necessary, logical conclusion. In a story crafted by a writer, the end will follow from what comes before it: usually, bad things befall bad peo-

ple and good people are rewarded, but even when that is not true the denouement will in some way be appropriate. In the case of a car accident, however, the connection between a person's action and their fate is cut, and inappropriate results occur: when the poem says that everything known about denouement is splattered across the stones, it means that justice has not been served and has in fact been made irrelevant.

Still, there is an overwhelming human tendency to believe that justice is somehow served in the universe, that God or karma would certainly make sure that good people are not allowed to suffer. This basic belief makes it possible for people to face the world each day with confidence, even if their understanding of "good" is not about kindness but relates to being smart, or powerful, or lucky, etc. The strength of this belief can be seen in the poem, where the speaker changes the question "Who shall die?" into "Who is innocent?": unable to accept the idea that violent death would come to the innocent, we sometimes look at the situation backwards and assume that someone who suffered a violent death must be guilty of something. In a world where accidents happen, innocence and guilt would become useless ideas if we did not try to question what we know about a person's life in order to see if it can be fit to the outcome.

### *Death*

From the title on, this poem captures readers' interest with the possibility that someone has died. We know that an accident is a life-or-death situation, and all of the signs here—the flares, the ambulance, the cops, etc.—indicate to us that this accident is one of those serious events where death is at least possible. The fact that a crucial safety step like closing the ambulance doors is just "an afterthought" tells us that someone is already dead, and even though the poem tells us nothing about who the victim might be we want to know what happens next, and how the people at the accident scene deal with this event. Literature about death, or even with the suggestion of death, has grabbed the attention of people across all time and cultural boundaries. One reason for this might be that death is the one experience that all humans undergo, but still, for all of the centuries of experience that our race has had with death, we really do not know what it is. We look at how ancient clans and sects approached death's mysteries, and compare them to the beliefs of modern communities, hoping to recognize a core truth about the experience that might help us feel a

## Topics for Further Study



- Write a visual description, like the one in the first stanza of this poem, of something that happened at night. Try to capture the uncertainty and confusion of the scene without being unclear about what your subject really is.
- Research new technological advances developed since this poem was published in 1968 and explain what has been done to make an accident site less psychologically traumatic.
- Do you agree with what the last stanza says about war, suicide, stillbirth, and cancer, or is the author stretching reality to make them contrast with his subject? Explore how an auto wreck could be seen as more logical than any of these.

little more comfortable with it. The speaker of the poem evidently comes from a rational society—looking at the situation from a distance, we might wonder if this person's life might not be too rational, if he cannot fit something as real and inevitable as death into his sense of the world.

### Style

"Auto Wreck" is in free verse with four stanzas. There are two themes that run through the poem. The first is the detached efficiency of the ambulance in motion, contrasted by the second theme, the fragile, easily broken humans, who are cut down randomly and at times violently. There are two conspicuous strains of imagery running through this poem. One is physical injury. This is addressed explicitly when mentioning people hurt in the auto wreck (for example, line 9 refers to "the mangled" and line 18 mentions "ponds of blood"). Injury is also a metaphor for the fragile mental state caused by the shock of the accident, indicated by the flare's light "pulsing ... like an artery" (line 3), by line 15's statement "we are deranged," by the "tourniquets" mentioned in line 22 and the

"wound" in line 29. The other recurring symbol is light, which is seen in the flare in line 3; in the ambulance interior in line 8; the illuminated clocks; and the policeman taking notes in line 17. Light has been associated with logic at least since ancient Greece, where Apollo was considered god of both. By contrasting man's higher mental abilities with physical vulnerability, Shapiro gives a broad overview of the human condition.

One other technique used in this poem is alliteration, which is the term for placing words with the same initial sound close together, as with the "s" and "b" sounds in the first line, and continuing in the poem in phrases such as "speak through sickly smiles" and "the stubborn saw of common sense." This technique knits the poem more tightly together, making it more intimate with the reader, more close and compact, a piece to be read quickly and low, in the hushed reverent tones one would use at an accident scene. The words in "Auto Wreck" are direct and graphic, not given over to speculation over their meaning.

### Historical Context

The year that this poem was published, 1968, was something like one huge auto wreck, with chaos spreading across the American landscape. It was one of the most dynamic and violent years the nation had seen since the end of the Civil War. It was the year when the war in Vietnam drove millions of citizens, many of them young college students, into opposition against the federal government and the frustration of urban blacks boiled over into race riots. Assassinations of two major political figures, not two months apart, stunned the nation, spattering all that the country knew about denouement across a balcony in Atlanta and a hotel kitchen in Los Angeles.

The single most notable event of that tumultuous year was the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., on April 4th. King was one of the principal leaders of the civil rights movement in the United States, a staunch advocate of nonviolent protest who is remembered by a national holiday on the third Monday of every January. Dr. King rose to national attention in 1954, as the leader of the famous boycott against the bus system of Montgomery, Alabama, where black citizens had only been allowed to ride in the backs of buses. The following year, when the Southern Christian Leadership Conference was formed, he was named its



## Compare & Contrast

- **1968:** On January 30th, Vietcong and North Vietnamese forces waged a massive attack against cities in South Vietnam. The attack was a failure, but showed a degree of force and determination that made many in the United States question the war.

**1973:** The United States withdrew its troops from the conflict in Vietnam, in accordance with a peace treaty worked out in Paris.

**1989:** U.S. troops invaded Panama in order to arrest dictator Manuel Noriega. He took refuge in the Vatican mission, but surrendered two weeks after the siege began and was flown to Florida, where he was tried and convicted in drug smuggling charges.

**1991:** U.S. troops lead a multinational force against Iraq, which had crossed the Kuwait border in August of 1990. The assault lasted from January 15 to April 6, and ended with the surrender of 100,000 Iraqi soldiers and at least 100,000 Iraqi citizens dead.

**Today:** Vietnam is in the hands of the Communist government that the United States was fighting and Iraqi military leader Saddam Hussein is still in power.

- **1968:** The Intel company was founded to make memory chips using a new metallic oxide semiconductor process.

**1971:** The first commercially available microchip, the Intel 4004, became available.

**1974:** The new Intel microprocessor was eight times what it was in 1971. Intel's cofounder Gordon Moore suggested the "law" that microprocessor capacity doubles every eighteen months.

**Today:** The Intel Pentium II Processor is in almost every new personal computer.

- **1968:** The American underground press printed stories of interest to the hippie counterculture, concerning subjects ranging from drugs to Eastern philosophy to small music groups without record labels. Circulation was estimated at around two million.

**Today:** Matrix Information and Directory Service estimated that there were 13.5 million Internet users in October of 1994, and that that number would double each year. In addition, underground magazines have made a resurgence with the publication of small-budget "zines."

president. He was a leader of nonviolent protests against segregation throughout the South, facing death threats and spending time in jail. In 1963, he was one of the organizers of the March on Washington, and delivered his famous "I Have A Dream" speech before a crowd of 200,000. These public, peaceful displays of African-American determination for equal rights and the violent opposition of some whites to their reasonable demands helped President Lyndon Johnson gain support for the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Near the end of his life, Dr. King did have opponents: black separatists, represented most visibly in 1968 by the formation of the Black Panthers, did not approve of King's nonviolent tactics

or his willingness to work with whites on racial problems, and the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, J. Edgar Hoover, waged an almost fanatical crusade of spying on King and spreading propaganda against him, fearful that he might become a black "messiah" who would lead the overthrow of the white race. When Dr. King was shot in Memphis, riots broke out in most major cities in the country, including Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Detroit, Kansas City, Newark and Washington D.C. Forty six deaths resulted. In Chicago, Mayor Richard Daley issued orders for police to "shoot to kill" looters who broke store windows. National Guard troops were mobilized in many states, and 21,270 people were arrested.

On June 5th, with the shock of the King assassination still fresh, the nation was stunned once again when presidential candidate Robert Kennedy was gunned down while campaigning in Los Angeles. He was the brother of President John F. Kennedy and had been the Attorney General in his administration, and his assassination was a frightening reminder of the trauma the country had felt five years earlier, when President Kennedy was killed. At the time of his death, Robert Kennedy had been the leading candidate for the presidency: he was young (42) and opposed to the war in Vietnam, and was favored by young voters, who were politically active and vocal but alienated from the system. His death, so soon after Dr. King's and so closely paralleling his popular brother's, became a symbol of great disillusionment to a generation that had believed in making the world a better place.

Protests against the Vietnam war took place regularly on college campuses throughout 1968, and in August, at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, thousands of protestors gathered, setting off a confrontation between police and radicals that became the image of what "the Sixties" means to many Americans. The protest was originally the idea of Abbie Hoffman, a youth leader and self-proclaimed "prankster" who, the previous new Year's Eve, had suggested to friends that they stop calling themselves "hippies" (the generic name for rebellious youth at that time, much like "beatniks" before them and "gangstas" after) and instead represent themselves as the Youth International Party, or Yippies. In Hoffman's plan, the Yippies would go to the Democratic Convention and demand representation. By August, word had spread from one antiwar organization to the next. The members of the peace movement were widely varied: some were committed to peace through peaceful means, some supported violence to end the war, and some treated it all with a sense of fun, relishing the chance to annoy their stuffy elders. In Chicago, though, all were considered serious threats—Chicago's mayor Richard Daley looked on the youths as terrorists who wanted to start a revolution to overthrow the government. Sixteen thousand Chicago police, 4,000 state troopers and 4,000 National Guardsmen were equipped with riot gear and posted around the hotel where the convention was held to face what turned out to be between 5,000 and 10,000 demonstrators. The "Festival of Life" that the war protestors had assembled for included rock concerts, marijuana smoking, public lovemaking and draft card burning. When the protesters threw bricks and bottles, the police

responded by firing tear gas and swinging nightsticks. Participants later said that the whole insane situation felt like being at war, but observers who watched it on television saw kids and news reporters and uninvolved bystanders being clubbed and sprayed with gas by police, despite a frequent chant by the protestors reminding them that, "The whole world is watching." An independent commission studying the event later referred to it as a "police riot." Throughout the 1960s, America's security had declined, as the war and the never-ending struggle for civil rights eroded faith in the government: in 1968, with men of peace gunned down and the military fighting against unarmed citizens, the strange, irrational violence that Shapiro describes in "Auto Wreck" was all too familiar.

### Critical Overview

Critics point out that Shapiro has written successfully in a variety of poetic styles and freed himself from many of the constraints of the cultural doctrines of his era. Michael True, discussing Shapiro's contributions to American poetry in *Commonweal*, states that "[Shapiro's work] provides one of the most accurate portrayals we have of America from the late Thirties until the early Sixties." In his *Collected Criticism*, Conrad Aiken applauds the "balanced excellence" of both the conscious and unconscious meanings of Shapiro's poems, suggesting that Shapiro "thinks with his feelings, thinks with his imagination, and the result is a curious and delightful poetic analysis, or criticism, of the given theme."

### Criticism

#### Chris Semansky

*Chris Semansky's poems and essays appear regularly in literary journals. He teaches writing and literature at Portland Community College in Portland, Oregon. In the following essay, Semansky examines the imagery in "Auto Wreck" and explores its themes of chance and death.*

Free verse—a poetic form dispensing with the traditional orderliness associated with regular meter and rhyme—is a fitting vehicle for a subject "without rhyme or reason." In "Auto Wreck" (1942), Karl Shapiro, one of the foremost proponents of

free verse, views the car crash as a break in the rational rules of an orderly universe. Shapiro has long been interested in the common strangeness of injury and death, and the subject appears in some of his best poems, especially "Elegy for a Dead Soldier" and "The Leg" (about an amputation), relating to his army experiences in the South Pacific during World War II.

While the car crash is a common phenomenon, Shapiro has reinjected strangeness into this event. Toward this end, the poem begins not on firm ground but on *terra infirma*—in a kind of dream world. With the repetition of the word "down" in the first stanza, the ambulance is described as descending, as if it were the angel of death (the "wings" of line four), or an alien spacecraft ("top speed" in line four, "emptying light" in line eight) floating downward. Fans of *The X-Files* might notice the similarity between the mission of the ambulance in this poem to gather up the dead and near-dead, and the made-for-television forays of aliens bent on abductions. Only somewhat less strange is the scene below with its singular and severe glowings in the dark: the "illuminated clocks" with the allusion to marking time until death; the "beacons" or lights that illuminate tall buildings, here as if beckoning to sky beings; and finally, the blood-red flare echoing the pulsing, spilling blood in this rite of passage from one world to the next. Not only are the eyes aroused at this spectacle, but so are the ears. The ambulance bell (ambulances of the 1940s had bells, not sirens) rings with the rhythm of the beating hearts the ambulance must try to save and tolls like church bells, for those it will not be able to save.

Its mission complete, the ambulance moves away, gently rocking like a cradle. This suggests the cycle from cradle to grave, or even of a soothing sense of rebirth or heavenly salvation from death. Or perhaps the rocking and late-closed doors hint at a frantic human crisis, one boding badly for the vehicle's injured occupants. This is an abduction, but whether by aliens, paramedics, or the angel of death is anyone's guess.

After the injured—who are mangled or perhaps dead—have been taken away, the narrator/bystanders are left "deranged," watching the caretakers of the aftermath with glazed eyes. The cops convert the terrible scene into an emotionless one recorded in colorless words, erased from sight by repeated douchings of water, and marked by lanterns into a scene memorialized for the purpose of imparting the rather common message: DRIVE CAREFULLY! The "empty husks" of locusts in

## What Do I Read Next?



- Shapiro's autobiography, published in 1988, is titled *An Autobiography in Three Parts*. His life was long and varied, as diverse as any American poet's, and his book therefore offers an interesting insight into our culture and the way we think about literature.
- In 1975, Shapiro published a book of essays called *The Poetry Wreck*. Most of the essays in this book are about the craft of poetry or about other poets (Yeats, Auden, Eliot, Pound, Williams, etc.).
- The poet that Shapiro said he most admired was William Carlos Williams. You can see the influence of Williams in *William Carlos Williams: The Collected Poems*, published by New Directions in 1991. Volume I covers the years before Shapiro wrote, 1909 through 1939. Volume II covers 1939-1962.
- Another poet that Shapiro thought highly of is Randall Jarrell, who often appears in anthologies of poetry along with Shapiro. Jarrell's best poems have recently been assembled in one volume, *The Collected Poems of Randall Jarrell*, published in 1996.

the last line of the second stanza might remind some readers of the David Cronenberg film, *Crash* (1997). In Shapiro's lines and Cronenberg's film, there is conflation of living bodies with vehicular bodies. But while Cronenberg dwells on damaged human, airplane, and automobile bodies as objects instigating sexual arousal, Shapiro's "empty husks of locusts" suggest the wrecked auto as a hard auto body, carapace, or pupa molted or shed by emerging inner bodies. Keeping with the idea of the ambulance as heavenly angel of death, the abducted might be said to emerge from their restrictive earthly cover (the car), to free themselves like flying insects struggling from their pupae. Or, in the scenario of the alien abduction, the "empty husks" could be seen horrifically, as signs of catastrophe beyond human control.



*What makes the auto wreck distinct for Shapiro is its imagined inscrutability compared to death by combat, suicide, or natural disease."*

Stanza three belongs to the bystanders, who are more wounded than the dead. Less important here are the bodies (presumably) being patched together in the ambulance than those bystanders who are themselves emotionally torn apart by the accident, and whose own attempts at self-repair lead them on a journey analogous to that of the crash victims. In relation to the bystanders, figurative tourniquets do not stanch the flow of blood but choke the throat, cut off attempts to explain this event. Splints do not safely immobilize broken bones but instead fix bystanders to their horror. The bystanders become the "convalescents," those awkward with speaking, moving, and acting. They try to smile, utter something common—"the stubborn saw of common sense"—in order to say something profound. They are also like the "grim jokes" and the "banal resolutions" such as "We all have to go sometime," or "Time waits for no one." The spirits of these bystanders have been wounded as profoundly as the accident victims have been wounded in body. Bystanders touch their "wounds," those reminders of their own vulnerability and mortality. The bystanders machine-like first reaction to the accident, the secular question, "Who shall die?" (like the more religious question, "Who is guilty?"), becomes a more sober and religious "Who is innocent?" Death, the bystanders understand, is democratic; it includes everyone, and from a religious perspective, it renders everyone guilty.

What makes the auto wreck distinct for Shapiro is its imagined inscrutability compared to death by combat, suicide, or natural disease. The car crash is a singular event because it is brought about by chance, but not from the more usual factory of chance, nature, but from the unusual locale of culture. There is no intention to kill or die in this kind of car wreck. Nor does the chance of nature seem operative. In the car crash, Shapiro is mysti-

fied at how technocratized humanity has, on a daily basis, replicated a product usually thought to belong to nature: chance. The car crash seems bereft of reason—what Shapiro calls "physics," or that part of nature said to govern with laws. Instead, Shapiro implies that collisions are replete with that other part of nature described as random and chance-like; for when all is said and done—even when the cops, victims and bystanders will have assessed the reason for the crash in the denouement—Shapiro remains unsatisfied. Rather than deluding himself with explanations, Shapiro—as represented by the bystanders—is more comfortable shifting the cause of the accident to a place just below: the stones of the street. To localize the cause of the accident to the "expedient and wicked stones" is to explain without explanation, to resort to a joke or unreason. The stones are expedient and have promoted this accident by being hard and slippery. They are also wicked, perhaps as wicked as the hell they pave over. Shapiro's indictment of nature through paving stones, however, is not a serious charge against nature so much as it marks his—or the—inability to explain and order the complex of events that result in an auto accident.

Shapiro, however, does not call his poem "Auto Accident." Is this because he believes there are no accidents? Does he believe that even when nature or stones are behind a course of events, these cannot properly be called "accidents"? Along these lines, recall that at the end of the third stanza Shapiro asks the question, "Who is innocent?" Does the question not imply that everyone is guilty and that everyone must shoulder blame for what has or will happen? Yet at the end of the poem, he seems to back off from this indictment of humanity framed as a question, and instead he says that humans are not responsible for auto accidents, but that "expedient" and "wicked stones" are.

The seeming inconsistencies of this poem can be explained if readers do not forget that the narrators in this poem are the bystanders and not Shapiro himself. These are bystanders struggling to come to terms with the accident. Because the auto wreck defies their attempt to explain it, the irrationality of the bystanders steps in (the "occult mind" invited in) in order to explain it by blaming nature. Less does this poem reflect Shapiro's view of the car crash than it does his understanding of bystanders whose reason—whose "physics"—have been canceled with their "sneer," as if they are bitter for having ever been taken in by rational explanations for unexplainable events. And when bystanders wear a sneer rather than a lofty

dispassionate face, nature seems to wear one too; stones, in turn, become complicitous and evil.

With the cancellation of *our* physics, the conception of order and justice in both bystanders and readers (who can be said to be bystanders in relation to the event of the poem), does it not make sense to construct an earthly ambulance into one descending from a world above, from a reality rendered perhaps good (heavenly salvation) or perhaps evil (alien abduction)? To render stones as wicked and plotting? And to render the poem into a form canceling the traditional "physics" of poetry? Perhaps Shapiro's free verse itself—in its refusal to adhere to conventional poetic forms of meter, rhyme, and even subject matter—is a wreck of sorts, made poetic by its very strangeness.

**Source:** Chris Semansky, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 1998.

### **Karl Shapiro**

*In the following excerpt, Shapiro himself describes what it means to be a poet.*

A delicious obliquity one sometimes hears at literary conferences and such places is the question: Are you a writer or a poet? The question, of course, is a high compliment, if one happens to be a poet. It bestows on the poet the keys to the kingdom; it takes him out of the realm of mere literature and installs him in the empyrean; it frees him from any of the normal ties to the world with which other men are bound; it makes him a kind of god.

There is a part of the world which wants to sanctify the poet and make him an object of worship. For is not the poet incorruptible? Is not his integrity beyond reproach? Is he not a man of wizardly insight and towering intelligence? Is not his learning instinctively deep even when it is not broad? Is he not the sole symbol of freedom in a regimented universe? Is he not impervious to the lust for money, power and position? Is he not also that Tiresias who sees into the future, who descends to hell and flies up to heaven?

These are hard questions to say no to, but let us say no, for the sake of truth, and then see what there is, if anything, that makes the poet a superior being. For certainly the poet is as corruptible as anybody else, and more times than not displays the manners of a corporal and the morals of a bellboy. His integrity, although he wears it on his sleeve, is very much to be doubted. His insights into anything but poetry—and very often poetry itself—are apt to be as wrong as anyone else's: we have only to



*[The poet's] love of physical freedom is another superstition: many poets would be perfectly happy in jail if they didn't have to work."*

think of the political writings of poets. His intelligence varies as much as that of other men and bears only an indirect relationship to his talent. His learning is always suspect. His love of physical freedom is another superstition: many poets would be perfectly happy in jail if they didn't have to work. As for freedom from money-lust, power or position, one has only to read the lives of the poets to be disabused of this fantasy. A history of literary politics would read like a combined version of the more lurid pages of Gibbon and the Marquis de Sade.

Poetic fame, poetic honor, or what you will, is part of the iconography of history. The fame of Byron on the Continent had nothing to do with his poetic stature and everything to do with his role of hero. Being a poet helped his heroics; the heroics did not always improve his poetry. History seizes on the heroic element in the artist and hugs it for dear life. And sometimes the artist himself adopts this quixotic pose, and he then becomes a party to a literary conspiracy and begins to confuse poetry with history, logic, science, system-making and God.

Nevertheless, the world wants the poet for what he is not, and the foolish poet goes to the world. This liaison results in the two false uses of art ...: the one that makes the poet a man of the people, or a man who leads people, or a man who makes the whole world kin, or a man who states universal truths. This is the idea of the historic poet. And the other that makes the poet a purveyor of myths, an oracle, a seer, an almost-philosopher, an aristocrat of the spirit, a being who perceives transcendental relationships. This is the idea of the mythic poet.

Literature of this kind always produces doctrines and fiats and manifestoes. After a time it becomes anathema for the historic poet to write any-



*A civilization without poets is a moribund civilization: it has no love of its way of life. But a civilization in which the artist is worshipped is on the point of suicide.*

---

thing which is not a folksong, a patriotic ballad, a rhetorical screed, an epic, or a Methodist hymn. In the other camp it becomes anathema to write anything which does not add to a symbolic system of ideas, or which does not code or decode the mythos of culture. Perceiving this strife, the readers of poems, if there are any left, decide that it is a fight between pessimists and optimists, intellectuals and emotionalists, romantics and classicists, or some other misleading dualism.

Now and then we get a really consistent poet who will align his politics, his religion, his science, and his philosophy so that they all work together. As I pointed out earlier, we then have what is called a Great poet. Even if in the nature of his system this poet must decide to eliminate people themselves, he is still called Great. The term refers to a kind of military genius. On the other side, we have the poet who perpetuates myths of the ideal world or the dream world, and this one is called a Major poet. Yeats is Major but not Great. Pound is Great but not Major. A minor poet, incidentally, is one who has no master plan of strategy either for the world or for the cosmos....

Both historic and mythic poets regard themselves as official poets. They acquire aides-de-camp among the estheticians and the press, and conduct their affairs along the lines of any other business or political enterprise.

The desire of these official poets to provide answers to all questions is indicative of the intellectual temper of the times we live in, and is not confined to artists, by any means....

Literature is contaminated by systems. The libertarian poet, the religious poet who plies the

dogma of his church, even the "scientific" metaphysical poet: these look for an absolute doctrine of life on which to build. In a healthy world this slavery to ideas does not exist and the members of my quadrivium do not contaminate each other. Philosophy pursues the absolute and calls itself the love of knowledge. Science pursues demonstrable knowledge and calls itself the love of natural law. Religion pursues goodness and calls itself the love of God. And poetry pursues human personal knowledge and calls itself the love of beauty. With poetry, as with other forms of knowledge, there is no crossing the line, no violation of the nature of the thing, without contamination. All art that does so is marked by insincerity, whether intellectual insincerity (the poet who takes a system of ideas to his bosom and writes verses to hang upon his Tree of Life) or emotional insincerity (the artist who tries to experience history).

What claim, then, has the poet to any knowledge except the personal knowledge of truth or beauty? Absolutely none. What claim has he to be a specialist in culture, morals, politics, religion, philosophy, science or even esthetics? Absolutely none. But if that is the case, what claim has the poet to any fame at all? Is there then no basis for poetic reputation, no reason for exalting poetry among the works of man?

Certainly there is. The seeker after truth and the seeker of truth through beauty are necessary to the world. But they are not rulers of the world or leaders of the world. The idea of the sacred poet is one of the most unsavory and dangerous ideas in our civilization. How and when the sacred poet was born I do not know, but in our own age this superstition has grown steadily for a century and a half. In Mozart's time the composer and performer were seated at table with the valet and the cook. This strikes us as cruel and degrading, but our exaltation of the artist is just as shameful....

A civilization in equilibrium does not make the poet a sacred cow, which when it barges into a citizen's house is hung with garlands of flowers. A civilization in equilibrium needs the poet as much as it needs the priest, the scientist, the scholar and the abstract thinker; he is never made a superior symbol of authority in any way. A civilization without poets is a moribund civilization: it has no love of its way of life. But a civilization in which the artist is worshipped is on the point of suicide. The artist should be treated as the equal of all other people who contribute to the sum total of knowledge,

but no more, except within his own guild, when he deserves their honor....

Poetry springs from the love of personal truth and it results in a thing of beauty. Beauty is a condition of art, an absolute condition, and an instrument of the kind of truth which we are here concerned with. But the worship of beauty is a form of idolatry which is little better than worship of the golden calf....

There is always the tendency to find some more noble use of art than the mere search for the personal truth of life—as if that were not sufficient. Art must lead others, art must improve others, art must even cure others. Yes, art leads us to perceive truth in beauty. But art is not medicine; art is not pedagogy; art is not jurisprudence; art is not the decalogue. The true poet does not fall into these attitudes of doctor and teacher and priest. He is detached from such quarrels. Other poets in their pride accept the world's challenge and purvey all sorts of real and quack remedies for readers who ask for them....

The true poet is a constant prey to the world and its readers because of his inability to accept knowledge he has not tested for himself. This almost scientific intransigence makes him both un-touchable and desirable. He is fair game for the world's rulers and is as subject to kidnaping as those physicists who end up in a closed city built for the dreams of science. Hence the poet sometimes becomes the tool of the objective thinkers of the world and betrays his nature and purpose by trying to make his truth available to others. That, in fact, is the antinomy in poetic knowledge; that the artist is restricted to his own world and cannot universalize what he knows. He can do no more than find the form of what he knows and relive himself through creativity. Thus poetry is neither historic nor prophetic but occupies a separate world of time and value....

Poetry is knowledge of the self only, but there is no self without a world, and no embodiment of self without art. To extend the poet's meaning beyond this point is to render him and his work meaningless. This is what usually happens when we touch art with the wand of doctrine.

History, I have already said, is a precious and noble fiction. Without it we would be living in a temporal chaos. Only saints can live without history. History indeed is the vital core of civilization; it gives us the symbology of our lives. History might even be called the world's poem, the poem by all hands, because history does for the world



*No good historian attempts to write history while it is happening, any more than a poet tries to write a poem while he is making love."*

what the poet does for himself: it creates its image. But the poet himself, the true poet, must live outside history like the saint. This is self-evident: if he accepts history he will be silent to the truth in himself.

The fate of works of art is always a matter of chance. The history of art is a history of chance. The historian of art, to be convincing, must be as much artist as historian, for history, like all other knowledge, must be formal and exclusive. The hierarchy of values is also a fiction, and is always being upset by new turns of history and by the advent of new works of art. For this reason, no good historian attempts to write history while it is happening, any more than a poet tries to write a poem while he is making love.

Poetic reputation, like the career of a work of art, cannot be understood in terms of value. Poetic reputation has to do with the fact that value is attributed to a particular piece of work.... In one sense, the history of poetry is no more than the history of opinion.

The non-historicity of art is one of its most significant characteristics. For the poet there is no progress, no evolution: for poetry there is no progress, no evolution. There is only the eternal problem of rebirth. Literary historians know this well. A man at the height of his powers may produce his worst work. In art there is a refinement of skill, as in any other trade, but no assurance of success. This fact is true because the poet enters a new and different world with each poem. The other worlds are lost to him and he can re-enter them only like any other reader. This constant re-entry into the world of new relationships makes of the poet neither messiah nor explorer but only a man fully alive in spirit and in body to existence itself.

Poetry intersects with the fiction of history, as it does with philosophy and science and religion. But all this is accidental and unpredictable. True poetry memorializes the scene, the time and place, and the world takes this as tribute. But the poet did not set out to memorialize anything. It is only as a by-product of art that art brings the past to life. There are "periods" of art, no doubt, but they tell us nothing about the individual work or the individual artist. Period does little more than point to the poet's vocabulary. Poetry helps create history: it helps rewrite it....

There is no rationale to success in works of art: anyone who has read the life of one poet knows this. On the other hand, there are certain works which are taken as touchstones of the age in which they appear. Such poems or works of art color the very atmosphere of life for a time....

There is nevertheless a true fame for the work of art, one which the poet himself values, one which the world values as well. This fame has nothing to do with the esotericism of myth or the power of public appeal. It has to do with authenticity. In art we refer to truth in terms of authenticity: that is the only way we have to get at it.... [S]uffice it to say that if this quality did not exist we would be living in a chaos in which every work of art would be the equal of every other work of art....

The personal truth of works of beauty cannot be equated with mythic truth or universal truth. We do not pretend to believe or not to believe what the poet says in order to follow, appreciate, or love the poem. All we have to believe is that the poet is sincere. Let one shadow of a doubt fall across our minds and the poem disintegrates. But the term *belief* is somewhat misleading; for poetry is more an act of passion than act of thought. Poetry occurs because a "belief" has been kindled by passion and made incandescent. There cannot be a cold poem. And the belief is more often than not a matter of emotion; that is, a belief which pulls the emotions into it. The creator of beauty is engaged in a constant struggle with the reality of his own emotions. Emotions do not exist in a vacuum; they are produced by contact with the world. The poet never moves out of this world of struggle in which his emotions ("beliefs") lock with experience. His recollections of these struggles are the subjects of his poems.

But how does this affect someone else? What is my poem to you? It is an embodiment of myself or part of myself, which would otherwise be lost, as most men's lives are lost to others, except in

memory. It is the rescue of my passion from disintegration. The poet wrests from the world the revelation of his personal reality. I need not point out that this is one of the most common themes of poets of all ages. When the sonneteer cries that his poem will make the lady's beauty live forever, he means that her beauty has become part of him; that part which creates his poem. Thus the poet triumphs over formlessness, the formlessness of his own life and of all life, the design of which is hidden from us. For many people, reality does not come into existence except through art. Through art we see with another's eyes, but we see no more than one truth. This truth may be the affirmation of our own reality. Indeed, that would be a lofty enough reason in itself for the high position of art.

The love of beauty, like the love of knowledge and the love of God, may be the metaphysical affirmation of man's divinity. At least, it is deeply satisfying to think so. Personal experience plus obedience to the laws of beauty—those strange laws which every artist discovers for himself—this is the equation for the creative act. And obedience to the laws of beauty implies a belief in the harmony of all things.

The poet's fame and honor are based on his love and knowledge of beauty. Who does not love religion, science; or philosophy more, or as much. And it is love of beauty which other men sometimes interpret as love itself. The poet is a man of love. But he differs from others in that he is so fired with the love of beauty that he must create beauty itself. Beauty feeds him with the desire to create beauty. No good poet departs from the obsession with beauty for a second. The moment he does he is lost—off on the journey to historic life or myth-hood....

The poet leaves an actual record of his passion in the presence of world reality. He creates the image of himself, sometimes only a part of himself, sometimes his full self. With Shakespeare we have the whole image; with Baudelaire we have a stylized and fragmentary image. But whole or fragmentary, the image is not always pretty. Yet when it is a good likeness, we recognize it and appreciate its handiwork. And the creation of this image takes place, like any other creation, through love. What the poet loves helps create his poetry and himself....

To believe that men are bettered by poetry is as narrow as to believe that they are worsened by it. Let us think of it another way. Let us think of creation in art as the vocation, and only the voca-



tion of a certain kind of man. Let us then give it the honor of any vocation for knowledge. But let us admit also that the sum total of the creation of an artist can equal only himself.

Such knowledge would seem useless to most men and, in fact, the usual view of poetry is precisely that. What poetry does is to ennoble the man who writes it by developing in him an almost habitual love of beauty. This may be the basis for supposing that poets are better than other people. Perhaps the vocation for art and the occupation with beauty do purify the writer; but this purification can take strange and exotic forms.

The fame due to poetry should not be exaggerated. A poet creates out of the necessity for seeking truth through the medium of beauty. The thing of beauty sets out on a career in the world. Sometimes it becomes legendary; sometimes it fades quickly from the face of the earth. But where it remains it leaves an image of its maker. Seeing it, other men have the sense of one man's affirmation of life, whoever he was, wherever, whenever he lived. Then we recognize, if we can read these works, the intelligence, the talent, the acts of a man who placed love of truth above all things and who could not find truth except in beauty. Thus tragedy and death itself turn beautiful in art....

The fame of art rises from the world's dream of freedom of spirit. The poet is not the buoyant and volatile singer of visions; on the contrary, he is more the Doubting Thomas who finds it hard to believe in the accepted abstractions, and who must prove them all over again for himself. One might say that the poet's freedom really consists of scepticism....

There is reason enough to exalt poetry. The artist is the only person whose work immortalizes life itself—his life and the lives of those who happen into the picture. It is this work which gives us a true knowledge of the maker, the poet, and of his world. It is knowledge of doubtful value, perhaps, but it is nonetheless true knowledge. One can learn nothing from art, really, except a kind of curious wisdom—the wisdom of love....

The just honor of poetry comes from the admiration of mankind for the creation of one personality or one facet of personality. It is not unlike the honor we pay to the athlete or to the man who achieves wealth or success in his affairs. Our pride in him is the pride of created identity. But there is this difference: the poet who creates out of his life has done so because he was part of a particular place and time, part of a particular milieu and na-

tion, and part of a particular age. The truer, the more authentic his work, the longer will last the soil from which he sprang and the clearer the character of his nation will appear to others. The treason comes with those artists who set out to become a touchstone of their time and place; the treason comes with those minions of culture who try to produce the poet who will represent them before the world. Culture says: We must have Art; let us set about having it. And the mythic poets and the historic poets flock to the banners. Meanwhile there is the true poet who has perhaps never published a line, who lives in a town from which no poet has ever come before, and whose greatest peril lies in his indoctrination with the false mythos of culture heroism....

Our poets today are sent out into the world writing masters into what they believe to be an enemy civilization and a hostile universe. Little wonder that they behave ever after like soldiers on their first patrol. Little wonder that they all mouth the same stereotypes about our dying world and our dying way of life. Little wonder that the poetry of cultural anthropology and cultural history make up the bulk of the 20th century anthology.

It is hard to imagine how the next true poet will escape all the masters lying in wait to receive him, but that is uniquely and eternally the problem of the young true poet....

The new poet is always the one who outwits the guardians of the prevalent systems—and mostly because he is not even aware of their existence.

Whatever the value of the poem *sub specie aeternitatis*, it should be given as a fresh, complete, instantaneous thing; for these are the qualities which make for long life in works of art, and even for what we fondly call the immortality of poems. The career of the poem exists only in those moments when the poem is being given and being received.

Source: "The Career of the Poem" in *A Primer for Poets*, University of Nebraska Press, 1953, pp. 51-73.

## Sources

Aiken, Conrad, "Karl Shapiro," in *Collected Criticism*, Oxford University Press, 1968, pp. 361-64.

Kaiser, Charles, *1968 In America*, New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1988.

Kleinfelder, Rita Lang, *When We Were Young: A Baby-Boomer Yearbook*, New York: Prentice Hall General Reference, 1993.

Stauffer, Donald Barlow, *A Short History of American Poetry*, New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1974.

True, Michael, "Books: Alive with Necessary Poems" *Commonweal*, November 10, 1978, p. 725.

### For Further Study

Mandel, Leon, *Driven: The American Four-Wheeled Love Affair*, New York: Stein and Day, 1977.

This book is an interesting and well-written exploration of the unique way that Americans think of their cars and driving, discussed in an informal, conversational manner. More recent statistics are available, but the general attitudes have not changed.

Steigerwald, David, *The Sixties and the End of Modern America*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995.

A serious sociology text, in which Steigerwald argues that the 1960s ended the era of growth known as Modernism that began around the turn of the century. This is an excellent research source for anyone who wants to study social trends, without the light interest in fashions and rock music that many studies of the 1960s have.

Young, Andrew, "Remembering Dr. King," *The Sixties*, edited by Lynda Rosen Obst, New York: Random House/Rolling Stone Press, 1977, pp. 232-7.

Young was an associate of Martin Luther King, Jr., and his essay paints a portrait of the man that we seldom see: a fun-loving man who was swept by duty into a national role at the young age of 26. This book is full of brief, interesting essays about the times and hundreds of photos.

# The Bells

*Edgar Allan Poe*

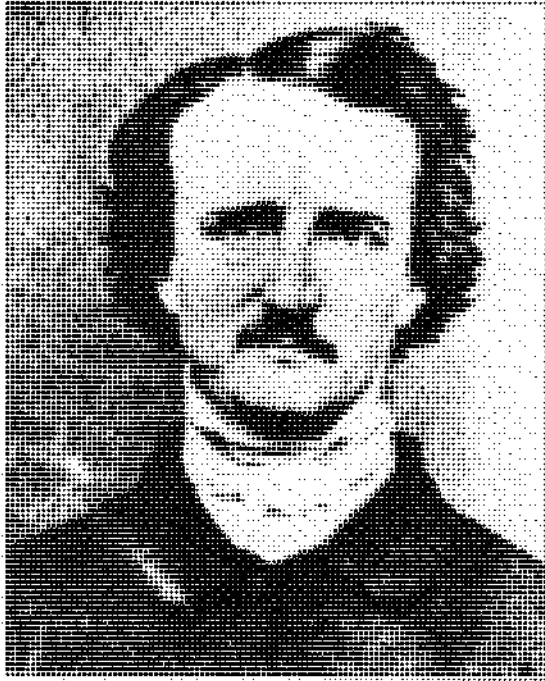
1849

Edgar Allan Poe worked on "The Bells" from the summer of 1848 to the autumn of 1849. Published posthumously in November of 1849, a little more than a month after Poe's death, it first appeared in the journal *Sartain's Union* to much critical acclaim, and was later published in the 1850 collection *The Works of the Late Edgar Allan Poe*. Over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this poem has become one of America's best examples of onomatopoeic effect, or use of words that recall the sound of what they describe. Through auditory and visual images, the poem describes the sound, function, and effect of four types of bells: sleigh bells, wedding bells, alarm bells, and funeral bells, all used in the mid-nineteenth century to get the attention of community members. In the common occurrence of their ringing, Poe finds a metaphor for the progression of the common man from the carefree times of youth (as in the merry sound of sleigh bells), to the serious commitment of marriage, to critical situations of emergencies in one's mature life, and finally to the conclusion of death. This natural progression, however, receives a dramatic emphasis because the descriptions become more and more emotionally charged.

## *Author Biography*

Poe was born in Boston in 1809, the son of Elizabeth Arnold Poe and David Poe, both minor professional actors. Both his parents died before he





Edgar Allan Poe

was three years old, and he was subsequently raised in the home of Frances Keeling Valentine Allan and her husband John Allan, a prosperous exporter from Richmond, Virginia. As a youth, Poe attended the finest academies in Richmond, his step-father overseeing his education, and he entered the University of Virginia at Charlottesville in 1825. He distinguished himself academically at the University but was forced to leave due to inadequate financial support from his step-father. Poe returned to Richmond in 1827 but soon left for Boston. There he enlisted in the army and published his first collection of poetry, *Tamerlane, and Other Poems*. Poe was discharged from the army in 1829, the same year he published a second volume of verse. Neither of his first two collections attracted much attention. After briefly attending West Point, Poe went to New York City and soon after to Baltimore. He married his cousin Virginia Clemm in 1836 after receiving an editorship at *The Southern Literary Messenger* in Richmond. Poe thereafter received a degree of recognition, not only for his poetry and fiction, but as an exceptional literary critic. He also occasionally achieved popular success, especially following the publication of his poem "The Raven."

Poe's wife Virginia died from tuberculosis in 1847. After a period in which he was involved in

various romantic affairs, Poe planned to remarry, but in late September, 1849 he arrived in Baltimore for reasons unknown. In early October he was discovered nearly unconscious; he died on October 7, never regaining sufficient consciousness to relate the details of the final days of his life. Since his death Poe's work has been variously assessed, with critics disagreeing on its value. Today, however, Poe is acknowledged as a major literary figure, a master of Gothic atmosphere and interior monologue. His poems and stories have influenced the literary schools of symbolism and surrealism as well as the popular genres of detective and horror fiction.

### Poem Text

#### I

Hear the sledges with the bells—  
Silver bells!  
What a world of merriment their melody foretells!  
How they tinkle, tinkle, tinkle,  
In the icy air of night!  
While the stars that oversprinkle  
All the heavens, seem to twinkle  
With a crystalline delight;  
Keeping time, time, time,  
In a sort of runic rhyme,  
To the tintinnabulation that so musically wells  
From the bells, bells, bells, bells,  
Bells, bells, bells—  
From the jingling and the tinkling of the bells.

#### II

Hear the mellow wedding bells—  
Golden bells!  
What a world of happiness their harmony foretells!  
Through the balmy air of night  
How they ring out their delight!—  
From the molten-golden notes,  
And all in tune,  
What a liquid ditty floats  
To the turtle dove that listens, while she gloats  
On the moon!  
Oh, from out the sounding cells,  
What a gush of euphony voluminously wells!  
How it swells!  
How it dwells  
On the future—how it tells  
Of the rapture that impels  
To the swinging and the ringing  
Of the bells, bells, bells—  
Of the bells, bells, bells, bells,  
Bells, bells, bells—  
To the rhyming and the chiming of the bells!

#### III

Hear the loud alarum bells—  
Brazen bells!

What a tale of terror, now, their turbulency tells!  
 In the startled ear of night  
 How they scream out their affright!  
 Too much horrified to speak,  
 They can only shriek, shriek,  
 Out of tune.

In a clamorous appealing to the mercy of the fire,  
 In a mad expostulation with the deaf and frantic  
 fire,  
 Leaping higher, higher, higher,  
 With a desperate desire,  
 And a resolute endeavor  
 Now—now to sit, or never,  
 By the side of the pale-faced moon.  
 Oh, the bells, bells, bells!  
 What a tale their terror tells  
 Of despair!  
 How they clang, and clash, and roar!  
 What a horror they outpour  
 On the bosom of the palpitating air!  
 Yet the ear, it fully knows  
 By the twanging  
 And the clanging,  
 How the danger ebbs and flows;  
 Yet the ear distinctly tells,  
 In the jangling  
 And wrangling,  
 How the danger sinks and swells,  
 By the sinking or the swelling in the anger of the  
 bells—  
 Of the bells,—  
 Of the bells, bells, bells, bells,  
 Bells, bells, bells—  
 In the clamor and the clangor of the bells!

#### IV

Hear the tolling of the bells—  
 Iron bells!  
 What a world of solemn thought their monody  
 compels!  
 In the silence of the night,  
 How we shiver with affright  
 At the melancholy menace of their tone!  
 For every sound that floats  
 From the rust within their throats  
 Is a groan.  
 And the people—ah, the people—  
 They that dwell up in the steeple,  
 All alone,  
 And who tolling, tolling, tolling,  
 In that muffled monotone,  
 Feel a glory in so rolling  
 On the human heart a stone—  
 They are neither man nor woman—  
 They are neither brute nor human—  
 They are ghouls:—  
 And their king it is who tolls:—  
 And he rolls, rolls, rolls,  
 Rolls  
 A paean from the bells!  
 And his merry bosom swells  
 With the paean of the bells!  
 And he dances, and he yells;

Keeping time, time, time,  
 In a sort of runic rhyme,  
 To the paean of the bells—  
 Of the bells—  
 Keeping time, time, time,  
 In a sort of runic rhyme,  
 To the throbbing of the bells—  
 Of the bells, bells, bells—  
 To the sobbing of the bells;  
 Keeping time, time, time,  
 As he knells, knells, knells,  
 In a happy runic rhyme,  
 To the rolling of the bells—  
 Of the bells, bells, bells:—  
 To the tolling of the bells—  
 Of the bells, bells, bells, bells,  
 Bells, bells, bells—  
 To the moaning and the groaning of the bells.

### Poem Summary

#### Lines 1-3:

In these opening lines, Poe introduces the first of the four bells, the silver sleigh bells. These sleigh bells are associated with a happy mood. The description of the bells as “silver” supplies a visual image and also an association with the idea of value. Alliteration of *w* in “what” and “world” and of *m* in “merriment” and “melody” add to the pleasing sound of these first lines.

#### Lines 4-8:

The use of the word “tinkle” is the first occurrence of onomatopoeia, or a word that sounds like what it means. In this case it reproduces the sound of these light sleigh bells. The setting of nighttime allows for a parallel between the sound of the bells and the twinkling of the stars above and for the pleasing effect of the double rhymes, “tinkle,” “oversprinkle,” and “twinkle.” In these rhymes, examples of assonance and alliteration respectively occur in the short vowel sound of *i* and the consonant sound of *k*. These sounds continue in the word “crystalline,” which also provides a very sharp image for the stars. Similarly, the rhyming of “night” with “delight” provides a repetition of the long vowel sound of *i*, the beginning of assonance that continues in the words “icy,” “time,” and “rhyme” in this first stanza.

#### Lines 9-11:

Repetition of the word “time,” which receives stress every time it is used here, adds excitement to the rhythm. Use of the long vowel sound *i* is an example of assonance since it appears in the words, “night,” “delight,” “icy,” “time,” and “rhyme” in

this first stanza. The repetition of the consonant sound *t* throughout the stanza, but mostly here in “time” and “tintinnabulation,” provides examples of alliteration. “Tintinnabulation” also provides the second example of onomatopoeia in the poem, again a description of the sound made by the light, happy sleigh bells. Also note the phrase “a sort of runic rhyme,” which suggests a parallel between the sound of the bells and poetry itself.

#### **Lines 12-14:**

Here is the first of seven times that the poem repeats the word “bells” in succession. This repetition makes the poem memorable and as the intensity of the repetition increases, the poem becomes increasingly exciting to hear. The words “jingling” and “tinkling” are two more examples of onomatopoeia.

#### **Lines 15-17:**

In the beginning of this second stanza, Poe introduces his second topic, the golden wedding bells. Once again by naming the metal in which the bells are cast, Poe provides a visual image and an association with a thing of value, since “golden” carries with it a strong connotation of wealth. The lines begin and end with the same phrases as those of the first stanza, to produce a parallel construction and comforting effect. In this stanza, alliteration of the sound of *h* produces a breathless feeling of excitement, an appropriate association to make with a wedding.

#### **Lines 18-19:**

Once again the setting is that of night; in this stanza it is not the icy night of the sleigh bells but a night that is “balmy,” or mild and soothing. Also, as in the first stanza, “night” rhymes with “delight.” This time though, the rhymes occur at the end of consecutive lines without any other end-rhymes interposed. The closeness of the rhymes to each other quickens the pace of the poem.

#### **Lines 20-24:**

These lines describe the sound of the golden bells and a creature who hears them. Assonance of the long vowel *o* in “molten-golden notes,” “floats,” and “oh” suggests the rich intonation of a golden bell ringing. The listener is a “turtledove,” a bird noted for its pleasant cooing sound and often used as an image of romantic love. “Turtledove” could also be read as a rather mushy term of affection for an actual woman. And rather than gazing at the moon, she “gloats.” While the use of this

word allows for the continuation of the rhyme with “notes” and “floats,” it also adds to the presentation of this listener as overly sentimental. These suggestions of heightened emotion, associated with golden, wedding bells, produce a feeling of luxuriance.

#### **Lines 25-35:**

These lines continue to develop the luxuriance of the golden, wedding bells. The phrase “sounding cells” creates an image of largeness; a “cell” is a room. The word “gush” implies the pouring forth of a large amount of something, and “voluminously wells” concurs with this suggestion, as does the words “swells.” “Wells” and “swells” bring the meaning of gathering up in quantity, and “dwells” brings the meaning of lingering in time. The word “euphony” provides an auditory image that is reinforced by the pleasant sound of ten end rhymes in eleven lines: “cells,” “wells,” “swells,” “dwells,” “tells,” “impels,” and “bells” three times. The internal repetition of “bells” seven more times in lines 32 to 34 adds to this pleasing effect. The one line of this section that does not contain this rhyme, line 31, has its own rhyme occurring between an internal word, “swinging,” and the last word, “ringing.” The existence of so many rhymes keeps the pace lively. In lines 27 and 28, the bells are given the magical power to foretell a future of “rapture” or bliss for this wedding party. As in the first stanza, where the bells were said to create a “runic rhyme,” here in the last line of this second stanza the bells are “rhyming,” making another association between the poem itself or the act of writing poetry and the ringing sound of bells. The stanza concludes with the onomatopoeic “chiming” of the bells.

#### **Lines 36-38:**

In these opening lines of stanza three, Poe introduces his third topic, the “brazen,” or brass-colored, alarm bells. The word “brazen” suggests loud, contemptuous boldness, and so these bells are immediately associated with an angry mood. Alliteration of *t* in “tale,” “terror,” “turbulency,” and “tells” adds a tense quality to the sound of these lines. The words “alarum,” “terror” and “turbulency” carry with them strong negative connotations.

#### **Lines 39-43:**

A nighttime setting appears again, this time, however, a night of fear and emergency. Personification exists in the phrase “startled ear of night,”

presenting the evening as a sleeping person, woken suddenly by this terrible sound of alarm. The assonance of long vowel *e* in “ear,” “scream,” “speak,” and “shriek” occurring throughout the stanza creates a squealing sound and a sense of urgency. The words “startled,” “scream,” “affright,” “horrified,” and “shriek” all have negative denotations and connotations. Repetition of “shriek” creates the sense that the situation is uncontrollable. Note finally that these bells are appropriately ringing “out of tune.”

### Lines 44-50:

These lines describe the frenzy of a destructive fire and the desperate ringing of the fire alarm bells. Though the bells are “clamorous” and make a “mad expostulation,” the fire does not respond, remaining “deaf,” “frantic,” and “resolute” while it leaps “higher, higher, higher.” The repetition here creates the sense that the fire is uncontrollable. Personification occurs when the fire is described as having the “desire” to climb so high that it can “sit” next to “the pale-faced moon.” Presumably the moon appears “pale” in comparison to the blazing fire. The words, “fire,” “higher,” “desire,” and “side,” provide assonance of long vowel *i* to create a disquieting sound and a sense of urgency.

### Lines 51-56:

These lines describe the alarm bells’ sounds and identify their ability to announce danger. Repetition of “bells” acts as a refrain that now creates a sense of urgency. Once again, alliteration of “*t*” in “tale,” “terror,” “tells” and “palpitating” adds tension to the sound of these lines. The words, “clang,” “clash,” and “roar” serve as onomatopoeic devices to create the discordant sound of these bells. The overall effect of the bells on the setting is to produce fear, as suggested in the metaphor of the “horror” poured onto “the bosom of the palpitating air.” The atmosphere has been personified as a woman who is shaking with fear while hearing the bells.

### Lines 57-69:

These lines indicate that the bells communicate the intensity of the danger to the community. The phrases “ebbs and flows” and “sinks and swells” suggest that changes in the loudness and rate of the alarm bells match up to the severity of the emergency situation. An example of

## Media Adaptations



- A compact disc titled *Closed on Account of Rabies: Poems and Tales of Edgar Allan Poe*, produced by Hal Willner, is available from Mouth Almighty Records. Various artists, including Christopher Walken, Gabriel Byrne, Deborah Harry, and Iggy Pop, read selections of Poe’s work.
- *The Poetry of Edgar Allan Poe* (1996) is available on audio cassette from Dove Audio.
- *The Poetry of Edgar Allan Poe* is available on compact disc from Audiobooks.

synecdoche, or a metaphor where a part symbolizes the whole, occurs when the word “ear” is used to represent the people who hear the alarm. Again, onomatopoeia creates the discordant sound of the bells, this time in the words “twanging,” “clanging,” “jangling,” and “wrangling.” Strong negative meanings emerge from the words “anger,” “clamor,” and “clangor.” As in the preceding sections, the word “bells” is repeated; this time the repetition has grown to seven consecutive “bells,” suggesting the dramatic urgency of the situation.

### Lines 70-72:

In the opening lines of this final stanza, Poe introduces the last type of bells, the iron steeple bells. “Iron” creates an image of coarse, crude metal, and so these bells may be associated with primitive, basic elements of life and death. They are said to produce “solemn thought” and ring only in “monody,” a type of dirge, thus connecting them to a funeral.

### Lines 73-78:

The descriptions in this section produce a tone of fear, of groaning and shivering in the night. In the phrase “rust within their throats” a personification of the bells presents them as having a hoarse,

raspy voice. Since iron rusts and sound comes from one's throat, this personification describes these bells very well.

### Lines 79-88:

These lines identify the ringers of these iron bells as demonic creatures or ghoulish semi-persons. These evil beings take pleasure in ringing the funeral knell, as represented by the phrase, "glory in so rolling / on the human heart a stone." Repetition of the word "tolling," besides supplying onomatopoeia, also has the effect of emphasizing the strain upon the hearer caused by this iron bell taking its "toll" on those who hear it.

### Lines 89-113:

This final section of the poem presents the image of the king of the ghouls, who joyously rings the iron funeral bells, presumably in anticipation of taking possession of the deceased. Several words express his joy: "paeon," "merry bosom," "he dances, and he yells," and "happy runic rhyme." Note that the line "in a sort of runic rhyme" from the first stanza is twice repeated here, serving to reinforce the parallel between the sound of the bells and poetry and to connect the entire poem. Repetitions in these lines produce steady rhythms, but they have also been carefully chosen to strengthen the structure or theme of the poem. In the case of "rolls," repeated four times, a structural link develops between these lines and the image above of the stone "rolling" over the "human heart." Through the repetition of the word "time," which appears in two lines a total of six times, the theme of life and death as subjects of time emerges. The iron bells produce a variety of sounds in these last lines: "a paeon," a "throbbing" sound, "sobbing," "rolling," "tolling," "moaning," and "groaning." In addition, repetition of the word "bells" takes on a feverish pitch as the poem concludes. It seems that the bells themselves, and not only those who hear them in the night, are victims answering to the demands of the ghoulish ringers.

## Themes

### Language and Meaning

Readers are often suspicious of the intellectual content of poems such as "The Bells" that have a flowing rhythm and a large number of snugly fit rhymes. There is good reason for suspicion: it

makes sense that the poet who chooses words for their sound is not doing all that can be done to assemble the words that are the most meaningful. From earliest childhood, we are raised reciting nursery rhymes such as "Hickory dickory dock, three mice ran up the clock," and "Jack and Jill ran up the hill." The musical qualities of these rhymes can be appreciated with no sense of what they mean, which tells us that meaning can be unrelated to rhythm and rhyme. Too often, though, readers will conclude that a clever or pretty poem is hollow, as if there is an equation that shrinks the meaning when the musical quality expands. Poe's poetic works have often been dismissed by serious critics because they resemble the pointless confectioneries that lightweight poets spew forth.

In "The Bells," Poe has chosen words that have such a close relationship between sound and meaning that neither is sacrificed. The term *onomatopoeia* is used to describe words that use their sound to suggest what they are describing: "buzz," for instance, resembles a fly's sound, while "splat" reminds us of the sound of the fly being crushed. Most of the words Poe chose for this poem work onomatopoeically. In the first stanza, for example, "crystalline" and "tintinnabulation" not only have the proper meaning, but their sound also carries the lighthearted sense of sleigh bells, just as "monody" and "tolling" carry the sound of gloom in stanza four. Throughout the poem, the repetition of the single-syllable word "bells" brings the monotone of the bells' actual sound to mind. Though poems that pay too much attention to the sounds of their words are often merely clever without insight, in this case the link between the words' sounds and their meanings is appropriate, because it resembles the way that sound and meaning relate in ringing bells.

### Supernatural

As is often the case with Poe's writings, readers must wonder whether the various moods created by the different bells are psychological or supernatural. There is, of course, a logical reason for why silver bells would evoke merriment; golden bells harmony; brazen bells terror; and iron bells solemn thought. Each has a history of social use, and we all associate their use with the happy and sad occasions during which we have heard them in the past. It is generally accepted that these bells are well matched to their functions; we would not toll heavy iron bells to celebrate a wedding any more than silver bells would be fitting for a funeral. But this poem implies that the feelings these tones stir



in us are not just responses to our past experiences, and it attributes to the bells themselves the power—even the desire—to control our responses. This personification becomes more obvious as the poem progresses, so that the bells seem to be more and more willful, as the poem becomes darker and more somber. In the first stanza the bells are “fore-telling,” in the second they are “ringing out delight,” in the third they are “screaming their fright,” and finally, in the end, the bells control the king like a puppet: “He dances and he yells” to their rhythm. By this point, there can be little doubt in the reader’s mind that the poem is telling us that the bells have supernatural control over people’s thoughts that extend beyond memories of past situations.

### Cycle of Life

The most obvious organizing principle of this poem is its movement from joy to sorrow as the bells reflect these various emotions: silver bells convey “a world of merriment”; golden bells play a tune that “tells / of the rapture that impels”; brazen bells tell a tale of terror and despair; and iron bells turn people to ghouls with “the melancholy menace of their tone.” Less obvious, but still present, is the author’s implication that the arrangement of these bells reflects the chronology of life, hinting that human lives generally follow the progression of joy, hope, fear and sorrow. In only the broadest sense is this true. Childhood can reasonably be seen as a time of innocent play, as indicated by the sleigh bells. Young adulthood, the time when people take control of their lives, is, as the poem tells us, a time for dwelling on the future—a time of happiness foretold. Middle age is when the realization of mortality makes us aware of the countless disasters waiting to happen around us. And people in old age can tend to become solemn and melancholy, as the vague fear of death turns into a very real fact, through the deaths of friends and acquaintances. The problem with the poem’s implying that this is *the* emotional structure that most lives take is that it relies too heavily on overgeneralization. In theory, for instance, it makes sense to call childhood a time of play and middle age a time of alarm, but children are frequently alarmed: What about the people who experience disaster or hardship in youth? How does the poem account for those who remain merry throughout their lives? There are so many exceptions to the patterns that Poe has sketched for us here that the poem, though accurate in matching sounds to moods, is not very helpful for teaching us about life.

## Topics for Further Study



- Write a nonpoetic description of exactly what is happening in the fourth stanza. Explain the characters involved and their motivations.
- In the modern world, many functions that formerly used bells—such as door chimes, fire alarms, and phone ringers—have been replaced by electrical tones. Do you think that these tones can have the same emotional impact that Poe associates with bells? Have the engineers who designed them removed the emotional element? Write a brief essay explaining how technology has or has not changed the effect that Poe describes here.
- Explain the speaker’s obsession with bells. Did he have a bad experience? Is he hypnotized by their sound? Do you think this person is obsessed to the point of being dangerous?

### Style

“The Bells” consists of four stanzas of varying lengths that follow no particular rhyme scheme. Most notably, the poem uses repetition of the word “bells,” and of words that describe the sound of bells, to create a ringing rhythm. Along with repetition, rhymes, alliteration and assonance, which are the repetition of consonant and vowel sounds, and onomatopoeia reproduce the sound of the ringing bells. The poem uses a trochaic meter of pairs of stressed and unstressed syllables to create the steady high/low rhythm of ringing, but Poe varies this rhythm, especially when he inserts many extra stressed syllables that may be thought of as spondaic feet, or pairs of stressed syllables. These extra syllables occur in the repeated words to add a sense of excitement. For example, consider the following line containing trochees:

To the / tin tin / nab u / la tion / that so / mu si /  
cal ly / wells ...

This line contains all trochaic feet, with an extra stressed syllable at the end on “wells”; the fol-

lowing line, however, begins with a trochee and continues with all accented syllables that can be scanned as spondees:

From the / bells, bells, / bells, / bells ...

In addition to repetition and rhythm variation, a notable characteristic of the poem's construction is that its stanzas increase in length and complexity as the poem develops: the first stanza has only fourteen lines, the second has twenty-one lines, the third has thirty-four lines, and the last stanza continues for forty-four lines. This increasing stanza length parallels the increasing seriousness of the types of bells being described, from the joyously simple sleigh bells to the profoundly frightening funeral bells. In this manner, the poem produces an overall climax with a tragic ending, as is the case in much of Poe's poetry.

### Historical Context

Poe's writings are generally seen as clearly reflecting the fact that he lived and worked in the era we now call the Age of Romanticism, which started in the late 1700s and dominated social and artistic thought throughout much of the following century. As with most things concerning this author, though, his greatest achievements are not strongly influenced by the situation around him, but are mostly the results of his own unique theories. "The Bells," for example, does show some traits that we associate with Romanticism, but it also has a unique approach that identifies it more clearly as a product of the man than of his times. Looking forward in history, we can see how Poe's interest in the mystical nature of objects, so obvious in "The Bells," influenced those who came after him, especially the followers of the French Symbolist movement of the late 1800s.

Romanticism was a response to the Age of Enlightenment. This was a period when the prevailing feeling around the world, especially in Europe (England, Germany, and France) was that rational thought could be used to overcome all of mankind's problems. The Enlightenment was a natural result of the optimism generated in the seventeenth century, as scientific discoveries and the exploration of unfamiliar civilizations made Europeans aware of possibilities they had not dared to dream of before. Events as diverse as Newton's theory of universal gravity in 1665 and the founding of Jamestown, the first English colony in North America, in 1607 led to the enthusiasm during the En-

lightenment for finding newer, better ways to address old problems. In one sense, the Enlightenment, with its interest in exploring uncharted territory, paved the way for the sort of innovative artist Poe was; on the other hand, the Age of Enlightenment was a bit too narrowly focused on the things of the physical world for Poe, whose interests expanded beyond the measurable world and into the areas of emotion and the supernatural. His 1831 poem, "To Science," points out the inability of scientific inquiry to address the concerns and fears that motivate humans.

Late in the eighteenth century, the drive to reach perfection in government and social affairs led to a general recognition of the importance of individuals, which, in turn, led to the rejection of powerful centralized governments. French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1718-1778) was particularly influential in refining the priorities of the Enlightenment by pointing out that feelings and emotions are just as important to human life as reason. Many thinkers of the time followed Rousseau in calling for the rights of individuals being put ahead of the rules of cold, rational, bureaucratic systems. The Enlightenment was giving way to the Romantic Age. Politically, Romanticism took over Western Civilization with the American Revolution in 1776 and the French Revolution in 1789, during which poor, common people stood up and fought for liberty against the governments that had controlled them for centuries. In literature, Romanticism is considered to have been directly expressed first in William Wordsworth's introduction to the 1798 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, a collection of poems by Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Romantic literature emphasized feeling over intellect, and therefore placed great importance on the subjective, personal experiences of the author. Nature plays a central role in Romantic literature: while writers of the Enlightenment had studied nature to discover the laws that control it, Romantic writers experienced nature and reported on the feelings that resulted. Poe was one of the most subjective writers to have ever lived. There is seldom a view of the world we all know from experience in his works, but instead the world in his works operates by strange rules, filtered through the author's state of mind. In his short stories, for example, the world that the reader experiences will often reflect the guilt or grief that the main character feels, and Poe's poems are even less grounded in objective reality. Unlike other Romantic poets, though, Poe put a great emphasis on the sound or "music" of the words that he used to capture his ideas. And

## Compare & Contrast

- **1849:** More than 77,000 people race to California after gold is discovered in the San Francisco area. Before then, the United States had only expanded to the Mississippi River; the gold prospectors, known as “Forty-niners,” traveled the western half of the continent by foot or sailed beneath South America to reach California. The next year California became the 31st state, extending the United States from the East to West coasts.
- 1912:** Arizona was admitted to the Union as the forty-eighth state, the last one of the continental states to be added.
- 1959:** Alaska and Hawaii were added as the forty-ninth and fiftieth states. They are the only states that do not border other states.
- Today:** With most of the world’s land and sea territories claimed, exploration and expansion takes place in outer space.
- **1849:** A U.S. patent was awarded for the first safety pin.
- 1893:** A patent was issued to Ernest Judson for a “clasp locker” that was the prototype of the zipper; the name “zipper” was copyrighted in 1926.
- 1948:** Swiss inventor Georges de Mestral invented Velcro. The product was patented in 1955.
- 1993:** The pentium computer chip is invented.
- **1849:** Some of the greatest and most recognizable names in American Literature were active at this time, including Nathaniel Hawthorne, Frederick Douglass, Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.
- Today:** With the communications technology that has made all places in the world familiar, it is unlikely that any group of authors could be so strongly identified with their nation’s history as those listed.
- **1849:** The Potato Famine in Ireland, which began in 1845, forced hundreds of thousands of Irish people to emigrate to America, continuing the largest migration in the world’s history.
- 1910:** The U.S. immigration rate hit an all-time high, with ten percent of Americans having been born in other countries.
- Today:** Mexico sends the most immigrants to the United States, nearly three times the amount of the next nation; it is followed by the Asian countries of Philippines, China, Korea, and Vietnam.

unlike other writers of the Romantic movement, especially the New England Transcendentalists, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, Poe did not use the objects of the physical world as a way of knowing God. To him, objects each had a more individual, sometimes sinister, meaning.

American literature has tended to follow in the tradition of Transcendentalism, using poetry as a tool for understanding, rather than valuing it for its own worth. Like Emerson, who once called Poe “the Jingle Man,” many scholars consider Poe a popular but not important figure—or at best more important for his fiction than his poetry. Poe’s influence is much clearer in French literature, where

the symbolist movement that flourished from 1850 to 1890 supported many of the same principles that he had championed, primarily the idea that the imagination was the true interpreter of reality. Writers of the symbolist movement, including Paul Verlaine, Arthur Rimbaud, and Charles Baudelaire, represented the objects of the physical world as symbols. To them, symbols are not only significant because they refer to other things, but they also have their own independent significance (as opposed to signs, which have no value except when they point to things that are valuable). In this poem, the bells fit this meaning of symbolism. The French Symbolists admired Poe for his attempts to experiment with symbols and music in his poetry, and

they valued his works more consistently than any other group has.

### Critical Overview

Immediately striking the reading public as an astonishing poem, "The Bells" has often been praised for its use of sound devices. Charles J. Peterson, who knew Poe from their work together on *Graham's Magazine*, hailed it in an issue of the *Philadelphia Saturday Gazette* dated October 20, 1849, only thirteen days after Poe's death. He announced its forthcoming appearance in *Sartain's Union* and wrote: "The wild and irregular style of the verse . . . ; the skill with which the author avails himself of the subtle force that lies sometimes in the reiteration of a word; and many other peculiarities, none the result of chance, but all of the most careful thought, prove Mr. Poe to have been the greatest master of the mere art of composition, which this country, or perhaps this century, has produced."

Peterson acknowledges that the subject of ringing bells is a "trite" one, but uses this fact to lavish further praise on his former associate. He suggests that only Poe could use such a simple subject to produce such a wonderful, original, and artistic poem. Another contemporary of Poe's, John Moncure Daniel, wrote in the *Southern Literary Messenger* on March 16, 1850, that "the design of the verse is to imitate the sound of bells; and it is executed with a beauty, melody, and fidelity, which is unsurpassed among compositions of its nature."

During the twentieth century, critics have continued to note the power of this poem. Although W. H. Auden, in an essay from 1950, states that the poem's "subject is nothing but an excuse for onomatopoeic effects," Vincent Buranelli, in his critical biography of Poe calls "The Bells" a "rhythmic triumph." In Floyd Stovall's study of Poe, *Edgar Poe the Poet: Essays New and Old on the Man and His Work*, he analyzes the connection between the bells and the four stages of man. He writes: "The silver bell is appropriate for childhood, and its tinkling suggests a merry mood. The golden bell is the right one for youth, and its mellow sound is suited to the church wedding. The brazen bell, used for fire alarms, represents by its harsh and discordant note the turbulence and danger of middle age. The iron bell is suited to old age because of its heaviness and melancholy tone, and also because it is associated with the funeral knell."

Stovall also discusses in great detail Poe's use of rhythm, rhyme, alliteration and assonance, connecting all not so much to the philosophical theme of aging in the poem but showing how the various sound devices produce pleasant, mellow, or excited stressful moods. He concludes his discussion by commenting: "In 'The Bells' the sounds of the syllables, taken by themselves and in their context, are doubtless more important than the denotative meanings of the words."

### Criticism

#### Chris Semansky

*Chris Semansky's poems and essays appear regularly in literary journals. He teaches writing and literature at Portland Community College in Portland, Oregon. In the following essay, Semansky deems "The Bells" "superficial" because of its focus on sound rather than ideas.*

Many poets and critics have rejected the notion that a poem can be paraphrased and that a reader can somehow reduce the poem's meaning to a message or a point. Believing that a poem's imagery and sound have as much to do with the reader's experience of the poem as its ideas, Edgar Allan Poe also claimed that knowing what went into a particular poem or knowing the writer's intention in writing it was largely irrelevant; he believed the unity of effect the poem had on the reader should be the measure of its success. "It is to be hoped that common sense, in the time to come, will prefer deciding upon a work of Art rather by the impression it makes—by the effect it produces—than by the time it took to impress the effect, or by the amount of 'sustained effort' which had been found necessary in effecting the presentation," Poe wrote in his essay "Poetic Principle." Poe's focus on the poem's effect centered on how it sounded. By focusing on sound to the exclusion of ideas, however, Poe frequently wrote superficial poems; probably one of his worst was "The Bells" (1849). By looking at both criteria—how and why the poem was written and the effect it has had—we'll explore why the poem has not succeeded.

The genesis of "The Bells" tells us something about Poe's motivation for writing it. Poe complained to his friend Marie Louise Shew Houghton that he needed money and had to write a poem, yet had no subject to write about. Houghton suggested writing about bells, because they were ringing out-

## What Do I Read Next?



- Charles Baudelaire's collection of poems *Les Fleurs du Mal* (*The Flowers of Evil*) is considered one of the most important books of the French Symbolist movement and was the subject of a famous obscenity trial when it was published. The author's style shows the influence of Poe's work throughout. The 1982 translation by Richard Howard (published by David R. Godine, Inc.) is particularly well done.
- One of the most reliable and readable biographies of Poe is Kenneth Silverman's *Edgar A. Poe: Mournful and Never-Ending Remembrance*. Silverman's book is full of meticulously researched details, and his style makes this a pleasurable reading experience. He has also written a biography about Harry Houdini, another historical American associated with the supernatural.
- Edgar Allan Poe's essays about writers and writing have been collected and packaged under many different titles. The University of Nebraska's collection, *Literary Criticism of Edgar Allan Poe*, edited by Robert L. Hough and published in 1965, divides Poe's essays into three sections: one in which he explores the writing of poetry, using his own experience in producing "The Raven" as an example, and sections in which he gives sharp, brutal examinations to works of contemporary British and American authors.
- For insight into the tumultuous personal life and thoughts of the author, Harvard University Press has compiled *The Letters of Edgar Allan Poe*, published in 1948.

side. Poe scholar David Smith noted that whether the bells were fire bells or church bells is unknown. Houghton began the poem and Poe finished it. He later revised it and sold it to *Union* magazine for fifteen dollars, then revised it and sold it again for forty-five dollars. Writing poetry for money isn't wrong; poets and writers have always struggled to make a living from practicing their art. However, this incident does underscore the deliberate and calculated manner in which Poe made his poems. Composed to arouse the reader's sense of beauty through its use of rhyme, rhythm, and repetition, "The Bells" relied solely on technique to evoke its feeling.

When writers want to imitate the sound or the thing they describe they use a technique called onomatopoeia. "Buzz," for example, is a word that sounds like the action it represents. In this way the distance between the thing or action represented and the word or words used to represent it is shortened, and the reader, theoretically, is closer to experiencing that thing or action. Poe's use of words such as "tintinnabulation" and his repetition of words such as "bells" and "time" are onomatopoeic—as is the rhythm of the entire poem—

in the sense that they attempt to mimic the sounds of bells themselves.

In each stanza Poe chooses onomatopoeic words to describe the respective bells. For example, in the first stanza he rhymes the words "tinkle," "oversprinkle," and "twinkle" to suggest the frivolous, carefree days of winter sledding and to echo how sleigh bells sound. The use of end-rhymed words—so called because the sound that is duplicated is at the end of the lines—in conjunction with the use of consonance, that is, the repeated use of consonants in words with varying vowels (e.g., "runic rhyme" / "turbulency tells" / "melancholy menace") and the poem's spell-like rhythm are all meant to evoke in the reader a sense of strangeness and beauty, although not necessarily pleasurable feelings. Although the first and second stanzas attempt to echo the sound of sleigh bells and wedding bells (traditionally "happy" sounds), the third and fourth stanzas attempt to do the same with alarm bells (fire) and funeral bells. Beauty, then, for Poe is as much rooted in the terror and dread of everyday living as it is in the feelings conventionally associated with it. Of the relationship



*The poem reads like a rhyming exercise cooked up in a poetry workshop, and what we feel is manipulation."*

between poetry and beauty, Poe wrote in "Poetic Principle": "I make Beauty the province of the poem, simply because it is an obvious rule of Art that effects should be made to spring as directly as possible from their causes:—no one as yet having been weak enough to deny that the peculiar elevation in question is at least most readily attainable in the poem."

In both poems and stories, terror and dread were Poe's stock in trade. As a writer obsessed with chronicling the dark side of human experience, Poe attempted to evoke a sense of the supernatural and erase the line between dreams and waking life. Describing one of Poe's methods for creating the otherworldly, Roy Harvey Pearce wrote in his book *Continuity of American Poetry* that Poe first described a place, "but only so as to make locating it impossible, since the locale is set in a manner which cancels out its potential for being a locale." The "locale" in "The Bells" isn't so much a physical place as it is an emotional space in which readers are asked to respond in vastly different ways in a very short time. The unity of effect Poe aims for is one of dislocation, of the very longing for place and substance that eludes us in the poem. It is the longing itself and the frustration that we feel in being unable to obtain the object of that longing (whatever that may be) that Poe wants us to feel. Unfortunately, we do not. Instead, the poem reads more like a rhyming exercise cooked up in a poetry workshop, and what we feel is manipulation.

Many critics have similarly expressed frustration with "The Bells." Addressing the relation between the author's experience and the poem itself, George Saintsbury wrote in *Prefaces and Essays* that "the piece does not seem as if Poe had ever heard real old bells ... the subject was suggested to, not imagined by him." Such a comment suggests that although Poe wanted his poems to be read without consideration of his intention or effort in writing them, more often than not they weren't. In

his article "The Refrain in Poe's Poetry," Anthony Caputi, though admiring Poe's effort, nevertheless could not find beauty in a poem without ideas:

"The Bells" furnished final proof, if such proof is necessary, that ingenious technique never made poetry. Poe's purpose in the poem was apparently to synthesize the ambivalences of experience by underscoring heavily the multifaceted complexity of a single object. To accomplish this purpose, he mastered the most intricate patterns of rhyme, vowel-motives, and refrains to be found in his poetry. Beginning with the sleigh bells, he qualifies "bells" all down the line: first wedding bells, then alarm bells, and finally funeral bells. Each repetition of the "Bells, bells, bells" refrain theoretically folds in another area of experience ... "Bells" marks the high tide of Poe's ineffectuality ... [but] it also bears testimony to his immense gift for poetic conception.

Echoing the sentiments of T.S. Eliot, who called Poe "a gifted adolescent," Daniel Hoffman surmised in his book *Poe, Poe, Poe, Poe, Poe, Poe, Poe*, that Poe's poetry is primarily a poetry for teenagers who themselves inhabit a kind of dreamy netherworld between childhood and adulthood. Speaking of "The Bells," Hoffman wrote, "At fifteen one is ready, one needs, to be swept away by the sheer tintinnabulation of a poetry of sound, of incantatory spells, a poetry of hypnagogic trance which will possess one's whole consciousness with a tomtom and a chime." W. H. Auden, however, wrote in his *Forewards and Afterwards* that "The Bells", though much less interesting than 'Ulalume' (a well-known long poem of Poe's), is more successful because the subject is nothing but an excuse for onomatopoeic effects."

"The Bells" appears so frequently in poetry anthologies not because it is a great poem but because it exemplifies so well the sonic qualities poetry can have. If we read it in this light, as a demonstration of the various techniques poets have and can use to achieve effects, rather than as an example of good verse, we are reading it in the correct manner. If, however, we read "The Bells" as an instance of the best poetry has to offer (often the criteria upon which anthology selection is based), we do ourselves, and poetry, a disservice.

Source: Chris Semansky, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 1998.

### **Floyd Stovall**

*In the following excerpt, Stovall gives an overview of Poe's work, defending it against negative critics and noting that "in the final reckoning, [Poe's] weaknesses should not be charged against his strengths."*

Of the four collections of poems published by Poe, three appeared in his youth: *Tamerlane and Other Poems* in 1827, *Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane, and Minor Poems* in 1829, and *Poems* in 1831. The fourth volume, *The Raven and Other Poems*, did not appear until 1845, fourteen years later. The next edition, in which the poems after "The Raven" were collected for the first times, was that of Poe's literary executor, Rufus W. Griswold, in 1850. All of the poems written after 1831 were first published in periodicals, some of them quite obscure. As a rule they did not receive the meticulous care in editing which Poe might have been expected to give them under more favorable circumstances....

The dominant themes and patterns of Poe's poetry were mainly established by 1831, but it would be a mistake to suppose that his career as a poet was "essentially finished" [as suggested in Edward H. Davidson's *Poe: A Critical Study*] at that time.... He also published eleven short poems between 1831 and 1845, totaling 312 lines.... These poems may have less spontaneity and imaginative freshness than the earlier work, but they demonstrate a greater mastery of the technical problems of the poet's art. His twelfth poem after 1831, "The Raven," was published in the *Evening Mirror* near the end of January, 1845, as previously noted, and was widely reprinted in newspapers over the country. It gave a tremendous boost to Poe's reputation as a poet and was probably a factor in making possible the fourth edition of his poems, *The Raven and Other Poems*, published in November of the same year....

During the four years remaining after the publication of *The Raven and Other Poems*, Poe published a dozen poems.... [T]hree—"Ulalume," "The Bells," and "For Annie"—are surely the best of the late poems, and each of them is unique in theme and style. "Ulalume," though not pleasing to many readers, displays all of Poe's extraordinary virtuosity in the manipulation of sound, sense, meter, rhyme, and stanza arrangement. There is something of the grotesque in this poem, though less of it than in "The Raven," that lightens somewhat the prevailing gloom. The theme, as in "The Raven," is inconsolable grief for the death of a beloved one, and a story is suggested by the symbols employed, but the poet is careful not to reveal too much. "The Bells" is equally effective, though the effects produced are quite different. This poem is a quatrain projecting the four periods of a man's life—childhood, youth, middle age, and old age—through the quality of sounds produced on silver, gold, brass, and iron bells. The



*Later poems reflect primarily the analytical and constructive faculty."*

intensity of each stanza is in direct proportion to its length, and the progressive lengthening of the stanzas is achieved by increasing the number of repetitions without introducing any new words or ideas.

Readers who admire the mellifluous tones and movements of "The Sleeper" and "The City in the Sea" sometimes feel inclined to reject the contrived pyrotechnics of "The Raven" and "Ulalume." It is possible, however, to defend both types of poetry, perhaps to reconcile them, as representing the two sides of Poe's genius. The early poems, even after revision, were dominated by the conceptual and imaginative faculty of the mind, whereas the later poems reflect primarily the analytical and constructive faculty. Poe believed that both faculties are essential to the poet, as they are likewise essential to the scientist, for they are complementary powers of any well-balanced mind. In the early poems images rise spontaneously and find their proper expression in language that naturally falls into musical patterns attuned to feeling: in the later ones the images rise with equal spontaneity, but they are seized by the constructive mind at once and subject to the craftsman's skill, so that they issue in language permeated more by ideas than by feeling....

Poe's poems, like his tales, are notable for their original conceptions and for the technical perfection of their execution. His ear was excellent; such irregularities of meter and discordant collocations as may be found in the late poems were intentional and served a purpose more important, at the moment, than pleasing the senses. But Poe could write mellifluous verse in his as well as in his early years, as witness "The Bells" and "Annabel Lee." Like [Samuel Taylor] Coleridge, he found music essential to poetry, and in the "Letter to B——," the prefatory essay to *Poems*, 1831, which was his earliest venture in prose criticism, he defined poetry as music combined with a pleasurable idea. There is no question as to the musical quality of his poetry. Some critics, however, have complained of



*There is no question as to the musical quality of his poetry. Some critics, however, have complained of the absence of ideas."*

the absence of ideas. In 1909 W. C. Brownwell said [in his *American Prose Masters*] of all of Poe's writings: "They lack substance. Literature is more than an art." In our time, T.S. Eliot has called Poe a gifted adolescent, and Allen Tate has said that his perceptual powers remained undeveloped. There is a certain amount of truth in all of these opinions; but the faults they adduce, if they exist, should be seen in the proper perspective. This perspective is provided by Poe's theory of the nature of poetry and of the function of the poet. The poet's truth is an intuition, and excitement of the soul that he called the Poetic Sentiment, and it is the product not of rational thought but the contemplation of beauty. The only substance of beauty is form. A rational construction, such as his prose poem "Eureka" or his tales of ratiocination, may have beauty, but that beauty subsists in the consistency, the harmonious relationship, of the ideas, not in the ideas themselves.

Poe's poems can be said to lack substance only if the theory which they exemplify is wrong. If his theory is right, or if we accept that part of it which concerns the relation of beauty and truth, we must admit that his poems have the true substance of art in their power of inducing intuitions of truth in the responsive reader. Such truths are untranslatable—they cannot be expressed in terms of the intellect or of the moral sense—but they are nonetheless real to all who accept truth and beauty as of one essence. Although exponents of the doctrine of "art for art" cannot rightly claim Poe as their prophet, they may well find comfort in his poetry as in his poetic theory. Some modern poets might, in all candor, confess a great indebtedness to Poe than they have been inclined to do. Poe was surely among the first theorists to affirm that a poem's primary value is in itself, not in what it tells us about something, whether that something be a moral or intellectual truth or some revelation

of the poet himself. A poem is not a document, but a total creation; it is not a part of a world only, but a world in itself. When these matters are better understood, Poe's poetry may be more highly estimated.

Of all American writers, critics have found Poe the most difficult to categorize in a phrase. Longfellow has been depreciated as a genial sentimentalist, Emerson tolerated as a hopeful idealist, Hawthorne appreciated as a physician of souls, and Whitman hailed as a prophet of the new Eden. But Poe was neither genial nor hopeful, and he grew to look skeptically on Edens here or hereafter. In his high regard for art he was akin to Hawthorne, and in his speculative intellect he had something in common with Melville; but where in nineteenth-century America will one meet with the equal of his critical acumen, his disciplined narrative skill, or his sure feeling for verbal sounds and rhythms? On the other hand, no other American writer of the first rank lent his talent to weaker performances than some of his carping book review or his more grotesque attempts at humor. Three or four of his poems addressed to literary ladies do but slight credit to their author. His late poems, with their ingenious and complicated structure, have been said to "smell of the lamp." But Poe should be judged objectively on positive, not negative, evidence; in the final reckoning, his weaknesses should not be charged against his strength. One does not arrive at the true worth of a literary artists by taking an average of his work.

Perhaps Poe's greatest single literary virtue is his originality. Each of his best poems and tales, as I have said, is unique in its kind. He was not an assembly-line creator. And though his critical ideas may be largely derivative, he made them his own, enlarged them, and used them well to his own purposes. He wrote a dozen poems and nearly as many tales that approach artistic perfection. His tales, however contrived, are vivid, and the strange beauty of his poems is inimitable. Wherein lies his true genius? That would be hard to say with conviction. Any just estimate of his work must take into account his total achievement in the three fields of criticism, fiction, and poetry. In his own mind, and in the minds of a good many, though probably a minority, of his critics, he was a poet first of all and above all else. It is possible that he made his most enduring contribution to literature in the creation of a few unforgettable poems.

**Source:** Introduction to *The Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* by Edgar Allan Poe, edited by Floyd Stovall. The University Press of Virginia, 1965. pp. xix-xxxvii.



## Sources

- Auden, W. H., "Edgar Allan Poe," in his *Forewords and Afterwords*, edited by Edward Mendelson, Random House, 1973, pp. 209-20.
- Buranelli, Vincent, in his *Edgar Allan Poe*, Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1961, 157 p.
- Caputi, Anthony, "The Refrain in Poe's Poetry," in *American Literature*, Vol. XXV, No. 2, May 1953, pp. 169-78.
- Daniel, John Moncure, "Review," in *Edgar Allan Poe: The Critical Heritage*, edited by I. M. Walker, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986, pp. 356-75.
- Hoffman, Daniel, *Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1972.
- Mason, Germaine, *A Concise Survey of French Literature*, Totawa, NJ: Littlefield, Adams & Co., 1966.
- Pearce, Roy Harvey, "American Renaissance: The Poet as Simple, Separate Person," in his *Continuity of American Poetry*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961.
- Peterson, Charles J., "Mr. Poe's Last Poem," in *Edgar Allan Poe: The Critical Heritage*, edited by I. M. Walker, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986, pp. 319-21.
- Poe, Edgar Allan, "The Poetic Principle," in *Poems and Essays on Poetry*, edited by C. H. Sisson, Manchester, UK: Carcenet Press, 1995.
- Saintsbury, George, "Edgar Allan Poe," in his *Prefaces and Essays*, edited by Oliver Elton, MacMillan & Co., 1933, pp. 314-23.
- Smith, Dave, *The Essential Poe*. New York: The Ecco Press, 1991.
- Stovall, Floyd, *Edgar Poe the Poet: Essays New and Old on the Man and His Work*, University Press of Virginia, 1969.

## For Further Study

Buranelli, Vincent, *Edgar Allan Poe*, second edition, Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1977.

Buranelli takes a close, careful look at Poe's place in literary history. "The Bells" is analyzed briefly and found to be better than its reputation suggests.

Shaw, George Bernard, "Edgar Allan Poe," in *Critical Essays on Edgar Allan Poe*, edited by Eric W. Carlson, Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1987, pp. 86-90.

In an essay originally published in 1909, Shaw, one of this century's great playwrights, examines the reasons British and American literature were never able to find a place for Poe.

# Chicago

*Carl Sandburg*  
1916

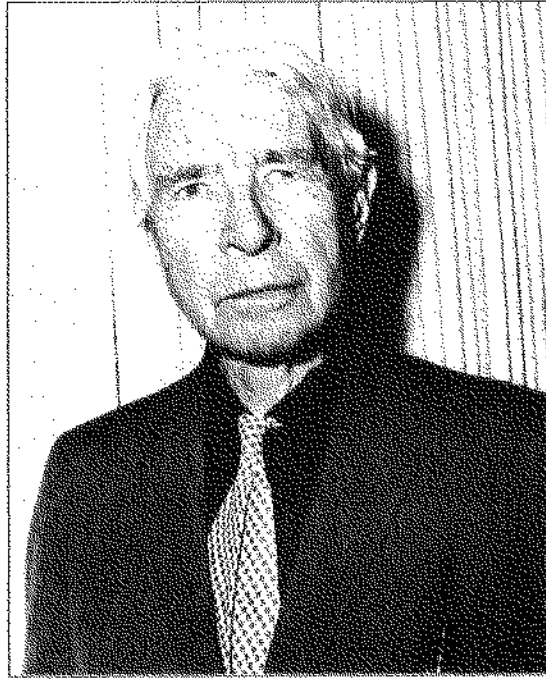
Carl Sandburg's first major volume of poems, *Chicago Poems*, published in 1916, offered the poem "Chicago," which would go on to be one of the most famous poems that Sandburg wrote. It is a classic example of his form and subject as it uses free verse to reveal, explore, and celebrate the lives of common people. The themes of hard work, suffering, and survival are presented alongside those of laughter and youth with an almost brutal honesty that Sandburg extracted from the everyday language he listened to so closely throughout his life. The opening lines set the poem apart from much of the poetry of the time with "Hog Butcher of the World," and the list of epithets that follow. Sandburg's poetry relied on themes of common, daily life in the same way that the poems of Walt Whitman had. Using a major urban landscape as a focus, the speaker goes on to mention the harsh yet vibrant aspects of American progress. There is violence and hunger in the city, and also the pride of a city so alive. The poem then offers another list, descriptions of work actions, and the line "Building, breaking, rebuilding" which could be seen to represent the cyclical nature of production and consumption in modern industrial life. The poem finishes with a definite emphasis on the experience of laughter, which offers another side of America often found in Sandburg's poetry—that of a country worthy of joyous celebration and livelihood in the face of hardship and progress.



## Author Biography

Sandburg was born in 1878, one of seven children of hardworking, conservative Swedish immigrants in Galesburg, Illinois. Despite his interest in reading and writing, Sandburg was forced to leave school at age thirteen to help supplement the family income. He held a number of odd jobs, including work as a milk delivery boy, a barber shop porter, and an apprentice tinsmith. Looking for adventure, Sandburg spent three-and-a-half months traveling around the country via railroad at age nineteen. In 1898 he volunteered for service in the Spanish-American War and was stationed in Puerto Rico. Upon his discharge he enrolled at Lombard College in Galesburg and studied there for four years. He left in 1902 before graduating and held a number of jobs before finding his niche as a writer. In 1908 he married Lillian Paula Steichen, sister of photographer Edward Steichen, and eventually fathered three daughters.

Sandburg finally became a recognized writer in 1914 when *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* published six of his poems. In addition to poetry, Sandburg wrote a number of books—from children's stories to biographies. He won the Pulitzer Prize twice, once (in history) in 1939 for *Abraham Lincoln: The War Years* (a detailed work larger than the collected writings of Shakespeare) and again in 1951 for *Complete Poems* (1950), a cumulation of his six previous volumes of poetry. Sandburg wrote his final book of poetry at age 85 and died four years later, in 1967, at his home in Flat Rock, North Carolina, where he and his family had lived since 1945.



Carl Sandburg

## Poem Text

Hog Butcher for the World,  
Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat,  
Player with Railroads and the Nation's Freight  
Handler;  
Stormy, husky, brawling,  
City of the Big Shoulders:

They tell me you are wicked and I believe them,  
for I have seen your painted women under  
the gas lamps luring the farm boys.

And they tell me you are crooked and I answer:  
Yes, it is true I have seen the gunman kill  
and go free to kill again.

And they tell me you are brutal and my reply is:  
On the faces of women and children I have  
seen the marks of wanton hunger.

And having answered so I turn once more to those  
who sneer at this my city, and I give them  
back the sneer and say to them:

Come and show me another city with lifted head  
singing so proud to be alive and coarse and  
strong and cunning.

Flinging magnetic curses amid the toil of piling job  
on job, here is a tall bold slugger set vivid  
against the little soft cities;

Fierce as a dog with tongue lapping for action,  
cunning as a savage pitted against the  
wilderness,

Bareheaded,  
Shoveling,  
Wrecking,  
Planning,  
Building, breaking, rebuilding,

Under the smoke, dust all over his mouth, laughing  
with white teeth,

Under the terrible burden of destiny laughing as a  
young man laughs,

Laughing even as an ignorant fighter laughs who  
has never lost a battle,

Bragging and laughing that under his wrist is the  
pulse, and under his ribs the heart of the  
people.

Laughing!

Laughing the stormy, husky, brawling laughter of  
Youth, half-naked, sweating, proud to be  
Hog Butcher, Tool Maker, Stacker of  
Wheat, Player with Railroads and Freight  
Handler to the Nation.

## Media Adaptations



- *The Poetry of Carl Sandburg*, read by Melissa Manchester, Carl Reiner, Burt Reynolds, Jean Smart and others was released on audio cassette by Dove Audio in 1996.
- An audio cassette titled *A Lincoln Album* is available through Caedmon's "Voices in Time" series.
- A record titled *Carl Sandburg Sings His American Songbook* was released by Caedmon in 1967.
- Decca released the album *Carl Sandburg Reads the Poems of Carl Sandburg* in 1957.

### Poem Summary

#### Lines 1-5:

Sandburg begins the poem with a list of names or epithets for the city that reflects its gritty, earthy, tough spirit. In the early twentieth century Chicago was a center for the industries Sandburg mentions. In these lines the speaker personifies the city by likening it to a "Stormy, husky, brawling" worker, with "Big Shoulders." This list also evokes the human workers who actually perform the work associated with these industries, thus establishing a link between the city and its inhabitants, and beginning a process of merging human qualities with the abstract "idea" of the city. In addition, by being identified with the city, each person seems to represent a combination of the individual and the universal. This is consistent with Sandburg's desire to elevate the working people to a level of great importance and claim them to be essential elements of larger social organizations.

#### Lines 6-8:

In these lines the speaker addresses a series of criticisms of the city followed by concrete images from the speaker's own experience which illustrate the criticisms. The city's wickedness is demonstrated by its prostitutes that corrupt innocent boys, its

crookedness by killers that go unpunished, and its brutality by the hunger seen in the faces of its women and children. Here the speaker advances the personification of the city begun in the first stanza by directly addressing it as "you" and also by attributing the human qualities of wickedness, crookedness, and brutality to it. At this point in the poem Sandburg shifts to much longer lines and a more lyrical use of language, partially to mimic the conversational language of the direct address, but also as a way to increase the tempo and energy of the lines.

Notice how Sandburg has used rhetorical strategies to help hold lines 6-8 together. First, he has used parallelism by having each set of two lines begin with a criticism, and then offers an image to illustrate it. He also begins the first line of each set of two (lines 6, 8, and 10) with almost the same phrase: "they tell me..." This repetition of a phrase at the beginning of lines is called anaphora, and as well as providing a certain organization to a poem it can create a smoother, more musical sound.

#### Line 9:

At this point, while not breaking the form of long lines, the poem shifts from criticism of the city to a defense. The speaker of the poem, having admitted the presence of negative elements, prepares to respond to "those who sneer," or the anonymous critics of the city.

#### Line 10:

Here the speaker continues the double reference to the "you" of the poem, describing it as a "city and lifted head," as a town and as a person. This is then followed by a number of positive adjectives with which the speaker attempts to balance or even override whatever negative conditions may exist in America's modern cities. It is implied that the negative conditions are the result of being alive, of living, and also that the city and its people are "strong and cunning" enough to survive and be proud.

#### Line 11:

Although struggling with work and toil, the speaker asserts that Chicago, "tall and bold against the little soft cities," is better than smaller, perhaps kinder cities. This also inverts the comparison earlier in the stanza where the city was "wicked" and "brutal" to its citizens.

#### Line 12:

As a last gesture before the poem moves back to a focused, short-lined list, the speaker reinforces the resourcefulness and survival abilities of the city

in the face of hardship. This is done with the use of simile, a poetic technique that compares two unlike things to offer further insight or description. In the example here, Chicago is compared to a wild dog struggling for survival, relying on his instincts to keep him alive.

### **Lines 13-17:**

Here Sandburg shifts back to the list form which gives particular emphasis to the words in these lines and also slows the pace of the poem. This list describes the city, drawing a comparison to a laborer. As in the first stanza the description of the city reflects all of the individuals who make up the city. This list might also be taken as a way of seeing the circular nature of modern, industrial America as it moves from “building,” to “breaking,” and then back to “rebuilding,” as well as the cycle of each individual as he or she works, encounters hardship, and carries on through it to better times.

### **Lines 18-21:**

With line 18 the poem turns toward the sentiment that will take it to its end. This is a feeling of celebration—even in the fatigue and dirt of work—found in the universal symbol of laughter. Again the lines are extended as the poem reinvokes the youthful energy and joy found even “Under the terrible burden of destiny.” To emphasize his point, Sandburg uses the repetition of the word “laughter” as it appears in some form nine times from this line to the end of the poem. It is this celebration of people’s ability to overcome nature’s hardship, to laugh and enjoy life despite it, that made Sandburg known as a poet of the people. Notice too how in line 21 the speaker of the poem synthesizes the individual and the communal by claiming that under the city’s ribs lies “the heart of the people.” This could be seen as a unifying gesture in the same way that the earlier list of laborers was melded into a collective city.

### **Line 22:**

In one final attempt to focus attention on celebration, and again to alter the pace of the lines just before its conclusion, Sandburg uses another one-word line and this time indents the line further than those previous. This is a good example of how free verse uses form to denote pacing and give emphasis to certain lines or words within the poem.

### **Line 23:**

In the final line the poem continues with this concept of laughter, enforcing the positive tone of

the ending of the poem. The laughter leads into a list of epithets almost exactly like that at the beginning of the poem. This technique provides a certain closure to the poem, ending back where it started. This time, the speaker makes it clear that Chicago is “proud” of what it is. Here also, the list of epithets is run in—one right after another—rather than being broken up into shorter lines as in the first stanza. One argument for this technique might be to lead the reader to the poem’s ending with a constant rhythm and pace.

## **Themes**

### **Strength and Weakness**

This poem praises the city of Chicago for its power and vitality, using sharp, powerful, vital words to make the reader experience the writer’s idea. The images in the first stanza, as well as the isolated words in the second (“bareheaded,” “shoveling,” etc.) would not generally be considered flattering, but they are so frequent, so unrelenting, that they serve to make the reader more aware of the strength that is required for a brutal city to survive. Left unexamined is the other standard component of brutality, the absence of intellect, even though intellectualism is usually associated with poetry. Sandburg takes us back to a more primitive perspective. It is a point of view we see more frequently in ancient poetry, from times when civilization was just being organized; Sandburg’s idea of the city hearkens back to *The Iliad* or the Bible’s Old Testament. The poet provides us with an explanation for why a city needs to be strong with the image of “a savage pitted against the wilderness”: if the world at large is seen as a wilderness, then it would certainly take a city of great physical strength to hold its nastier aspects at bay. This point is made more explicitly when the poem mentions “the little soft cities” that surround Chicago and set it off. From an urban perspective, the small farm towns of the American Midwest are seen as places of naive, passive victims just ready to fall prey to disasters—both natural and social. In 1914, when the population was beginning its great shift from rural to urban life, the strength of cities must have stirred strong emotions. This would, in part, have accounted for why such a shift occurred and why America is predominantly urban today. Ironically, today’s city dwellers find the urban life threatening, not protective, and they look nostalgically at “weak” small-town life for its civility.

## Topics for Further Study



- The tone of pride in Sandburg's poem has remained part of the city of Chicago's image. Write a poem to the town or city you live in, retaining the tone that Sandburg used.
- Compare this poem to Walt Whitman's "I Hear America Singing," also included in this volume of *Poetry for Students*. What similarities are there in style? In images? How do you think these elements help an author write about a place?
- Do you think the things Sandburg says about Chicago are true about most big cities, or does each city have its own particular character?

### Moral Corruption

The opening lines of this poem are delivered with a lofty tone of reverence, even though the specific graces that are attributed to Chicago—from hog butchering to big shoulders—are not the sort of features that usually elicit praise. Having established the working-class ethos that he will use to measure the city's greatness, Sandburg goes on to directly address the charges of moral corruption that get pinned on large urban centers. The charge of wickedness he accepts without offering any justification, but in his reply he makes a point of mentioning the "farm boys" who are presented as victims of the "painted ladies," but who are also outsiders: the poem seems to suggest that at least some of the blame for this seduction lies with the boys, for coming to the city in the first place. His second response is even more unapologetic: there is no way to accept or justify murder, and in the case he states it is even more horrible because the killers are not repentant (since they do it again), yet are set free due to crookedness. There is nothing in either the individual's crime or society's response to it to soften or mitigate the evilness. In the third example, though, Sandburg's reply is specifically presented to suggest a whole world of psychological insight. As before, he does not pretend that the accusation, in this case brutality, is not true. In-

stead, he attributes its root cause to innocence. The hungry women and children may be victims of the city's brutality, but their struggle to survive is just as likely brutality's root cause. From that point on, the poem links struggle with glory, indicating that moral compromise is a necessary step on the path to that glory.

### Pride

The adjectives that the poem applies to Chicago tell the whole story: "proud," "coarse," "strong," "cunning," "fierce," and even the quick, unnecessary mention that the teeth of the city's personification are "white." The phrase "this my city" tells us not only the facts, but also about Sandburg's emotional relationship with Chicago: underlying any conceptual points that this poem is trying to make about Chicago is the poet's admission that the subject is personal. He holds off until the middle of the poem to make this bond clear, but for the first half we know that we are supposed to admire the city, even with its wickedness, crookedness, and brutality. Sandburg is able to steer the reader's emotions in the beginning of the poem because of his controlled language. Once it is called his city, we can see that the speaker of the poem identifies himself with Chicago, and so it is easy to see why he has wanted us to see through the city's darker aspects to its greatness.

Given the oppressive labor and moral corruption associated with the day-to-day operations of a big city, it is reasonable to ask why Chicago is shown, in the end, so proud of itself. The key is in the poem's one isolated word, "laughing." Laughter absorbs indignation and horror, allowing the city to concentrate upon its accomplishments. Sandburg presents the city's faults in this poem, but he allows the city to remain untouched by its own faults: the pride the city feels for itself might be based on ignorance, but the poet still admires it.

### Style

"Chicago," is written in free verse, which means that it conforms to neither a particular meter nor rhyme scheme. It is a style that caused many people difficulty in recognizing works like "Chicago" as poems. One reason Sandburg might have chosen to break from traditional form is that he wanted to speak in the language of the common people, which does not come in careful, predictable cadence. Sandburg felt that common speech had its

own particular music and he wanted to capture it. This would allow him to offer his poems back to the people in a language familiar to them. He also believed that the poems could more accurately represent the American experience with extended lines that sprawl and stretch out like the American landscape itself. In "Chicago" he alternates between a list form:

Bareheaded,  
Shoveling,  
Wrecking,  
Planning,

and more extended lines such as this:

Laughing the stormy, husky, brawling laughter of  
Youth, half-naked, sweating, proud to be  
Hog Butcher, Tool Maker, Stacker of  
Wheat, Player with Railroads and Freight  
Handler to the Nation.

This shift of form gives the poem moments of focus and brevity, and then moments of expansive breadth and energy, both of which Sandburg wanted to express in his poetry.

### *Historical Context*

The Chicago that Sandburg moved into in 1905 was a prime example of the growing American industrial town that was starting to find out how the economic growth of the late nineteenth century would affect it. Across the nation, improvements in construction, transportation, and communications drew people from the country to great manufacturing cities in the Northeast and Midwest, including Pittsburgh, Detroit, and Cleveland. (After the decline of the manufacturing era, these cities that came to be known as comprising the "Rust Belt" because they were built of steel and were almost obsolete.) Adding to the shift of the U.S. population was the greatest surge in immigration in the history of America. Between 1880 and 1920, for instance, more than 20 million immigrants arrived from Europe. This increase in the labor supply helped with the growth of industry, and large industries attracted people looking for jobs to the cities. There were not, however, enough jobs to absorb all of the workers who arrived, and so the cities were jammed with unemployed people, the high crime rate that accompanies poverty, and the unsanitary conditions that result from overcrowding people into tenements and ghettos. Labor unions, which had existed in America since the middle of the nineteenth century, were regaining the public's support, and

they enjoyed increased negotiating power after 1910, when the flood of cheap labor from immigrants slowed. Workers who were tired of being taken for granted and who were influenced by the political philosophy of Karl Marx joined political parties that vocally and sometimes violently opposed the capitalist structure of government. This atmosphere of poverty, destitution, and social chaos was a breeding ground for crime, and as city government organized so did its evil alter ego, the crime syndicate. In Chicago, organized crime became so prominent in the 1920s that the city became known, even in remote corners of the world, for its criminal activities.

Chicago provided a prime example of the growing pains suffered by major American cities. Its relative newness (although the city had been incorporated in 1835, the famous Chicago fire of 1871 had led to a new beginning), its size, and its extensive immigrant population made it an ideal place for writers to study the phenomenon of modern urban life. For example, Chicago was the home of Hull House, the original prototype of the settlement house. Established in 1889 through the efforts of social reformers, most notably Jane Addams, Hull House provided various forms of support for the city's underprivileged: it gave housing and financial assistance to the unemployed; it ran special programs for juveniles, to help combat delinquency; it held classes and provided referrals for newly arrived immigrants. With the unending efforts of Ms. Addams, settlement homes modeled on Hull House sprang up around the country in the early decades of this century. She was Hull House's resident head from its inception in 1889 until her death in 1935, as well as being president of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom from 1919 to 1935, and one of the founders of the American Civil Liberties Union in 1920.

Chicago was also a center for the labor movement that was growing both in the nation and around the world. One of history's most famous confrontations between workers and authorities took place at the McCormick reaper plant in Chicago in 1886. After police tried to break up a protest meeting during the strike, a bomb was thrown into the crowd, killing workers and policemen alike. Eight of the protest's leaders were arrested, tried, and found guilty, even though the source of the bomb was never identified. Rather than intimidating union organizers, the jailing of the Haymarket protest leaders inspired greater resistance to the government's unrestrained support of business: to this day, the decision remains a mon-

## Compare & Contrast

- **1916:** "I believe that the business of neutrality is over," President Woodrow Wilson said in October. "The nature of modern war leaves no state untouched." The next year America entered World War I.

**1941:** Although many European nations were already involved in World War II, the United States did not become involved until U.S. territory at Pearl Harbor was directly attacked.

**1991:** More than 60 nations from around the world gathered together to oppose Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, a key supplier of the world's petroleum.

**Today:** Various regional conflicts around the world bring multinational peacekeeping forces together to help stabilize the situations.

- **1916:** Germany conducted 41 air raids by zeppelin against England, as World War I continued.

**Today:** American scientist have been working fervently without much success to develop the

Star Wars initiative, which is supposed to stop long-range missiles from reaching the United States by shooting them down from space.

- **1916:** The United States Supreme Court upheld laws banning the sale and use of opium products.

**Today:** After battling the flow of drugs into the country for decades, some social theorists have suggest legalizing the less dangerous ones, ending the profit in criminal trafficking and using the subsequent tax revenues to treat addicts.

- **1916:** An act of Congress created the National Parks Service to preserve millions of acres of forest land for the enjoyment of future generations.

**Today:** With the population of the United States increasing at an unprecedented rate, the argument between environmentalists who want to preserve forests and developers who think land should be used for industry and construction is becoming increasingly heated.

ument to suppression of the Constitutional right to free speech. Chicago was also the site of the historic strike against the Pullman company in 1894, which led to a resurgence of union activity in this country. This strike made a national hero of strike organizer Eugene V. Debs, a Chicago labor leader who went on to help organize the Industrial Workers of the World in 1905. A composite of trade unions and socialist groups, the I.W.W. (or "Wobblies") supported the Marxist theory of struggle between workers and capitalists. In 1897 Debs organized the Social Democratic Party of America. Carl Sandburg met the wife he was married to for 59 years at a Social Democratic party meeting, and his first job in Chicago in 1912 was for *The Daily Socialist*. Between 1900 and 1920, Eugene Debs unsuccessfully ran for president of the United States five times.

In addition to being a center for the study of urban poverty and for the labor movement, Chicago was also a crime capital in Sandburg's day. Its reputation was much worse than other large cities, and it became so notorious that in the 1920s the town was synonymous with gangster activity. By 1919, organized crime in Chicago was so powerful that gangsters were able to bribe eight members of the Chicago White Sox baseball team to lose the world series; this was deemed the Black Sox Scandal. At the time, various organized crime syndicates vied for control of gambling and prostitution in Chicago, with the Johnny Terrio gang foremost among them. The image that the city has been known for worldwide, of gangsters with tommy guns killing each other in the streets, started with Prohibition, a ban on liquor that began on midnight, January 16, 1920. A byproduct of this legislated ban was the luring



of vicious criminals toward the high profits available from bootlegging (selling illegal liquor). Famed crime figure Al Capone came to Chicago in 1920 and took over control of the Terrio gang in 1925. In 1929 Capone took over all organized crime activity in Chicago by killing off his competition in the legendary St. Valentine's Day massacre.

### Critical Overview

"Chicago," was possibly Carl Sandburg's most famous poem. Like much of his other work, its free form, folk subject matter, and depiction of the American landscape and its people, helped, in the words of Herbert Mitgang, "to free poetry from the old strictures." This style is admittedly similar to that of Walt Whitman. Sandburg presented the tales and talk of the American people, which, according to Daniel Hoffmann, resulted from "his ear for a good yarn, his sense of revealing detail, [and] his empathy for folk wisdom." This all came together in 1916 in the volume *The Chicago Poems*. Louis Untermeyer in *The Dial* described this collection as being "so determined to worship ruggedness that one could hear [Sandburg's] adjectives strain to achieve a physical strength of their own." This emphasis on physicality and strength was always a part of Sandburg's work, as it focused on the people who were the heart of his democratic sensibility.

Sandburg's popularity and success as a voice for the American people did not go without criticism. Possibly one of the strongest claims made against his poetry came from another revered, distinctly American poet, William Carlos Williams. Although Williams thought "Chicago" to be a "brilliantly successful poem," he went on to say in his essay "Carl Sandburg's Complete Poems" that "technically the poems [in the collection] reveal no initiative whatever other than their formlessness; there is no motivating spirit held in the front of the mind to control them." This leaves the bulk of the poems, Williams then concludes, to be "an aimless series of random and repetitious gestures." Daniel Hoffmann responded to this criticism by arguing that even if the poems did lack the imaginative, unifying vision of Whitman or Williams, Sandburg still managed to create an individual style, one based, in Hoffmann's words, "on the faith that poetry is a quality of life itself."

### Criticism

#### Sean Robisch

*Sean Robisch holds a Ph.D. in American Literature from Purdue University and has taught composition and literature for eight years. In the essay below, Robisch examines the often contradictory images Sandburg applies to Chicago, complimenting the city's industry on one hand and criticizing working conditions on the other:*

At least one bridge in Illinois has its spans inscribed with lines from Carl Sandburg's poetry. A good way to read Sandburg is standing in a cornfield with the skyline of Chicago to the north, distant pillars of billowing smokestacks beyond the farms, and finding a line that was painted onto the bridge for a dedication ceremony. The best bridge to choose would be one in disrepair, one replaced by a highway suspension bridge up the river, because Sandburg's best work masks what appears to be a simple anthem or dedication. Often with great poems the superficial read gives us one message, while re-reading and considering the tangles, the untidiness of verses, may leave us with a touch of suspicion. So, in time, we return to the work, and try to work the knots, to abandon our expectations about neatness, to discover that the poet might have wanted us to grapple with an idea that lesser language would have called a foregone conclusion. This is Sandburg's expertise, and it is no better articulated than in "Chicago."

After moving with his wife Lillian (Paula) Steichen and their first child to Chicago, Sandburg worked as a journalist for several newspapers, writing poems all the while and receiving rejection slips, until he composed some "Chicago poems" while working for a trade magazine. Two of the papers that had employed him had socialist political agendas, and Sandburg was a strong proponent of their ideals during the era of American modernism, when populism and socialist activism had great political currency and helped create better working conditions for those under the industrial wheel. Sandburg's poetry is filled with praise for the laborer; it lacks references to college professors, chief executive officers, or the landed gentry. The poem's first stanza is written as a formal greeting, ending with a colon, like a letter to the editor. This championship of the blue-collar worker is one of the characteristics which causes critics to compare Sandburg's work to Walt Whitman's.

That championship has also often tempted readers to appropriate Sandburg as a champion of

## What Do I Read Next?



- Nelson Algren was well-known writer among writers, but too few people remember his works today. He wrote about the street life in Chicago that Sandburg praises in this poem, including the workers, the prostitutes, and the small-time crooks. His book *Chicago: City on the Make*, most recently reprinted in 1983, takes the same stance of pride in corruption and survival that Sandburg took.
- To find out what life in Chicago was like for normal people who seldom come in contact with literature, the authoritative source is Studs Turkel's *Division Street: America*. Turkel, now in his eighties, is considered the dean of Chicago writers, and his books of interviews with regular people from all walks of life, such as this one, *Working*, and *The Good War*, have received international praise and scholarly attention.
- The influence of Walt Whitman's style on this poem is obvious to anyone who has read both poets. Whitman's finest work is the book *Leaves of Grass*, which, like "Chicago," draws our attention to the greatness of common people. Whitman revised the book often over the course of almost forty years, but the 1997 Doubleday edition is safely authoritative, taking most of its poems from the 1892 "deathbed" revision.
- To get a sense of how horrible the conditions for workers could be in large cities early in the twentieth century, read Upton Sinclair's classic, *The Jungle*. Set among Lithuanian immigrants working at the Chicago stockyards, this 1906 novel is based on an actual 1904 strike at "the yards." Sinclair's reputation as a social crusader was built upon this novel and lasted until his death in 1968. This book is continually in print: try to find an edition with the author's 1946 introduction.

industry. In his book *America's Literary Revolt*, Michael Yatron refutes such a position; Sandburg thought the city "a hell-hole, but it is the people of this milieu who are heroic figures—because Sandburg believed in them with mystic faith." A close look at "Chicago" reveals how the poet may bait us into cheering, then quickly admonish us for too quickly unfurling our flags. The first line is an excellent example of one of the principle devices at work in the poem—the dubious compliment. "Hog Butcher" may be merely a fact of the city's booming turn-of-the-century slaughterhouse business, but it certainly does not constitute the kind of slogan that would entice people to move to Chicago. And why wouldn't hog butchery, an occupation employing thousands of workers, be considered an occupation worth compliment? Sandburg immediately responds by dignifying the title with global importance. The city may be a hog butcher, but for the whole world. We see the technique again when the city is addressed as a "Player" with railroads. This indicates power, that

Chicago may move railroads around as a child might, "Building, breaking, rebuilding." Yet "Player" could also be pejorative, implying that a real railroad is hardly a toy, and is too clumsily handled here. In such titles as "Hog Butcher for the World," and "Player with Railroads" we have the paradigm of the entire poem, the implicit question of whether Sandburg is glorifying the city or insulting it. The blue-collar titles our narrator values beg us to find the humanity in the metropolis.

When Sandburg brought the first set of Chicago poems to Harriet Monroe at *Poetry* magazine, he probably expected one more rejection. What he received instead was not only publication, but an award for producing the best of the magazine's poems that year. During those months after the first appearance of his poems, Sandburg received some harsh reviews, particularly from *The Dial*, a magazine competing with Monroe's *Poetry*. The criticism of "Chicago" in particular echoed Monroe's first reaction, but did not share her deeper considerations. Critics thought the poem to be

clumsy, vulgar, metrically inferior and too prosaic. These had been criticisms of Whitman during his time as well, and Monroe, initially startled by such elements in the poem, decided that Sandburg's work was part of the wake-up call American poetry needed. Monroe became one of the many women in Sandburg's life who supported his experimentation with identity, language, and presentation, and it was she who introduced him to one of the most important artists' communities in American history.

Even after Whitman shook up the literary world, poetry was still largely romantic and formalist, controlled by an effete and largely old-guard male constituency. What we now think of as literary modernism would contest that role, freeing poets to pursue inventive forms. Sandburg was hardly the most experimental of the writers to whom Monroe introduced him: they included Ezra Pound, H.D., and Amy Lowell. Any change in Sandburg's politics or ideals would remain imperceptible throughout his writing life, which was long, and his poetry would eventually be eclipsed by other modernists. But "Chicago" remains one of the great works to connect midwestern urbanism to a broad and complex view of people at work, and was one of the first poems to bring modernism into the national consciousness.

Just as Emerson had called for a national poet to represent an American language and Whitman responded, around the turn of the twentieth century so too did Edward Arlington Robinson and Harriet Monroe call for a poet to contest the conventions of formalism and perpetuate a dynamic language. Sandburg was among the first to respond. Written under the influence of the Native American poetry he had been reading at the time, "Chicago" ironically jolted American formalism with its borrowings from the only truly indigenous literature of the country. He was a multi-faceted writer, not merely a hobbyist in other genres. He won his first Pulitzer Prize not for poetry, but for a six-volume history of Abraham Lincoln that heavily influenced much of his work to follow. He judged Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt along with Clarence Darrow and Illinois Governor John Peter Altgeld according to their action on behalf of the oppressed rather than by their party affiliations. Sandburg's conclusions about leaders, as about cities, were built on what those entities produced, not in machinery, but in humanity.

Critic Mark Van Doren cited a dark humor as one of Sandburg's chief poetic virtues, a trait that



*Late in the poem we see the city take a human shape, appearing like a Cheshire cat—the white teeth of a man laughing through smoke and dust. He laughs in ignorance; he has never lost a battle, and this is his greatness, so far his destiny.*

enabled him to see what Thomas Carlyle called "what is beneath him and about him as well as what is above him," and a trait that separated Sandburg from Whitman. Sandburg used his wit to depict the person who would laugh regally through economic hardship, though that laughter might be grim, even mistaken. In this light, "Chicago" succeeds in avoiding overt propaganda by investing it with clever subtleties, unlike many other Sandburg poems. After casting the city as wicked, crooked, and brutal, and fitting each epithet with journalistically observed examples, the narrator claims the city as his own and returns the skeptic's sneer. He understands that city loyalists often claim the right to complain: No one may insult my city but me and those who understand it as I do. After assuming this elitist position, the narrator delivers a few more questionable compliments to the city's greatness. It is a "tall bold slugger set vivid against the little soft cities" only after it has been "flinging magnetic curses," and "piling job on job." So the sneer is returned with a wink. If we place ourselves in the position of the personified Chicago, of being addressed in this manner, we may imagine frowning for being called "coarse," puffing up a little with "strong and cunning," then scandalized by being called a curse flinger and an oppressor; and just as we are about to respond in self-defense, we're praised as that "tall bold slugger." Sandburg keeps Chicago, the recipient of his letter, precariously positioned between the sloganeering of city fathers and the cries for justice of sweatshop workers.

Late in the poem we see the city take a human shape, appearing like a Cheshire cat—the white

teeth of a man laughing through smoke and dust. He laughs in ignorance; he has never lost a battle, and this is his greatness, so far his destiny. But destiny is a "terrible burden," and the implication is that a lost battle is on its way. We must remember, too, that the narrator is still personifying the city, now engendering it as a man. So the repetition of laughter up to the long indentation and exclamation point, becomes almost maniacal or deluded—the laughter of the city that thinks it holds power "under his wrist," or "under his ribs." But the heart of the people, the poet implies, may not, after all, remain under the wrist, the cage of ribs, or by implication, under the thumb, of the city. So the compliments that close the poem are dubious indeed; they echo the greeting of the letter, but now depict a youth covered in grime, the human being in the midst of all the city's capitalized titles. Here we see that the greatness of a city is not one-dimensional: at its heart is the person building it. But that person must fight to prevent becoming as "savage" as the city and as ugly as its smoke and dust.

In 1916, the poem appeared as the first in a muscular collection called *Chicago Poems*, and began Sandburg's long and prolific career not only as a poet, but as a historian and folklorist as well. In the context of the larger book, the poem takes on a stronger persona than in its 1914 appearance in *Poetry*. Many of the poems following "Chicago," such as "They Will Say," are much more clear about the narrator's harsh reaction to urban hardship. Amy Lowell pointed out the subtle turns from brutality to tenderness, and critic William Alexander posits that the presence of tenderness throughout the collection of poems is often reserved for the lake, the pastoral outside the city and away from the urban poor. Strikes and riots were frequent in Chicago during the early modern era, and Sandburg continued to view them both with the journalist's eye and the poet's language. He understood how to meld these worlds, having been a manual laborer through his twenties, a journalist into his thirties, and a poet all his life.

As a child, Sandburg had signed his name "Charles A. Sandburg" because it sounded more American, to which his parents responded with understanding and gave Carl the nickname "Cully." He wrote under pseudonyms when working for papers whose ideals he could not support, and when he finally established himself as a poet, did so as "Carl," a child of a hard-working Swedish immigrant family. His struggle for identity was not only as a poet, but as a socialist, a presidential historian, a collector of American folk songs, and as a

Swedish-American, a war correspondent in Stockholm who was later honored by that nation as well as the United States. Even *The Dial* eventually published some of his work, acknowledging that his poetry deserved a public forum. Sandburg's identity began to solidify with the publication of *Chicago Poems* and gave American poetry a purveyor of the human landscape, a new poet for the people.

**Source:** Sean Robisch, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 1998.

### Chris Semansky

*Chris Semansky is a freelance writer, teacher, and sole proprietor of Apocalypse Joe's, a merchandising firm specializing in millennial kitsch. In the following essay, Semansky examines how the poem's narrative voice, the use of personification, and the "manner of presentation" illustrate the "confidence and recklessness" of Chicago.*

To personify something is to make it human and to speak or to write about it as if it were an animate being. We hear this everyday when people refer to the planet we live on as "mother earth" or when journalists write that the stock market has been "stingy" or "generous." Personifying an idea or an object makes it easier for readers to visualize it in more concrete terms and to develop emotional responses to it. To use personification successfully a poem needs to produce an image in the reader's mind that makes sense and also forges a connection between the thing or concept being personified and the human characteristic linked to the inanimate object. Carl Sandburg uses personification in his well-known poem, "Chicago," where the relationship between the object—in this case the city—and the means of personification is more complex and difficult to visualize. In this poem, the poet describes the city as a volatile and energetic working-class man full of machismo.

In the short first section of the poem, Sandburg lists not only the industries the city is known for but also describes how a person possessing similar traits might look and behave, creating an image of a strong, working-class man:

Hog butcher of the world,  
Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat,  
Player with Railroads and the Nation's Freight  
Handler;  
Stormy, husky, brawling,  
City of the big shoulders.

While it is true, as Sandburg critic Philip Yan-nella suggests in *The Other Carl Sandburg*, that the

opening “sounds like a chamber of commerce blurb [whose] capitalized words suggest the advertiser’s craft,” the portrait Sandburg presents also depicts the city as a bad boy. The narrator, assuming the role of parent, dismisses complaints that his city-child is “wicked,” “crooked,” and “brutal,” replying in turn: “I turn once more to those who sneer at this my city / and I give them back the sneer.” Complaints of the city’s “immoral” nature were common during the early twentieth century in Chicago, where social reformers, anti-urban crusaders, and temperance groups battled forces of modernization and industrialization. Defiantly—again reminiscent of a parent who recognizes his son’s faults yet remains obstinately proud of him—Sandburg’s narrator refuses to renounce his city-child. “Come and show me another city and lifted head singing so proud to be alive,” he says, echoing the cockiness of his own offspring. It is the narrator’s own aggressive yet forgiving attitude toward the city that provides the poem with so much of its energy.

Sandburg expresses the city’s hyper-masculine, arrogant energy in his personification of the city, describing it as alternately “a bold slugger”; “a savage pitted against the wilderness”; or “an ignorant fighter who has never lost a battle.” Chicago is depicted not so much a city as it a testosterone-laden, 18-year-old who lives purely on instinct. By juxtaposing images of poverty and corruption with the “bragging and laughing” behavior of the personified city, Sandburg intentionally brings to the forefront the effects of a capitalist economy on the working class. An ardent socialist keenly aware of the inequalities to which unfettered capitalism leads, Sandburg recognized that the city was a place of both hope and despair for many in early twentieth-century America. While farmers and the rural poor flocked to Chicago and other large cities seeking better jobs and opportunities, they often ended up broke and worse off than when they arrived—victims of hustlers, low-wage jobs, and their own unrealistic expectations. Harry Golden, a journalist and Sandburg scholar, observed in his book *Carl Sandburg* that “while the city is a bold enterprise on the part of men, it is also an enterprise which corrupts natural emotions.” These natural emotions include the trust and goodwill that many men and women have toward one another.

Yannella connects Sandburg’s politics more directly to the poem’s central idea, saying that “Thematically, ‘Chicago’ was an orthodox radical statement about labor as the creator of wealth.”



*The poet describes  
the city as a volatile and  
energetic working-class man  
full of machismo.”*

Finding the material origin of Sandburg’s personified city in images of the proletariat hero, Yannella claims in *The Other Carl Sandburg* that:

Visually, Sandburg’s myth-man was a perfect replica of the Adam-like American worker depicted in cartoon and poster art in left-leaning magazines and union propaganda. Sometimes, looming heroically above industrial landscapes, this familiar figure—powerfully muscled, square-jawed, grinning or looking resolute—was shown already victorious over his circumstances. Other versions stressed the potential of victory, with the worker tensed to catapult into a future beyond wage slavery, his broken chains dangling from his powerful wrists.

Sandburg displays the confidence and recklessness of Chicago in the construction of the poem as well. By this I mean that his method of presenting his ideas and the ideas themselves dovetail. Not only does Sandburg write about the city of Chicago as a vibrant, relentlessly active, innately amoral place of embodied contradictions, but he writes about the city in a manner that celebrates and embraces these very attributes. His use of short and long stanzas, his choppy sentences and anarchic prose rhythms, and his use of slang and colloquialisms underscore the theme of the poem: that Chicago cannot be tamed because it embodies the life force itself. In this way we can say that the form (manner of presentation) of Sandburg’s poem cannot be divorced from its content (ideas). “The aim [of *Chicago Poems*],” Sandburg himself said, “was to sing, blab, chortle, yodel, like people, and people in the sense of human beings subtracted from formal doctrine,” according to a 1978 *New Republic* article by Mitgang Herbert. Donald Barlow Stauffer echoes this sentiment in his own response to *Chicago Poems* (in *A Short History of American Poetry*), saying that Sandburg demonstrates “a sure and strong voice, with a deep underlying love of people; people in the abstract, but seen in individuals, in particulars.” Calling him “the poet of social consciousness” Stauffer applauded Sandburg for being “the champion of the little guy and the underdog, the fellow who never had a chance.”

Such an approach to poetry offended many readers who were accustomed to “loftier” subject matter, more refined language, and nuanced metaphors in their verse. Sandburg biographer North Callahan wrote in *Carl Sandburg* that the poet’s use of slang and the earthy idiom of the common man “outraged” readers. His poetry astonished them. “It was verse of massive gait,” *Poetry* editor Harriet Monroe said, “whether you call it poetry or not.” Some critics suggested that Sandburg’s writing didn’t constitute poetry but was closer to the “ill-regulated speech” of Walt Whitman. Indeed, Sandburg’s colloquialisms, his use of compound descriptions, his long awkward lines, and his praise of the common working man in his Chicago poems mark him as a poetic heir of Whitman and to Whitman’s vision of America. Roger Mitchell wrote in his essay “Modernism Comes To American Poetry,” “The lines [of “Chicago”] are not without strength, and Sandburg was one of the first after Whitman to catch in poetry, something of the brute reality of the emerging American City. But, typical of Sandburg, the poem reflects Whitman’s wordiness without his sensitivity to the delicately exact image, Whitman’s uncoiling line without his grace of movement.” “Sensitivity to the delicately exact image,” however, is precisely a feature of a poetic tradition that did not interest Sandburg, who was more drawn to the raw language of the working class and who was interested in speaking for those who couldn’t speak for themselves precisely because they didn’t possess the “delicately exact image.” This included the city of Chicago itself. His distinctly rough, male voice was also a response to the other modernist tradition that Mitchell deemed “urban and international, aesthetically intricate, politically and socially conservative, and difficult to grasp.” According to Mitchell, Sandburg wanted to rescue poetry “from its reputation, cultivated and flaunted by the English Aesthetes and Decadents, as effete and unmasculine.”

By ending the poem with the same words with which it began, Sandburg underscores the idea that Chicago is a process, not a product—that finally it exceeds even our own understanding and his own descriptions. Like human beings, cities have cycles, their own ups and downs, virtues and vices; also like human beings, they often contain irreconcilable contradictions. We may not necessarily “understand” the city of Chicago at the end of the poem, but we do understand Sandburg’s own unabashed love for its vitality and the resilience and often unconquerable will of its people.

**Source:** Chris Semansky, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*. Gale, 1998.

### **Daniel Hoffman**

*In the following excerpt, Hoffman maintains that the strength of Sandburg’s poems, which “celebrate the infinite variety of American life,” comes not from Sandburg’s craft but from his colorful subject matter.*

Mark Van Doren, speaking in The Library of Congress shortly after [Carl] Sandburg’s death, said of his life of Lincoln that “It may even be Sandburg’s greatest poem, if our definition of poetry is liberal enough to include it.” Such praise can be given to nearly all of Sandburg’s prose—his autobiography, his children’s stories. We say this of course because Carl Sandburg was a poet first; from his earliest book, *Chicago Poems* in 1916, it was as a poet that he was regarded, and as a poet that he regarded himself. On this hundredth anniversary of his birth it seems appropriate to take a retrospective look at Sandburg’s achievement. It is my hope to present his work in a way that makes possible a fair reevaluation of the writings of this attractive, generous, likeable man who pitched his verses to a scale of possibilities so different from those of his contemporaries or successors....

If completion of his first century qualifies a departed poet for a celebration among the shades, then somewhere on or near Olympus there must be tonight a gathering like this one, with the ghost of Sandburg himself at its center, singing “The Boll Weevil” or “The Streets of Laredo” to his guitar, and saying his poems in that voice at once warm and rough. He’d be in workman’s clothes, and have his audience in the palm of his ghostly hand. For Sandburg was the Will Rogers of the poetry circuit, a masterful entertainer. Only Robert Frost could rival him in this. He brought a sense of color, of liveliness, of beauty in their own lives to many who don’t read other poets at all. His poems came as near to being prose as they can, and yet they are poetry. There’s little in Sandburg of the virtues most readers value in the poems of his contemporaries. Most recent critics and scholars of modern verse have had other fish to fry, and have passed Sandburg by. Not that he didn’t get lots of praise in his time, but it was more often from those who prized the life his work reflects than from those whose chief concerns were with the art of poetry....

I assume that everyone at all familiar with Sandburg knows his most famous poem, the one that begins

HOG Butcher for the World,  
 Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat,  
 Player with Railroads and the Nation's Freight  
 Handler;  
 Stormy, husky, brawling,  
 City of the Big Shoulders ...

This poem, perhaps overly famous, has become a sort of albatross to Sandburg's reputation. He was capable of many other notes than "Stormy, husky, brawling," but they may be drowned out in the memories of everyone who has read "Chicago." One such note is joyousness in the most ordinary life, in sights other poets had not noticed, sounds made by people other poets hadn't listened to, as in "The Shovel Man"....

This is perhaps the first poem in American literature in which an Italian immigrant is presented as a serious subject; until Sandburg's *Chicago Poems* appeared, the immigrant was to be found only as a comic stereotype, speaking in the dialect poems of T. A. Daly. Writing at the time not only of the free-verse movement in poetry, but also when the Armory Show had dramatized the new, democratic aesthetic of the Ash Can school in painting, Sandburg too could look up and down a teeming street of city tenements and find subjects whose innate beauty and joy in life invited treatment in his art....

["The Shovel Man" and "Fish Crier"] are but two from Sandburg's scores of poems that describe and celebrate the infinite variety of American life. The first fact one confronts in reading Sandburg is his inclusiveness, his liberality. Although many of his poems are brief—I believe the best ones to be so—the sensibility of the poet embodies what Whitman once called "acceptation." Sandburg excludes nothing, or at any rate very little, of his own experience from his poetry. If what he sees on a crowded city street on a wintry day includes a fish peddler, his poem will tell us this, and will tell us what feelings the sight of that peddler evokes in him.

Sandburg touches many emotions as well as observing facts and faces. Alongside his celebrations of the various fulfillments of human life are his moments of poignance, of longing, as in "Gone"....

So much has been said about Sandburg's vitality and his celebration of life that his ability to see sharply the darker side of life—its doubts, its defeats, its despairs—is often overlooked. Yet these too are among the emotions his poems keenly define....



[Sandburg's] purpose  
 would be to take poetry out  
 of the parlor and clothe it  
 in overalls...."

His rejection of meters and rhymes made possible Sandburg's style, but what made possible his rejections? It's not only that he lived through the *vers libre* period; after all, by the time free verse came along Carl Sandburg was in his thirties. It was in search of hints of what made his style possible that I recently read his autobiography, *Always the Young Stranger* (1953).

This book re-creates the first twenty years of a fellow who didn't yet know where he was going in life or what he would become. Luckily, Sandburg had a memory as retentive as flypaper, and he recollected details like a magpie hoarding spoons. His account is perhaps overfull, even garrulous, but it is richly informative and steeped with affection for the small town on the prairies that was the young Sandburg's entire world. To help out his family and, later, to strike out on his own, Sandburg worked successively as milk delivery driver, barber-shop attendant, tinsmith, bottle-washer, potter, and many another odd job until he left town to ride the rails and sleep in hobo camps around the country. He returned to enlist in the Illinois Volunteers in 1898 and served in Puerto Rico.

To this observant boy, Galesburg was a miniature of the country at large. Its population ranged from hoboes and drunks to the boss of the State Republican Party and the United States Ambassador to Denmark. There were immigrants like the Sandburgs and their Polish, Hungarian, German Jewish, Irish, and Italian neighbors among the older Anglo-American stock and blacks. In one chapter Sandburg tells of a settler whose plough broke the plains when Galesburg was founded only fifty years before his own birth, and of another neighbor who invented a mechanical cornplanter, production of which became the town's principal industry. These two overlapping lives take the history of the country from the frontier into the industrial era.

This town of 20,000 had its honky-tonks, its red-light district, its railroad yards and feed stores,

its shacks and its mansions. Across Berrien Street from the Sandburgs, young Charlie, as he was then called, would see a neighbor milk his cow every morning, then get up from the milking stool and walk a few hundred yards to meet his classes at Lombard College. Knox College, better known, was in Galesburg too, and still is there. By the time he was twenty Sandburg had learned a lot of American life through living it to the full in Galesburg. His book about that life bears comparison with Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer*, with *Peck's Bad Boy*, with the first volume of W. D. Howell's autobiography. *Always the Young Strangers* is one of the best books about small town American boyhood that we have.

But where in all this experience are the sources of Sandburg's style in his poetry? One must begin with the fact that Sandburg was indeed of the salt of the earth. His father and mother were immigrants from Sweden, and of all American poets of stature, Sandburg is the only one I know for whom English was not the language of family life, of home, of his own tradition. The one book his father read was the Swedish Bible. Sandburg attended public schools through the eighth grade, but seems not to have absorbed the poets in Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*. He seems never to have had to memorize passages from *The Vision of Sir Launfall*, or *Hiawatha*, or "Thanatopsis," or "The Deacon's One Horse Shay." Or if he did, they did not impress him. Sandburg grew up unexposed or immune to the pieties of the Anglo-American poetry tradition. It was there, in the books, but it didn't have to do with him. And how could it have, for what he would have in his mind to express when the time came were things none of the poets in Palgrave, none of the bearded bards on the schoolroom wall, had ever touched. His purpose would be to take poetry out of the parlor and clothe it in overalls....

Sandburg did not encounter literature until, after service in the Army, he enrolled as a special student at Lombard College. There a teacher of unusual intellectual power and literary sensitivity befriended and guided him. It is an overstatement to say that Sandburg lacked cultivation or was ignorant of the literary traditions he did not use in his poems. He became in fact a reader who, with the pertinacity of one who gets a late start, devoured books of all kinds. But the mould had been set: Sandburg to the end was a writer who prized direct experience over literary tradition, raw power over finesse. He was a writer who evolved his own cadences pragmatically, whose sense of rudimentary poetic structure reflects his adaptation of folksong

and ballad, and whose vignettes in free verse recall the brevity of feature articles in a daily paper. For it was as a journalist that Sandburg schooled himself to write and this was how he made his living until the first volume of his *Lincoln*, researched and written under these conditions, brought him security.

It is often said that Whitman is Sandburg's model, even that Sandburg is Whitman's successor. Surely he learned from Whitman the possibilities of a long prose-rhythmed strophe. And just as surely he learned even more from the Bible, where Whitman learned it, of the uses of incremental repetition. But anyone leafing through Sandburg's *Collected Poems* may be surprised at how often he used short lines, a different swing altogether from Whitman's lyrical legato. True Whitman preceded him in glorifying the details of the common life; but I agree with Professor Gay Wilson Allen that Sandburg's divergences from Whitman are greater than his resemblances. Chief of these divergences is in these poets' attitude toward death. Sandburg has little of Whitman's welcoming of death as the unifier and completion of life; for Sandburg death is merely life's end, not its fulfilment. Death is central to Whitman's work, the deep dark river that flows through all of his lines, while Sandburg is a poet of living. His vision of life does not include tragedy.

Impatient of theory, Sandburg in the preface to his *Collected Poems* tells us that "the more rhyme there is in poetry the more danger of its tricking the writer into something other than the urge [he had] in the beginning." As Mark Van Doren justly said of him, "He feels free only when he thinks he has escaped from form. He seems to have known nothing about the freedom that flows from mastery of form." Yet at his best Sandburg contrived his own form—without apparently being aware of it as form at all. He regarded his free verse as entirely free. The question his readers ultimately have to face, because the experience of reading more than a few anthology pieces by any poet raises it, is whether the structures as well as the language Carl Sandburg devised to take the place of those he spurned have the look and the feel of necessity. As the pioneers of the prairies knew, it takes more than sod to build sod houses. There must be a rudimentary architecture to hold up the roof, keep the doors and windows hung squarely on their sills, let the smoke go up the chimney. This principle is equally true of those other indigenous structures, the skyscrapers, which Sandburg was among the first to praise in his poems.



As a preface to his volume *Good Morning, America* (1928), Sandburg offered "Tentative (First Model) Definitions of Poetry"; from those we may infer his convictions about the nature of poetry itself. Where Archibald MacLeish, in his familiar "Ars Poetica," offered only three such definitions, Sandburg with typical prodigality sets down thirty-eight. It is hard to find any thread of connection or development among them, but on inspection his definitions prove to be of three sorts. On the one hand there are these:

5. *Poetry is a sequence of dats and dashes, spelling depths, crypts, cross-lights, and moon wisps.*  
 9. *Poetry is an echo asking a shadow dancer to be a partner.*  
 37. *Poetry is a mystic, sensuous mathematics of fire, smokestacks, waffles, pansies, people, and purple sunsets.*

These strophes are simple imagism gone to seed with sentimentality. But strewn among them are definitions in which the given images dramatize a state of feeling:

7. *Poetry is a plan for a slit in the face of a bronze fountain gout and the path of fresh drinking water.*  
 10. *Poetry is the journal of a sea animal living on land, wanting to fly the air.*  
 32. *Poetry is a shuffling of boxes of illusions buckled with a strap of facts.*

And there are also definitions which offer a sense not only of the effects of poetry on the reader but of the means of creating those effects:

1. *Poetry is a projection across silence of cadences arranged to break that silence with definite intentions of echoes syllables, wave lengths.*  
 3. *Poetry is the report of a nuance between two moments, when people say, 'Listen!' and 'Did you see it?' 'Did you hear it,' 'What was it?'*  
 38. *Poetry is the capture of a picture, a song, or a flab, in a deliberate prism of words.*

Yet compared to the metapoetics of Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, or Marianne Moore, these definitions seem impressionistic rather than analytical. Sandburg is concerned with the effects and materials of his poetry but not with creating those effects from new modes of perception. He would, as he says in yet another definition, "achieve a synthesis of hyacinths and biscuits,"—or of moonlight and mittens—simply by juxtaposing the one with the other. And yet we know that his practice is a little more uncasual than his protestations. His best poems, and the best passages in his longer, uneven poems, are shaped with a kind of caring of his own.

The case against Sandburg was made by William Carlos Williams, reviewing the *Collected*



*Sandburg to the end  
 was a writer who prized  
 direct experience over  
 literary tradition, raw  
 power over finesse."*

*Poems in Poetry* (September 1951). Williams' review states the reasons for that neglect of Sandburg by critics, scholars, and most other poets against which Roy Basler (in *The Muse and the Librarian*, 1974) and his other defenders have protested. Williams faulted Sandburg for having no development in his work. Sandburg, said Williams, "although the best of him was touched with fire," made the "mistake of trying to substitute the materials of a new territory for the great and universal power of art itself.... The formlessness of his literary figures was the very formlessness of the materials with which he worked.... He didn't see that the terms the people use are so often the very thing that defeats them. It is by his invention of new terms that the artist uniquely serves."

One can see why Karl Shapiro, then editor of *Poetry*, chose Dr. Williams to review Carl Sandburg's work. For Williams was the one poet of their generation most like Sandburg in his use of the industrial landscape of contemporary life, and the one most determined to discover in his experiences their own principle of form. And for Williams it is here that Sandburg is fatally deficient: lacking a theory of poetry, he has no formal principle to make his poetry cohere. The charge is a grave one, from which Sandburg's reputation suffers still....

But Dr. Williams' objections cannot be completely obviated. Here, as everywhere, he would say, Sandburg accepted that which is, while it is demanded of a great poet that he impose upon reality his own imaginative vision. Such is the unification of experience we find in Whitman, in Emily Dickinson; such is what Williams, Pound, Eliot, Stevens, and Frost each in his own way strove for.

I find something like this in Sandburg too, though not as powerfully crafted as in these other poets. What I find as the unification of his vision is in fact inherent in the very amplitude, vitality, and inclusiveness with which Sandburg's work

spreads itself before us. We must accept the seeming artlessness of his diction, the sprawl of his forms, and the fact that the tensile strength of his individual lines is seldom taut, as we expect great verse to be. Yet his ear, his tone, his lilt, his voice are unmistakable. Out of what Williams termed his weaknesses Sandburg made an individual style. His work is based on the faith that poetry is a quality of life itself. It is easy to oversimplify Sandburg's view of "the people"; sometimes he oversimplified it himself. And it is easy to dismiss his conviction that in the demotic diction of American life there is a vein of real poetry; he himself often quarried more dross than the genuine article. But Sandburg's conviction that the real thing was there, that he could find and shape it into poetry, is not a mere submission to whatever is. It is this conviction that I take to be Sandburg's democratic ideal, his insistence that the lives and lingo of blue-collar people could bring him not only the subjects of art but the materials of art, and that from these he could make poetry.

Much of his work is flawed, but in at least two periods of his long career he achieved a democratic art that lasts. Sandburg's best poems still speak of lives of people in small towns, in city ghettos, and of the energy and broken patterns of industrial life with the force, the clarity, and the pleasure that first was found in them. And the poetic vision in *The People, Yes* is felt, not in the invention of a new language or a novel presentation for poetry, but in the poet's faith that "the bookless people" could, in their adversity, provide a thesaurus of idioms commensurate with their strength to endure and their will to survive.

Like the men who broke the plains in Illinois, Carl Sandburg was a pioneer. His vision of life was neither tragic nor cheery, but inclusive of defeat, of doubt, of despair even; these conditions he found life to transcend by its own resilience. He was deeply in the American grain in his pragmatism, his hopefulness. He once said, "The past is a bucket of ashes." He wrote of the present he knew. Now that that present and his work have become parts of our past, we can look back at Sandburg's best poems with gratitude for their capturing a portion of the reality of his time. We can thank Sandburg, too, for enlarging the possibilities of subject and language for other poets who came in our century.

**Source:** "'Moonlight dries no mittens': Carl Sandburg Reconsidered" in *The Georgia Review*, Vol. XXXII, No. 2, summer 1978, pp. 390-406.

## Sources

- Alexander, William, "The Limited American, the Great Loneliness, and the Singing Fire: Carl Sandburg's *Chicago Poems*," in *American Literature*, Vol. 45, No. 1, March, 1973, pp. 63-83.
- Brumm, Anne-Marie, "The Cycle of Life: Motifs in the Chicago Poems of Carl Sandburg," in *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik*, Vol. 31, No. 3, 1983, pp. 237-55.
- Callahan, North, *Carl Sandburg*, College Station, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996.
- Crowder, Richard, "The Lure of the Big City," in *Carl Sandburg*, New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1964.
- Furer, Howard B., editor, *Chicago: A Chronological History*, Dobbs Ferry, NY: Oceana Publications, 1974.
- Golden, Harry, *Carl Sandburg*, NY: The World Publishing Company, 1961.
- Hacker, Jeffrey H., *Carl Sandburg*, New York: Franklin Watts, 1984.
- Hoffmann, Daniel, "'Moonlight Dries No Mittens': Carl Sandburg Reconsidered," *The Georgia Review*, Vol. XXXII, No. 2, Summer, 1978, pp. 390-407.
- Mitchell, Roger, "Modernism Comes To American Poetry," in *In A Profile of Twentieth-Century American Poetry*, edited by Jack Myers and David Wojahn, Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992, pp. 25-54.
- Mitgang, Herbert, "Carl Sandburg," *The New Republic*, Vol. 178, No. 2, January 14, 1978, pp. 24-6.
- Niven, Penelope, *Carl Sandburg: A Biography*, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1991.
- Reid, Robert L., "The Day Book Poems of Carl Sandburg," in *The Old Northwest: A Journal of Regional Life & Letters*, Vol. 9, No. 3, Fall, 1983, pp. 205-18.
- Sandburg, Carl, *Complete Poems*, Harcourt, Brace, & Company, 1950.
- Stauffer, Donald Barlow, *A Short History of American Poetry*, New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1974.
- Untermeyer, Louis, "Strong Timber," *The Dial*, Vol. XLV, No. 774, October 5, 1918, pp. 263-64.
- Van Doren, Mark, introduction to *Carl Sandburg's Harvest Poems: 1910-1960*, Harcourt, Brace, & Company, Inc., 1960, pp. 5-10.
- Williams, William Carlos, "Carl Sandburg's Complete Poems," *Poetry*, LXXVIII, No. 6, September, 1951.
- Yannella, Philip, *The Other Carl Sandburg*, Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1995.
- Yatron, Michael, *America's Literary Revolt*, Philosophical Library, Inc., 1959.

## For Further Study

- Andrews, Clarence A., *Chicago in Story: A Literary History*, Iowa City, IA: Midwest Heritage Publishing Co., 1982.

This book gives a comprehensive overview of works written about Chicago and things that have been written about the city.

Callahan, North, *Carl Sandburg: His Life and Works*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1987.

This scholarly extended biography gives a concise history of Sandburg's life and works.

Miller, Donald L., *City of the Century: The Epic of Chicago and the Making of America*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996.

The century referred to in the title is the nineteenth, but this book is very useful and interesting to anyone who is trying to understand any big American city at the time Sandburg was writing.

Wilson, Gay Allen, *Carl Sandburg*. University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers No. 101, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1972.

As with all of the pamphlets in this series, this one is well-written, concise, and very informative for its length.

# The Courage That My Mother Had

*Edna St. Vincent Millay*

1949

“The Courage That My Mother Had” is included in the collection *Mine the Harvest*, which was published in 1949. The poems in this volume were written in Millay’s later years, and they tend to reflect the mature sensibility of a woman who has experienced her share of hardship. Indeed, one might read “The Courage That My Mother Had” as Millay’s autobiographical response to her mother’s death. In this poem, Millay expresses her admiration for her mother’s courage and yearns for her fortitude. She also carefully chooses small details to allude to other aspects of her mother’s personality. Although her tone is wistful, the speaker is not embittered. She acknowledges the belief that material possessions can be handed down but such virtues as courage cannot. Using simple diction, the speaker laments the fact that she lacks courage as she faces the heartache of having lost her mother.

## *Author Biography*

Millay was born in 1892, in Rockland, Maine, to Cora Buzzelle Millay and Henry Tolman Millay. Inspired by her mother, who raised her following her parents’ divorce, Millay became an independent child who freely explored her interest in music (for which she displayed a considerable aptitude), theater, and both the reading and writing of literature. Much of this pursuit took the form of writing poetry, and, by the time she was a teenager, Millay had already published poetry in the noted



children's magazine *St. Nicholas*. At the age of nineteen Millay wrote what is considered her first major poem, "Renascence." The work was enthusiastically received, and, in part, earned Millay a scholarship to Vassar College. While it was obvious that she possessed a talent for verse, Millay's time at Vassar refined her natural skills and provided her with a significant source of culture and scholarly acumen, including much of the feminist and political sensibilities that surfaced in her later work. While studying at Vassar, Millay continued to write. She regularly published her poems and plays in the school quarterly, and even composed the lyrics for a Founder's Day song.

Following her graduation, Millay took up residence in the New York borough of Greenwich Village, a noted haven for people of artistic sensibilities as well as a center for issues of women's rights and free love—both of which Millay espoused. While making a nominal living, she busied herself with writing poetry and acting with the Provincetown Players theater troupe. She also developed a taste for fast living, keeping a busy social calendar, and becoming romantically involved with several notable men of letters, including poet Arthur Davison Ficke and literary critic Edmund Wilson. By the early 1920s, however, this lifestyle caught up with Millay, and she was beset with nervous exhaustion and ill health. Seeking better climates, she sailed for Europe, where she remained for two years. Her income during this time came primarily from the writing of articles under the pseudonym Nancy Boyd.

Upon her return to New York in 1923, Millay met businessman Eugen Boissevain at a party; the two were married later that year. While his practical business skills freed Millay from day-to-day financial details, Boissevain was also the poet's ideological and spiritual partner, as he respected both her artistic pursuits and her feminist concerns. In addition to these advances in her personal life, Millay's career was on the rise: she won the Pulitzer Prize in 1923 and was granted an honorary degree from Tufts University in 1925. Her increased public profile gave Millay a platform to voice her social conscience, and she regularly engaged in protests, including a campaign against the conviction and death sentence leveled against political radicals Sacco and Vanzetti.

Millay's writing throughout the late 1920s and 1930s reflected her political views, with many works taking the form of outright protest. This is particularly evident in her railings against the atroc-



Edna St. Vincent Millay

ities of Adolf Hitler's Nazi regime in Germany during World War II. Despite her attempts to maintain an active schedule, however, Millay's health was quickly deteriorating. She had been in precarious shape since an auto accident in 1936, and the pressures of maintaining her artistic and social concerns, combined with the troubled climate during World War II, precipitated a nervous breakdown in 1944. Her recovery was slowed by a number of personal setbacks, the most significant being the death of Boissevain in 1945. Although her emotional and physical powers were appreciably depleted, Millay continued to write. She was in the midst of compiling a poetry collection when she was struck by a fatal heart attack; she died at her home in Austerlitz, New York, on October 19, 1950.

### Poem Text

The courage that my mother had  
Went with her, and is with her still:  
Rock from New England quarried:  
Now granite in a granite hill.

The golden brooch my mother wore  
She left behind for me to wear:  
I have no thing I treasure more:  
Yet, it is something I could spare.

Oh, if instead she'd left to me  
The thing she took into the grave!—  
That courage like a rock, which she  
Has no more need of, and I have.

### Poem Summary

#### Lines 1-2:

In these lines, the speaker uses plain statement to introduce the subject of the poem—her mother's courage, which has gone somewhere with the mother. It is not clear to the reader initially why the speaker's mother is missing, nor where she has gone, but the colon after the word "still" indicates that some sort of explanation will follow.

#### Lines 3-4:

Here, the speaker uses a metaphor to describe her mother's bravery. By likening her mother's courage to a rock in line 3, the narrator shows how strong, enduring, and unshakable that courage was. The tone is one of admiration, respect, and pride. The reference to New England suggests that her mother was from this area; her character was chiseled from her environment, like granite from a quarry.

In the fourth line of this stanza, the speaker uses granite as a metaphor to emphasize her mother's strength as well as to hint at her mother's death. Granite sometimes implies "endurance" or "steadfastness," and it also refers to the rock commonly used to build monuments and headstones. In line 4, the narrator is saying that her mother has died, and that she has taken her courage with her to the grave. The repetition in line 4 is meant to remind the reader of the phrase "ashes to ashes, dust to dust." Figuratively, her mother's courage has returned to the place from which it originated. The reader can assume that, in actuality, the mother now rests in a New England hillside cemetery.

#### Lines 5-6:

The second stanza of the poem focuses on a different aspect of the mother's personality. Although the speaker is addressing an emotional subject—her mother's death—the tone is not sentimental. Rather, the diction remains simple and straightforward. In lines 5-6, the speaker uses the small detail of the mother's brooch to illustrate another facet of her mother's personality. In some regard, it might even be said that the brooch is symbolic of some of her mother's characteristics. Indeed, the speaker's mother may have been coura-

geous, but the fact that she wore a golden brooch shows that she appreciated finery, too. The brooch might allude to the fact that the narrator's mother had a good sense of style, or that she was, like the brooch, feminine and beautiful, in addition to being steadfast and brave. The image of the golden brooch serves as a contrast to the image of rock, of granite.

#### Lines 7-8:

These lines contain a paradox. Although the brooch is the speaker's most valued possession, she indicates that she could part with it if she had to. The words "no thing" emphasize the fact that the speaker is aware that the brooch is still just an object, a thing. She treasures it for what it is: an object that reflects her mother's personality. She loves it because it is a connection to and a tangible reminder of her mother. At the same time, the speaker could part with the piece of jewelry because it is merely a possession, however symbolic. It is not something from which she can truly take comfort, or which can make her a stronger person. Instead of being useful, the brooch is merely decorative. Millay could be implying that one's internal attributes are more valuable than one's ornamental possessions.

#### Lines 9-12:

In the final stanza, the speaker's tone changes to wistful. She is not bitter, yet she yearns for her mother's courage. The speaker seems to recognize that while one may admire virtues in others, one cannot necessarily adopt those virtues for him or herself. She deeply grieves the loss of that trait which she so admires.

Not only does she admire her mother's strength, but the daughter needs that strength now more than ever. Her mother is buried, and, as is implied, she is at rest. However, the speaker is still living, and she needs a guiding tool to help her through her loss. The speaker implies that it is unjust that her mother should have taken her courage with her to the grave, since she no longer needs it, while the daughter needs it more than ever. In wishing for her mother's courage, the speaker may, on some level be yearning for her mother's presence to help her through her grief, although, ironically, her mother is the source of that grief. In the final stanza, line 11 repeats the simile which compares the mother's courage to a rock. This repetition serves to emphasize a final time the mother's bravery in comparison with her daughter's lack of bravery. The speaker ends the poem with a quiet state-

ment, one which acknowledges how difficult it is to face her mother's death.

## Themes

### Memory

"The Courage That My Mother Had" is Millay's elegy to her mother. It is a somber commemoration. Much of the poem's tension arises from two contrasting elements: the vividness with which the poet remembers her mother, and an awareness of her death that is present from the beginning of the poem until its end. The mother is described in the past tense, implying that she is now dead; however, some of the details suggest she is still alive—at least for the poet. For example, her courage "went with her," but it "is with her still." The juxtaposition of real death and imagined life produces a poignant sense of loss which grows over the course of the poem's three stanzas. The sense of loss is all the greater because the death of the mother is only hinted at in the first two stanzas. She is "granite in a granite hill"; she "left behind" a brooch. It is not until the final stanza, when the poet mentions "the thing she took into the grave," that death is confronted directly.

In the first two stanzas, the poet recalls her mother in a remarkably economical portrait. In two lines the poet suggests the complexity of her mother's character, which comprised both "rock from New England quarried" and "the golden brooch" she wore. The first metaphor describes the mother's courage. This is her most remarkable characteristic, emphasized by being mentioned both in the poem's first line and in its concluding thought. The metaphor also associates the mother with a specific location and culture, evoking the steadfast, proverbial strength New Englanders are reputed to possess. In the second descriptive line, the brooch reveals a very different aspect of the mother's character, a soft, feminine side. One can almost see an old photograph of the mother in her best dress.

The brooch recalls both the living mother and the fact of her death; it was the living mother who wore the piece, but the poet would not have it if her mother had not passed away. The paradox is underlined in the last lines of the second stanza. "I have no thing I treasure more," she writes, "yet, it is something I could spare." She values the brooch because it is a link to her mother, but she would

## Topics for Further Study



- In her poem, Millay uses stone to represent her mother's courage. Think of a person you know. Make a list of objects that represent their good and bad qualities.
- What emotions does Millay express in the poem "The Courage That My Mother Had?" How does she express them?
- Imagine the setting in which the poet may have written this poem. What does she see around her? How do the various elements in the landscape of her home contribute to the mood of the poem?

gladly do without the jewelry to have her mother back with her.

### Strength and Weakness

The moment she recalls her mother, the poet is intensely aware of her own weakness. As readers, we do not know *why* she feels this way. She only says at the very end that her mother no longer needs the courage she had, while the poet does. The mother's courage is compared to "granite," to "rock." Rock, particularly granite, is strong and long-lasting—it can resist harsh forces for centuries. Granite, however, is not only strong, it is lifeless. Like the stone to which the mother is compared, she now lies buried in the granite hillside from which she sprung.

When the poet speaks of her mother, she implicitly does so as her mother's child. Speaking from the perspective of a child, the poet sees her mother as the personification of strength, even limitless strength. "The courage that my mother had / Went with her and is with her still." Even in death she has not lost her courage. As children often do, the poet feels weak, helpless, and afraid, and she admits her fear. She needs her mother's courage. But instead her mother left her only the golden brooch, something pretty, delicate, perhaps a little old-fashioned. The brooch conjures up all those characteristics that are *not* strong. On the contrary,

they are qualities stereotypically associated with femininity and helplessness—precisely the qualities that will not help the poet in her present state. The poet feels herself doubly weak: she is a child who needs protection, and at the same time she is a woman who fears she has inherited from her courageous mother only those characteristics associated with weakness.

### Style

“The Courage That My Mother Had” consists of three quatrains, or four-line stanzas. Within each quatrain, the final words of the first and third lines rhyme, as do the final words of the second and fourth lines.

Although the meter of the poem varies in places, each line tends to be arranged in iambic tetrameter. “Iambic” refers to segments in a poem called iambs, units of two syllables where the first syllable is unstressed and the second is stressed. “Tetrameter” indicates that there are four such segments, or feet, to each line—“tetra” meaning “four.”

The following line illustrates the poem’s iambic tetrameter construction:

The gold / en brooch / my mother / er wore.

The poem’s rhythm lends “The Courage That My Mother Had” a song-like quality when it is read aloud. When you are reading the poem, you will also notice that each stanza contains a complete thought. The stanzas are linked together thematically, but each addresses a slightly different sentiment.

### Historical Context

In 1949, the year Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote “The Courage That My Mother Had,” a number of difficulties in her life—personal loss, doubt regarding her artistic ability, and bouts of depression—reached a crisis point. This preceded the short, final creative period in her life, and shortly thereafter she passed away. Millay had enjoyed success unparalleled by almost any other American poet in history: critics praised her work and, at the same time, her work was read by a large popular audience. She wrote continually, but as events accelerated toward war in the late 1930s

and early 1940s, Millay became increasingly involved in getting the United States to support the European Allies in their fight against Hitler. Once America did go to war, she put her pen almost exclusively in the service of the war effort. Between 1940 and 1945 she gave up all writing except “propaganda poetry.” Millay never considered this work part of her “real” poetic output. Its purpose was to rouse the nation against an enemy that—Millay was deeply convinced—was a threat to freedom and could be defeated only on the battlefield. These poems were usually “occasional” pieces; that is, they were written in response to a specific event or at the request of an individual or group. They were written quickly; Millay rarely had the time to lavish that she gave to her other poetry.

In her eyes these poems constituted a disposable product meant to serve certain limited, temporary purposes, after which she hoped they would be forgotten. Millay did not want to see this work published in “permanent” form, as if it were part of her collected work. Her publisher released it in book form anyway. Critics reviewed *Make Bright the Arrows* harshly. The bad reviews came at a time when Millay, exhausted by her war work and unhappy about neglecting her “real” poetry, was recovering from a serious nervous breakdown she had in summer 1944. She had to be hospitalized for several months as a result and had still not fully recovered when the war finally ended the following spring. In all, the war period was catastrophic for Millay: both her sister and her best friend passed away; her reputation as a poet was seriously impaired; and the war itself had confirmed her most pessimistic intuitions about man’s true nature.

She and her husband Eugene moved to upstate New York. There Millay confronted an even worse affliction—she found she was no longer able to write poetry. Whether this was a result of her depression or the cause of her next bout with it is moot. As a consequence, though, America’s most popular, most visible poet became a virtual recluse. Eugene became her shelter from the hostile world. Visitors could see Millay only if Eugene allowed them to. According to some biographers, his overprotection contributed more to her problems than it helped. When she was around Eugene, Millay became infantile and passive. However, reports from the couple’s friends indicate that Millay seemed willingly to adopt the role of the young child in her relationship with her husband.



## Compare & Contrast

- **1949:** The Soviet Union explodes its first atomic weapon, becoming the first nation after the United States to possess the bomb. The confrontation between the USA and the USSR, soon to be known as the Cold War, will escalate very quickly after this event and determine the nature of international politics for the next forty years.

**Today:** The Soviet Union no longer exists and Russia is too concerned with its domestic problems to pose much of a threat to U.S. security. Unlimited nuclear war no longer seems likely. However, the threat of nuclear blackmail or nuclear terrorism is posed by smaller nations with extremist governments, such as North Korea or Iraq.

- **1949:** The United States and the nations of Western Europe form the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), a military alliance intended to prevent Soviet aggression.

**Today:** Western Europe is working toward the formation of the European Union (EU). Eventually, the EU is meant to create a single political and economic unit that will include much of Europe, abolishing most internal trade barriers, establishing uniform regulatory standards, creating a European parliament, and establishing a single European currency. An important purpose of the EU is to comprise an economic bloc to help the nations of Europe compete with the United States and Japan.

- **1949:** Jack Kerouac, an unknown, unpublished writer, begins his novel *On The Road*. Although

it will take nearly seven years to get it published, the book will become a sort of countercultural bible to the disaffected youth of the 1950s. Kerouac, like other so-called Beat writers, rejected many of his times' mainstream values and standards—social as well as literary.

**Today:** Works of Beat writers, such as Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs and Jack Kerouac, are arguably the most influential literature of the twentieth century. The worldwide effects of their work extend across traditional genres like fiction and poetry, through popular culture like music, film and video, into the realm of personal lifestyle.

- **1949:** The Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) and the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) are founded. The confrontation of the two Germanies mirrors that of their patron states, the USA and USSR.

**1989:** Against all expectations, the Berlin Wall falls. Within eight months, East and West Germany form a single economic unit; within eleven months, amid much euphoria, they have reunited politically.

**Today:** The cost of rebuilding the infrastructure of the eastern part of the country brings Germany economic problems it has not known since the 1950s. These problems are exacerbated by animosities between East and West Germans, many of which result from prejudices developed during the Cold War.

---

In 1949, just as she was beginning to recover her creative powers and write new poetry, Eugene went into the hospital suddenly and died following surgery. Millay was shattered by the new blow. Most of her last poems, including "The Courage That My Mother Had," were composed following the death of her husband. Calling on that courage, Millay might have had in mind how her own

mother had also suddenly found herself without a husband. But Millay's mother was not widowed; she freely left her husband, who was an alcoholic and a playboy. What is more, she took this step with three small children to support at the turn of the century, a time when society was far less forgiving of women who lived life on their own terms.

### Critical Overview

Critics are divided on the issue of the merit of Edna St. Vincent Millay's poetry. Those who favor her poetry praise it for its depth of human understanding, its clarity, its music, and its form. For instance, in an essay in *Poetry*, Harriet Monroe suggests that Millay may be the most talented poet since Sappho. Of Millay's work she writes, "Always one feels the poet's complete and unabashed sincerity. She says neither the expected thing nor the 'daring' thing, but she says the incisive true thing as she has discovered it and feels it." Others are not so generous, claiming that Millay's work is lacking in substance or that it is girlish, artificial, and coy. One such critic, Winfield Townley Scott, writes in *Poetry* that the biggest offense you could make today would be to compare a young female poet to Millay. "No one can sound so profound as Miss Millay at her falsest," he claims. Perhaps a third critic, Sister M. Madeleva, offers a more moderate evaluation of Millay's poetry. In her essay "Where Are You Going, My Pretty Maid?" she writes, "Her weakness lies in her strength—she is versatile. She adapts herself too easily to the forms and moods of the day. She can be mystical, epigrammatic, flippant, serious, dramatic. She can be neat and sweet and beautiful, and she usually is.... Beauty, technic, poise she has."

Although critics disagree on the worth of Millay's work, they are quick to acknowledge the popularity of her poems, especially her earlier ones. They also agree that her poems are usually formal—although some readers take issue with her variations on form—and that they examine themes of love, nature, and death. Millay's poems also explore concepts of sexual love, a theme that previously had been largely excluded from poetry written by women. "The Courage That My Mother Had," demonstrates that Millay's sensibility may have matured but that she is still concerned with the themes of her earlier verse. In his book *Edna St. Vincent Millay*, author James Gray puts it another way: "The world, which she had held no closer at the beginning of her life than she did at the end, gave her as much of pain as it did pleasure. Love, beauty, and life itself had all to be endured as well as enjoyed." "The Courage That My Mother Had" depicts some of that pain, as well as a glimpse of what Hildegard Flanner calls Millay's "deceptively artless ability to set down the naked fact unfortified."

### Criticism

#### David Kelly

*David Kelly is a freelance writer and instructor at Oakton Community College and College of Lake County, as well as the faculty advisor and co-founder of the creative writing periodical of Oakton Community College. In the following essay, Kelly provides biographical and historical information regarding Millay and her mother, in analyzing what Millay had meant by "courage."*

The landscape of literary fashion changes its aspect continuously. Right now, Edna St. Vincent Millay is treated as a dim and distant light that is barely visible and hardly thought worth examining. When her work is discussed, critics bring out its obviousness and the formality that tends to make it seem just a bit heavy-handed, given the simplicity of her subject matter. Contemporary readers often consider Millay's writings as the quaint expressions of a naive person who lived in a simpler time. To some degree, the lack of awe respect accorded to this poet should be considered her personal responsibility or shortcoming, since anyone can name writers of true greatness whose works continue to take readers' breath away, centuries after they have walked the earth. On the other hand, we cannot hold Millay accountable for doing her job all too well. She sought to examine simple truths that are common to all human experiences, and, if her work sometimes seems trite, it might be just a testimony to how common her subjects really are. The job of artists in all fields is to make difficult feats look easy; the curse of the artist is being taken for granted when the difficult looks too easy. The question of whether Millay's insights are too obvious to deserve our attention or not can hardly be handled well, since "obviousness" is so subjective: who is to say whether a poem should provide a revelation to five, five thousand, or five million readers in order to be thought worthwhile? In some poems, though, most notably "The Courage That My Mother Had," we can see that Millay herself understood and anticipated the attitudes that would be held toward her works by some contemporary critics who are unable to appreciate the familiar and the integrity it takes to stick with matters close to home.

It is simply a function of their place in the world that young people tend to see their parents as timid and naive. After all, once the greatest problems of the day pass by they are nothing but static history lessons to subsequent generations. If we

only understand someone's challenges in the abstract, then how likely are we to acknowledge the suffering those challenges have caused? It seems that this lack of empathy is at the root of many criticisms of Millay's works, and, only slightly ironically, it also appears to be the core mechanism that makes "The Courage That My Mother Had" work. In the poem, the speaker does not acknowledge that she had previously underestimated her mother's strength of character, but the clues are there to make us realize that she only recently came to see her mother as courageous. This is implied by the air of desperation in this poem. After all, when does one dwell upon something they haven't got, or upon the subject of courage at all, except when faced with a true need for it? The poem leaves us with the impression that this is someone who did not realize when her mother was alive that she was observing the courage that she herself would someday need.

Throughout her lifetime, Millay would appear to all who observed her to be quite courageous enough, seeming hardly the type who would find herself unable to face the sedate life of her later years. She wrote this poem when she was in her fifties and had lived a life of adventure and fame that steered a path wide of the safety of common behavior. She was famous for her poetry almost immediately after graduating from college. In her twenties—on her own for the first time—she took up the free-thinking, artistic life in New York's Greenwich Village, which was just then rising as a center of the counterculture, much as San Francisco was to become in the 1960s and Seattle in the 1990s. In Greenwich Village, she attended all-night parties, had affairs with a number of men, and became a member of the Provincetown Players, a theatrical troupe that pushed the limits of free expression. After a few years of the wild life, Millay gave her image of herself in her 1920 poem "First Fig" as a candle burning at both ends, that "will not last the night" but still "gives a lovely light." Unlike people who take up opposition to social norms as their mission in life and, therefore, end up living by just another set of norms, Millay was independent enough to walk away from the fast-paced life when it began affecting her health. She sailed to Europe for a little more than a year in the early 1920s, and on her return, rather than going back to the Village (which grew in her absence to a Prohibition social center for out-of-towners and artistic wanna-bes), she went back to Maine to live with her mother. When she married, it was not to another artist, but to a financier. Rather than settling down to a sedate life of a luxury, though, she be-

## What Do I Read Next?



- The *Letters of Edna St. Vincent Millay* depict Millay's life from her own point of view, in letters to family, friends, and the leading literary figures of her time.
- Edmund Wilson, among America's foremost critics during the first half of the twentieth century, was also one of Millay's friends. He described the literary scene in which she flourished in *The Shores of Light: A Literary Chronicle of the Twenties and Thirties*.
- H. L. Mencken offers a very different take on the twenties and thirties in his *Prejudices*. His incisive language and biting humor are entertaining and insightful.

---

came more vocal than ever in her writings against war, repression, and political injustices of all kinds.

To the outside observer, then, Edna St. Vincent Millay's life shows no sign of her being too timid to do what she felt was appropriate, regardless of pressures from social (or antisocial) forces. The need for courage in her later years must then stem from finer, more sublime challenges in her life than the global political movements that the poet stood up to in her lifetime. We do not know as much about her mother, Cora Millay, as we do about Edna, for the simple reason that the mother was not famous and was not one to record her activities on paper. Still, we know more about her than we do about the parents of most writers because the bond between the two was so tight. Normalcy seems to be the most amazing thing about Cora Millay's life, given her circumstances. She divorced her husband at the end of the nineteenth century, when Edna was seven and her other girls were six and three. Life was not easy at that time for a woman raising children alone, both for the obvious financial reasons and because the social stigma attached to divorce was considerably worse than it is today. Because of this, many women remained in horrible domestic situations, especially when young children were involved. By all accounts, the



*The job of artists in  
all fields is to make  
difficult feats look easy;  
the curse of the artist is  
being taken for granted  
when the difficult looks too  
easy."*

---

Millays' marriage, though it had its problems, was not abominable, as indicated by the fact that Cora and Henry Millay remained friends after they separated. The worst aspect seems to have been Henry's compulsive gambling, which depleted the household funds. A woman with less courage than Cora Millay might have been able to equivocate or make up excuses for accepting her bad luck in order to avoid taking action. Cora, however, took a job as a practical nurse and accepted sole responsibility for her daughters.

One of the reasons for the poem's continuing popularity is its praise for domestic life. This praise is all the more convincing and valuable because it comes from someone who has lived a life generally considered more desirable than mere stability. The age-old tension between fame and worldly gain on the one hand and respect for the household on the other is addressed here by someone who has lived one life but admires the other. The fact that the author is not writing in support of her own way of life gives the values espoused in the poem an extra glow of sincerity. The wistful longing to be, like her mother, a rock, and the speaker's weak, half-hearted interest in the "treasured" golden brooch, all point to a belittling of social success. Millay's life was certainly more than a search for baubles of gold, but for the purposes of this poem that is how her life is represented. Regardless of what the poet accomplished in her life, the poem tells us that her mother had what was really important: in the case of Cora Millay, that was courage.

This brings up a final question: does the poet's focus on courage come from a need that she feels in her own life (as it seems to be, recognizing the desperation in her tone discussed above) or is courage just the word that she uses to capture the

essence of her departed mother? As much is made here of the fact that the mother is gone as is made of the mother's courage, indicating that her departure holds the same weight with the writer as courage does. Since Edna St. Vincent Millay showed no particular sign of cowardice in her own life, courage might not have been the thing that she needed most, but it would be important to her if she needed a legacy, or some form of connection, from her mother. There will never be any way to answer a question like this, because there is no way of knowing just how fearful or courageous any person feels inside; outside appearances are almost always deceptive in this regard. The important point is that, regardless of the depth of feeling that inspired this poem, the piece that has resulted has found a place in the hearts of millions of readers, bringing together something familiar in the mix of courage, motherhood, and death.

**Source:** David Kelly, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 1998.

### **James Gray**

*In the following excerpt, Gray gives a general overview of Millay's style, pointing out that in many ways she adhered to tradition, but that her "temperament" helped create a unique poetic voice and an artist who reflected American culture.*

For the two decades of [Edna St. Vincent Millay's] ever-rising popularity—the twenties and thirties of the century—she seemed to personify the spirit of the time: Its exuberance, its defiance of convention, its determination to discover and to declare a sharply defined identity.

But to remember her only as the nymph of Greenwich Village, exulting playfully in freedom, would be to turn away from nearly all that was of genuine importance to the experience which she put herself to exquisite pain to communicate. Seen whole she emerges out of myth not a gay figure but as a tragic one; not as a precocious perennial schoolgirl but as an artist born mature and burdened with a scrupulous sense of responsibility toward her gift; not as a changeling child of mysticism but as a creature whose essential desire was to find identity with the balanced order of nature; not as a woman merely but as a creator who inevitably contained within her persona masculine as well as feminine attributes.

The theme of all her poetry is the search for the integrity of the individual spirit. The campaign to conquer and control this realm of experience is conducted always in terms of positive and rigorous

conflict—the duel with death, the duel with love, the duel of mind pitted against heart, the duel with “The spiteful and the stingy and the rude” who would steal away possession of beauty....

[Q]uiet reverence for vitality under discipline is the distinguishing quality of her poetry. At its best it is characterized by a kind or orderly surrender to ecstasy....

It is often said of the major figures of the arts that each seems to create a universe all his own and to measure its vast dimensions with untransferable techniques....

No such gigantic stature can be claimed for a poet like Edna Millay. Her theme was too personal, too intimate to herself to fill out the dimensions of a supernatural realm of imagination. Indeed it might be said that her unique effort was to perform the miracle of creation in reverse. A universe already made pressed its weight on the sensibility, the aptitude for awareness, of one individual....

An account of the running battle between life and death claimed first place among the poet's preoccupations through her writing career. The effectiveness of the report is heightened by an awareness, sometimes bitter and sometimes merely rueful, that now one side commands ascendancy over will and now the other....

As she grew older the tone of her quarrel with death tended to become more subdued....

[V]ariations of tone in her report on the duel of life against death lend the best and most original of her personal qualities to the development of an old, familiar theme. The parallel may be suggested that, just as a mother must have faith in her child lacking any evidence to justify it, so the believer in life must show a similar courageous unreasonableness. Edna Millay is perhaps at her best when she casts her vote of No Confidence in death....

From first to last, through every phase of her development, Edna Millay continued to be intensely herself and no other. Whether her theme was death, love, beauty, or the refreshing impulse of the will to live she spoke always with an accent that was unique to her. Of language she made a homespun garment to clothe her passions and her faith.

That she was able to create effects of striking originality is discovered to be only the more remarkable when a characteristic poem is examined closely and its thought is found to wear “something old” and “something borrowed” from the left-over



*An account of the running battle between life and death claimed first place among the poet's preoccupations through her writing career.”*

wardrobe of tradition. Edna Millay was a product as much of the nineteenth century as of the twentieth. The influence of tradition moved her a little backward in time. A too great reverence for her early instruction—not only at her mother's knee but also at Keats's—probably accounts for all the “O's” and “Ah's,” the “would I were's,” the “hast's,” the “art's,” the “wert's,” the “'Tis's.” It must account also for the inversions of normal word order which sometimes impede the plunge of her hardihood in thought.

Even in more important matters of vocabulary, imagery, and symbolism her impulse toward expression was governed by convention....

Because she absorbed tradition deeply into herself she seems able to revitalize its language with the warmth of her own temper. Her words become fertile from the nourishment which, as woman, she communicated to them as if by an umbilical link.

Simplicity, spontaneity, the seeming absence of calculation combine to produce her best efforts....

More often than with either definitely declared voice she speaks as a detached observer of natural sights and sound. The souvenirs of experience are shared with a reader in language that seems entirely casual; it has been borrowed for the moment from more studied performers in the realm of poetry simply to convey a passing impression.... More typical of the poet's method is the device of catching a symbolic significance, some warning of the threat against survival, in an image that seems to be, all at once, spontaneous, startling, and inescapably true....

An important element in the highly personal tone of all her poetry is the wit that flashes through not merely the exercises in light vein but her most

“  
Of language she  
made a homespun garment  
to clothe her passions and  
her faith.”

---

serious reflections as well. The epigram was for her an entirely spontaneous form of expression and its unexpected sparkle of insight often illuminates even the darkest moments of the sonnets....

Edna Millay's wit was never petty. She was generous toward all her adversaries except mediocrity, war, and death. As in fashioning an epigram she revealed her most fastidious respect both for truth and for elegance. In the later poems her wit is so unobtrusive, so modest, that it might be missed entirely by a reader hoping to find a showy attribute identified by a capital letter. But it is always subtly present, embedded in a theme, as is the wit of Henry James. The tight-packed phrase, the unexpected revelation of how opposites of impulse may be found to blend, the sudden illumination of an ambiguity—these are the veins of wisdom through which wit runs in the sonnets....

Throughout her life Edna Millay's chief concern was to canalize creative energy into the production of poems that bespoke her innermost awarenesses. In her last years this concentration became so intense that almost all her other interests were severely excluded....

Edna St. Vincent Millay has been praised extravagantly as the greatest woman poet since Sappho. She has also been dismissed with lofty forbearance as a renegade from the contemporary movement in poetry and sometimes been treated almost as a traitor because she never broke defiantly with the past. But both eulogy and denigration seem to hang upon her figure like whimsical investitures. Neither costume suits the occasion when her enduring presence rises up before us to bespeak a mind that has not lost its vigor. Her talent shrugs off these irrelevances—still staunch, still self-reliant, and still self-fulfilled. What we hear is a voice urging upon us the will to survive, uttering its sentiments with the grace and gravity of an intense and highly personal awareness. The fervor has not been dissipated from her words nor has the lucidity faded from her patterning of them into idea

and conviction. In its most ardent moments the performance shows the same familiar spontaneity, disciplined into elegance without loss of power. It should be enough to call this talent unique among those that have appeared in our time. Rejecting comparison and eluding classification, an artist who has spoken so clearly and so persuasively seem tacitly to remind us that is really no acute need to try to grade achievement according to an established formula or to consider austere, precisely, what place may be accorded to her in the hierarchy of genius.

But acceptance of this gift as a natural phenomenon need not preclude the effort to discover its significance as a manifestation of the creative impulse in America. That she was peculiarly a product of our native way of life critics and the general public alike recognized when she first appeared. In the nymph of Greenwich Village phase she appeared to be the very embodiment of a characteristic and widespread spirit, roused by the circumstances of the time. As she grew older her temper was affected by other circumstances just as the temper of the country and the century was affected by new crises and new obligations. The tragic quality of the human experience became, for Edna St. Vincent Millay, ever more and more evident. It should not be suggested that the miseries of war, of depression, and again of war chastened her, mellowed her, or performed any of the improving operations which disaster is often said to perform on the docile. Her fundamental outlook did not change; she would seem to have been born with her special insights clear before her eyes. But her temperament was enriched and her intelligence was spurred to an ever more alert display of will by the pressure of many threats. Without any loss of wit, the early frivolity dropped away leaving her nature fully revealed as champion, even at a moment when calamities multiplied, of faith in "the shining animal's" ability to be reborn.

So, in the end, she was more surely the embodiment of the American outlook than she had been in the beginning. Indeed she enclosed the ethos of these United States in the twentieth century within the variety of her temperament. Even the contradictions and unresolved conflicts that tormented her were the same ones that have confused our culture. The granite of New England was in her and so was the flexibility of bohemia. She was American in her recklessness and in her reserves; in her mixture of audacity and decorous formality; in her devotion to learning and in her determination to put it to creative use; in her impulse toward

rebellion, corrected and controlled by her respect for tradition; in her will to carry the battle to the enemy even when she knew the adversary to be the invincible one, death. The blend in her intelligence of traits derived from many sources of American vitality conveys the striking impression that she contained within herself important aspects of our native genius, alerted to a fine intensity of insight.

It is this absorbing—and, surely, durable—interest that claims for her a permanent place in the history of American poetry. She belongs to an impressive company of artists who came to maturity and found their voices during the second quarter of this century. Many of these have undertaken to explore the darkest caves of the secret mind of man and they have developed new poetic forms in which to record their experiences. Among them the figure of Edna St. Vincent Millay is conspicuous because she stands alone and in a blaze of light. It is impossible not to understand what she has to say, impossible not to be moved by the simple, direct, eloquent statements of her convictions. The world, which she had held no closer at the beginning of her life than she did at the end, gave her as much of pain as it did pleasure. Love, beauty, and life itself had all to be endured as well as enjoyed. But the human experience had meaning for her. The round of the seasons still kept to its pledge of rebirth and renewal. From that faith she drew the strength to impart dignity and beauty—as she said of Baudelaire's achievement—to even the most cruel phases of the adventure of our time.

Source: *Edna St. Vincent Millay*, University of Minnesota Press, 1967, 48 p.

### Sources

Flanner, Hildegarde, "Two Poets: Jeffers and Millay," in *The New Republic*, Vol. 89, No. 1156, January 27, 1937, pp. 155-67.

Gray, James, in his *Edna St. Vincent Millay*, University of Minnesota Press, 1967, 48 p.

Madeleva, Sister M., "Where Are You Going, My Pretty Maid?," in her *Chaucer's Nuns and Other Essays*, D. Appleton and Company, 1925, pp. 143-58.

Monroe, Harriet, "Edna St. Vincent Millay," in *Paetry*, Vol. XXIV, No. 5, August, 1924, pp. 260-67.

Scott, Winfield Townley, "Millay Collected," in *Poetry*, Vol. LXIII, No. VI, March, 1944, pp. 334-42.

### For Further Study

Britten, Norman A., *Edna St. Vincent Millay*, revised edition, Boston: Twayne, 1982.

An overview of Millay's life and work, including her prose and drama.

Dash, Joan, *A Life of One's Own*, New York: Harper & Row, 1973.

A short look at Millay's life and her relationship with her husband.

Gould, Jean, *The Poet and her Book*, New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1969.

The standard biography of Edna St. Vincent Millay.

Gray, James, *Edna St. Vincent Millay*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1967.

A booklet that assesses Millay's life and works in a very accessible style.

Van Doren, Carl, *Many Minds*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926.

An assessment of Millay written at the height of her powers and popularity.

# Fern Hill

*Dylan Thomas*

1946

Dylan Thomas has been a controversial poet since his first poems appeared in 1933. His work is not easily categorized. He has been variously described as a surrealist, a primitive, a Welsh bard, a metaphysical poet, a dadaist; the list is extensive. Perhaps the term most frequently attached to Thomas is twentieth-century Romantic.

Thomas's poetry is usually divided into three stages. In the first period, his poems are complex and often obscure, centering on the cycle of birth and death. The poems from the second period, written primarily during the years of World War II, take on a more human and personalized dimension, and include such works as "Ceremony After a Fire Raid" and the elegy "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London." "Fern Hill" was written during the last period, when Thomas produced longer narrative poems, using more understandable imagery and fluid lines. Published in *Deaths and Entrances* in 1946, it is one of his poems which easily fits the description, romantic; in fact, it has often been compared to William Wordsworth's nature poetry.

The poem is based on Thomas's own childhood vacations spent at Fernhill, a farm owned by his mother's oldest sister, Ann Jones, and her husband. In "Fern Hill," Thomas presents an idyllic picture of childhood on a farm, filled with vivid imagery which presents a child's view of the world. This is contrasted in the final stanzas with the regret of the adult as he recalls the loss of the innocence and splendor of childhood.





## Author Biography

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

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



Dylan Thomas

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

During the early 1950s Thomas wrote several of his most poignant poems, including "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" and "Lament." Nev-

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

### Poem Summary

**Line 1:**

"Fern Hill" is considered one of the most beautiful and evocative recollections of childhood in all of English literature. Thomas opens the poem like a storyteller. The word *now* does not mean at the present time. It is a storyteller's phrase; "Now as I was young," advises the listener to sit back and hear a story about childhood. The word *easy* here recalls the comfort and freedom from care that adults associate with childhood.

**Line 2:**

Throughout the poem, Thomas combines words that are not ordinarily associated with each other to give the reader a new perspective; thus the

“tilting house” becomes one that is full of joy and song. This blend does not give a physical description of the house, but an emotional one. The reader experiences the child’s pleasure. This is a key technique in “Fern Hill,” as Thomas recreates for the reader the idealized dreams of childhood summers. In addition, he combines clichés to create a surprising new way to present an idea or feeling; each cliché alone would attract no attention, but the unusual blend with its word play becomes an intriguing and playful simile. “Happy as the grass is green” does not necessarily translate into a specific, identifiable amount of joy. It simply brings the delight of the tongue twisters and nonsense rhymes of childhood. Green, the color of spring and renewal, is used throughout the poem.

**Line 3:**

Even the nights are filled with stars, as fits the memories of idyllic childhood.

**Lines 4-5:**

Thomas uses personification when he introduces time, who grants the child permission to enjoy his days fully, to “climb golden” under his gaze. The use of golden adds the connotation of being charmed, untouched by the ordinary worries of life.

**Line 6:**

With this line, Thomas re-creates childhood play and fantasies. The child becomes the master of all that is around him. The idea of a fairy tale connotation is further reinforced with the word prince. A child’s kingdom is fashioned from the world around him, in this case, the apple orchard. The line also refers to the apple boughs in the first line and the windfall light in line 9. Such connections help Thomas establish a visual and sensual impression of Fernhill.

**Lines 7-9:**

Thomas returns to the mode of storyteller as he changes the traditional opening of fairy tales, from upon to below. In addition, it reinforces the impression of time as a gentle overseer in lines 4-5. As lord of all this place, the child rules the trees and flowers. In the last line of the stanza, Thomas uses beautiful images, describing the sunlight in the orchard as “rivers of windfall light.” Windfall refers to the apples fallen from the trees, but in addition the word has a secondary meaning of good fortune or good luck. Both definitions contribute to the emotional sense of the image.

**Lines 10-11:**

These lines restate the child’s impressions in the first stanza. A sense of well-being is emphasized again as green is repeated and now joined with carefree. The word “famous” supports the child’s sense of being the center of his world; it compliments “honoured,” “prince,” and “lordly.”

**Line 12:**

This line hints at the nostalgia that will end the poem. Although the child feels that he will be young forever, while even the sun must age, it is he who is only once young.

**Lines 13-14:**

Again Thomas parallels the lines, 4 and 5, from the previous stanza. Time allows the speaker the freedom to play endlessly.

**Lines 15-16:**

The emphasis on the colors green and golden, with their connotation of young and blessed, recurs throughout the poem. The alliteration in huntsman and herdsman reinforces the child’s idea of the control that he has over his world; the other images in these lines support this feeling. Notice the repetition of words beginning with “g,” “h,” and “c.”

**Lines 17-18:**

In this line, Thomas recalls the ways in which children view time as moving slowly. Time, a benevolent force in the child’s life, moves at a different pace for him than for adults.

**Lines 19-22:**

Thomas presents the reader with a series of images—long sunny days, rich and golden hay fields, sweet melodic air—which convey a sense of joy, song, comfort, and contentment. Everything is exaggerated, as a child might see it. The hay fields seem enormously high; the fire can glow green.

**Line 23:**

The rest of the stanza describes the child’s ideas about what happens during the nighttime on the farm. As day turns to night, the stars themselves become not distant spheres, but simple objects lighting the sky for a child.

**Lines 24-27:**

Thomas creates a dream image in which the child imagines that the farm vanishes when everyone is asleep. This foreshadows the disappearance of the farm in the final stanza. However, here the nighttime fantasy is one of adventure, not at all

## Media Adaptations



- *In Country Heaven—Evolution*, an audio cassette read by Thomas and others, is available from Harper Collins Audio.
- *Dylan Thomas Reads* is available on audio cassette from Audiobooks.
- A video cassette titled *Dylan Thomas: A Portrait* is available through Films for the Humanities and Sciences.
- A video narrated by the author titled *A Dylan Thomas Memoir* was released by Pyramid Film and Video in 1972.

frightening or sad. Thomas even uses “blessed” to describe these night happenings. The farm is borne away by the owls, seemingly under the protection of the moon.

### Lines 28-30:

The morning finds the farm back, shimmering with morning dew. The alliterative “wanderer white” continues Thomas’s use of connotation; he uses the color white to symbolize purity and renewal. The entire stanza focuses on images of marvel and wonder and renewal. Thomas compares each morning to the first morning of Adam and Eve. The farm becomes Eden before the fall.

### Lines 31-36:

Thomas expands his image by going even farther back in time than Adam. He describes the creation of the cosmos itself. The joy of light appearing finally out of darkness is the joy that surrounds the farm and all the creatures on it as they enter each new day. If these images were expressed through an adult voice, they would seem artificial, even ridiculous. Only through the voice of a child can they express wonder effectively.

### Lines 37-38:

This stanza restates many of the ideas and descriptions in the previous stanzas. Honoured was

first used in line 6; the animals and house are described again. The “new made clouds” recall the birth of light in the last stanza, while “happy as the heart was long” revises the end of line 2. This repetition or echoing effect reinforces the child’s life. Days are similar, one to another. This is the pattern of childhood.

### Line 39:

The “sun born over and over” contrasts with the sun in line 12 which is only young once.

### Lines 40-41:

The child’s carefree attitude is again described. The alliteration and assonance of “house high hay” reinforce this easy feeling.

### Lines 42-45:

With the last three words in line 42, Thomas introduces the idea of loss. Time allows the child such mornings, but they will not last forever. Until this point, the details presented the idealized memories of childhood, recalling what it felt like to be free and easy, to feel that time was generous, giving endless sunny days. Now the adult perspective enters, mourning that the number of those glorious days is so limited. In line 43, Thomas uses alliteration to create an image of the joyful song of time. However, the song is not for adults. Only the green and golden children can hear it.

### Line 46:

This line restates line 42, and the word “white” again appears, with its connotation of innocence, remembering the child’s inability to understand the nature of time.

### Lines 47-50:

These lines parallel the disappearance of the farm in lines 23-27 as the farm disappears in the nighttime once again. Instead of the protective owls however, it is time that takes the farm.

### Line 51:

This line provides a poignant contrast to the beginning of stanza four, when the child wakes up like Adam, overwhelmed by the glory of the world. Thomas effectively uses the alliterative phrase “farm forever fled” to stress the loss. Time will no longer show his mercy in a “childless land.” This final transition from the remembered glories of childhood to the reality of the adult world is irrevocable.

**Lines 52-53:**

Thomas uses repetition of phrases from past stanzas to emphasize the sense of loss. Line 52 repeats lines 1 and 14, while line 53 changes line 10 to “green and dying.” Green now becomes the color of decay.

**Line 54:**

The emotional impact of this line is more easily felt than translated. The adult has become a prisoner of time. His life has boundaries like the sea; time orders his movements, just as the moon directs the motion of the sea.

## Themes

**Nature and Its Meaning**

The childhood described in “Fern Hill” is spent among trees, streams, hay fields, and animals, and the child who lives among these beautiful rural surroundings feels safe and confident. To some degree this scene is a typical idealization of nature, suggesting that children would be happy and well-adjusted if left alone by adults and society. The idea of the “noble savage”—the pure, childlike person who is noble because untainted by civilization—has endured in literature for centuries, dating back at least to Aphra Behn’s 1688 novel *Oroonoko* and most widely popularized in the writings of eighteenth-century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Like the noble savage, the child of “Fern Hill” is at home in a natural state without the intrusion of society.

In “Fern Hill,” however, it is not nature that makes the boy’s life so blessed, but the boy who glorifies nature. This is evident in the language of joy and amazement that serves to elevate and celebrate the boy’s experiences. He uses personification to give human motives and behavior to objects, animals, and abstract concepts: wagons, foxes, and pheasants “honour” the narrator; the farm is described as having a rooster “on his shoulder”; and, most important, time “let me hail and climb / Golden in the heydays of his eyes.” The child also uses hyperbole, or exaggerated overstatement, to make nature more impressive, as when he says that the haystacks are as high as the house, the dewy farm is “all / Shining,” or the stream is “holy.”

Furthermore, life in nature seemed so blissful that the narrator compares it to the biblical paradise of the Book of Genesis, the Garden of Eden,

## Topics for Further Study



- Write a few stanzas of a poem about what your childhood was like, to make it seem happier than any childhood could be. Choose objects and descriptions that will make readers envy you for having grown up so happy and carefree.
- Explain the “fire green as grass” in line 22: what do you think the speaker means by this? Try writing your own similes that seem to make no sense, along with a few sentences for each explaining why they actually are appropriate.
- Do you think this speaker regrets the way his childhood transpired? What sort of life do you think he has led since growing up? What values does he have as an adult? Support your answers with quotes from the text.

through references to Adam and Eve (“Adam and maiden”) and Creation (“the birth of the simple light / In the first, spinning place”). And like the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden for their sinful pride, children fall “out of grace” when they lose their innocence. Depicted in “Fern Hill” as the object of the narrator’s youthful awe, nature symbolizes a passing stage of wonderment and inner peace.

**Freedom**

In memories, childhood is often recorded as a time of freedom, mostly because children have simple needs and desires that are easily satisfied. It is unusual, though, to associate childhood freedom with power, as this poem does. In fact, the narrator’s special status as a child—he is not just “honoured” “lordly,” and “a prince,” but also “golden”—is a more original depiction of childhood than the versions seen in most literature, where children are presented simply as happy and carefree. Part of the freedom that this child senses results from the fact that he moves about in his surroundings without rules or limitations imposed by others. In contrast, the poem ultimately equates time and aging as chains that imprison us.

The worlds in which the boy and the adult narrator live are the same, only their perspectives differ. The adult has become aware that the serene world described in "Fern Hill" is not permanent and may even be an illusion. In this poem, freedom seems to be dependent on perspective, but eventual loss of freedom also appears to be inevitable. In the closing lines, the narrator admits that he may never have been free, even as a happy child: "Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means, / Time held me green and dying / Though I sang in my chains like the sea."

### Impermanence

The boy of "Fern Hill" is not aware of time, but the older narrator draws attention to time's passage with the first few words, which indicate that he is beginning a story about days gone by: "Now as I was young ...." Four and a half of the poem's six stanzas serve as a laundry list of the wonderful experiences, sensations, and sights of the narrator's childhood. However, the reader detects hints, in the form of statements in the past tense, that the circumstances described no longer hold true: "I was prince," "I was green and carefree," "the farm was home," "I was huntsman and herdsman." Still, there is a slight shock when the poem shifts to the present tense in line 42 with the phrase "time allows." The surprise is lessened because that crucial phrase is buried in the middle of a tangled sentence that twists and turns with prepositional phrases, delaying the reader's recognition of meaning until the last possible moment. What is revealed here changes everything: "... time allows / ... so few and such morning songs / Before the children green and golden / Follow him out of grace." The days of childhood, each beginning with a blissful morning, are destined to be few. The farm, so real and tangible in "Fern Hill," is "forever fled."

### Style

Like all of Thomas's poetry, "Fern Hill" is complex in its structure. The poem has six stanzas, each with nine lines. Ordinary meter is frequently less important to Thomas than the syllabic line. This can be seen in "Fern Hill" which has a unique pattern of development. The first, second, sixth, and seventh lines of each stanza are fourteen syllables long, while the third, fifth, and ninth lines are nine syllables. Each fourth line has six syllables.

The rhyme scheme, as well, is nontraditional. Instead of concentrating on end rhyme, Thomas uses internal rhyme throughout the poem. Alliteration, words that begin with similar sounds, also occurs throughout the poem; for example, line 2 uses "green" and "grass," and line 28 describes the "wanderer white." Assonance, using similar vowel patterns, is also part of Thomas's poetic style. "Daisies and barley" from line 8 illustrate this. In addition, many lines are filled with types of half rhyme: "sun" and "young" in line 12; "spinning" and "whinnying" in lines 34 and 35. These recurring sounds create a melodic quality which reinforces the mood and atmosphere of "Fern Hill." Like the house Thomas describes, the poem itself is lilting and gay.

### Historical Context

According to the poet's widow, Caitlin Thomas, "Fern Hill" was written in Majoda, New Quay, Wales, in 1944 even though it did not appear in print until Thomas's 1946 book *Deaths and Entrances*. The two years' difference is significant. In 1944 the terror of the war was at a peak, and Thomas had retreated to Wales to avoid the constant bombing of London, his home at the time, by the *Luftwaffe*, Germany's air force. By the time the poem was published, the terror of the air raids was over, and the British people had time to reflect on the ways the war had changed their lives.

Britain had been preparing itself for invasion from Germany since 1938. In that year, Germany took over Austria under the guise of wishing to protect the German citizens in that country from persecution. Later that year, when German Chancellor Adolf Hitler laid claim to the region bordering Czechoslovakia, known as the Sudetenland, Britain and France both urged the Czech government to give up the land in exchange for a treaty in which Germany promised to stop its aggressions. Six months later, Germany broke its treaty and took the remainder of Czechoslovakia by invasion.

By then, it was clear that Hitler could not be trusted, and local governments in Britain began preparing citizens for invasion. More than 38 million gas masks were distributed to citizens, and air raid drills occurred on a regular basis. In September of 1939, when Germany invaded Poland, both France and Great Britain declared war. Germany set about conquering the smaller countries in north-

## Compare & Contrast

- **1946:** The British Labour Party, led by Prime Minister Clement Attlee, nationalizes the British Coal Industry and the Bank of England, among other industries.

**1951:** Winston Churchill, Prime Minister of Great Britain during World War II, is re-elected to the post of Prime Minister, but does not change any of the Labour Party's socialist policies.

**1979:** Conservative Party leader Margaret Thatcher is elected Prime Minister for the first of three consecutive terms, serving in her post until 1990. During her tenure she lowered the tax rate and sold nationalized industries back to private concerns.

**Today:** The Conservative Party is still in power in Great Britain, but has lost its majority to the Labour Party.

- **1946:** U.S. colleges reach an all-time high enrollment, as returning servicemen received tuition through the G.I. Bill of Rights (passed by Congress in 1944).

**1962:** James Meredith becomes the first African-American to attend the University of Mississippi after the Supreme Court's 1954 ruling against segregation in public schools.

**1990:** The Americans with Disabilities Act is passed, containing provisions ensuring dis-

abled citizens have equal access to public education.

**Today:** Although rising tuition rates are creating a wide rift between public and private schools, a college education is available to all Americans.

- **1946:** After losing World War II, the Japanese give up control of Vietnam. The French, who prior to the war had controlled the country since 1880, attempt to restore their rule, but Vietnamese Communists fight for independence.

**1954:** The negotiated end of the struggle between the French and the Vietnamese Communists temporarily divides the country into two, but Ngo Dinh Diem, with U.S. backing, rises to power in the south and refuses reunification.

**1963:** Diem is assassinated, and U.S. military arms and advisors are sent to Vietnam to help the South resist the Communist North.

**1973:** After overwhelming domestic protest, the United States withdraws its troops and support from Vietnam.

**1975:** North and South Vietnam are united as one country under Communist rule.

**Today:** Large nations are hesitant to extend military help to either side of disputes without the backing of other independent nations.

ern Europe—Norway, Denmark, Holland, and Belgium—and eventually, in June of 1940, forced France to surrender. Until the United States entered the war after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December of the following year, Great Britain was the only major country left opposing the spread of Germany and its allies.

After the fall of France, Germany directed its attention to Britain, using submarines to sink supply ships and airplanes to bomb strategic sites.

Bombing first targeted airplane manufacturing facilities, and then, soon afterward, major cities such as London, Coventry, Plymouth, and Swansea (where Thomas was born and raised). Great Britain had not been taken over by an invading army since 1066 A.D. The British had expected a German invasion and were prepared to repel it. Thousands of school children were evacuated from larger cities and sent to rural Wales, in many cases to live on farms like the one described in "Fern Hill."

Between mid-August, 1940 and July of 1941 the cities of Britain were pounded by German bombs almost daily. One of the key reasons that the Germans were unsuccessful in the "Battle of Britain," as it came to be called, was the British development of radar. A string of radar stations along the coast was able to anticipate incoming *Luftwaffe* planes and limit their damage, while the British Royal Air Force kept bombing German cities, which had no such protection. In June of 1941 the pressure was taken off of Britain when the Germans diverted their force toward Russia, which had been an ally of Germany in 1939 but was now attacking. Not much later the United States entered the war, keeping Germany busy defending the lands they had captured. The threat of a German invasion decreased, but frequent bombing raids against British cities continued throughout the rest of the war. As late as March of 1944, when Thomas decided to leave London for Wales, air raids killed 79 British citizens and wounded 633.

When "Fern Hill" was printed in 1946, the war was over, and Britons had time to look around and see how their world had changed. Many of the major cities were in rubble and needed rebuilding. Published reports stated that in London alone 700,000 houses needed repairs from war damage. This led to overcrowding in the structures still standing. Unemployment rose as able-bodied workers returned from military service to a world where production demands had lessened from wartime levels and hundreds of manufacturing factories lay in ruin. The end of an American aid program, known as Lend-Lease, created food shortages. The people of Britain desperately needed relief, and Thomas presented a nostalgic look back at more carefree days of innocence and freedom in "Fern Hill."

### Critical Overview

In her essay "Kinship and Craftsmanship," Sheila Deane discusses the importance of the "voice" in Dylan Thomas's poetry, noting that he designed his poems to be read aloud. The sound of the line was even more important than the exact meaning of any one particular image. She compares Thomas's description of his own writing style as a sculptor of poetry to the traditional Welsh bards, who were also viewed as craftsmen in their age. Throughout his poetry, the use of language and the rhythms of words were key elements in Thomas's creative

style. In "Fern Hill," Deane finds that Thomas returns to "an experience of language that he associated with childhood and freedom." She analyzes the language in the last stanza, looking at the use of rhyme, alliteration, and assonance, and concludes that Thomas "wanted his poems to be a series of interconnected words; each word contributes its sound, shape, and meaning to the design of the stanza, but each word also receives something from the stanza, is 'charged' with extra significance by its position and relevance."

In *A Reader's Guide to Dylan Thomas*, William York Tindall discusses the similarities between "Fern Hill" and poems by Shakespeare, Yeats, Marvel, Hopkins, Vaughn, and Wordsworth. He also compares it to Thomas's "Poem in October," which has a similar theme. Tindall admires the musicality of "Fern Hill," calling it "a symphony in green and gold major." In his analysis of each stanza, he stresses the musical effects of the language.

### Criticism

#### Tyrus Miller

*Tyrus Miller teaches comparative literature and English at Yale University, and has written extensively on twentieth-century poetry, fiction, and visual culture. In the essay below, Miller analyzes "Fern Hill" stanza by stanza, praising Thomas's use of assonance-rhymes, his metaphors describing time, and the images used to convey sexual awakening.*

Dylan Thomas's "Fern Hill," written in September 1945, shortly before the poet turned thirty-one years old, revisits the site of his boyhood joys and poignantly renders the glimmering afterimage of their lost intensities. Thomas published it in the literary journal *Horizon*, alongside his famous poem commemorating the tragedy of the Nazi air raids on British cities, "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London." He also managed to include it at the last minute in his forthcoming book, *Deaths and Entrances*, which appeared in February of 1946.

"Fern Hill" dates from one of Thomas's most productive periods, the last year and a half of World War II, and was partially occasioned by the events of the war. Swansea in Wales, Thomas's hometown and the city of residence of his parents, was bombed repeatedly in the Nazi air campaign against Great



Britain. After the terrible bombings of February 1941, which caused the stricken Thomas to sob to a friend, "Our Swansea is dead," Thomas's parents withdrew to their cottage in Blaen Cwm, near the farm of Fernhill, where Thomas had spent time with his aunt many years earlier. His visits to his parents during the war triggered the memories of the happy Edenic times when he was young and thoughts of war were still distant. Though "Fern Hill" bears no open trace of this historical context, its background presence is crucial to understanding the poem's meaning and emotional force. It represents an imaginative return to this rural childhood paradise, but at the same time offers us, in a sense, a negative print of the adult inferno of buzz-bombs and night fires, the hell of the times from which the poet had only temporarily escaped.

Thomas sought to lend his poetry a sculptural quality, an effect he achieved through his extensive use of repetition and variation of phrases, rich sound patterning, and elaborate stanza forms based on exact syllable counts. "Fern Hill" is an exemplary work in this respect, with its dense weave of repeated phrases and its complicated stanzas; Thomas painstakingly worked out the final form on over two hundred sheets of manuscript. Each of the six jagged, nine-line stanzas repeat the syllabic scheme of 14, 14, 9, 6, 9, 14, 14, 9, and 9 syllables per line. Rather than employing full rhymes, Thomas uses assonance rhymes, in which the rhyme words share a vowel sound; the stanzas follow the rhyme scheme "abcdeabcd." Yet the technical intricacies of Thomas's stanzas do not end there. In the a-, b-, and d-lines, the end-words are mostly monosyllabic and hence have their assonance on the final vowel; for example, "boughs" assonates with "towns" in the first stanza. In the c-lines, however, the endings are two-syllable words which assonate on the first of the two vowel sounds: stary / barley, only / slowly, watery / horses, maiden / stable, over / golden, rising / dying. In more conventional rhyme, rhyming on the last syllable is referred to as "masculine"; rhymes on earlier syllables are referred to as "feminine." Thomas uses both patterns and maintains a rigorous scheme throughout the whole poem.

The craft which Thomas so ostentatiously displays in this poem is not, however, meant as a mere show of virtuosity. The sound structure and linguistic texture is intended to evoke a boy's blissful participation in the textures, sounds, forms, colors, and intensities of the natural world. In the mouth, consonants are made by various stoppings of the breath, while vowels are formed by the flow

## What Do I Read Next?



- Thomas's *Collected Poems* (1952) is a slim selection of ninety works. Containing an additional 102 pieces, *The Poems of Dylan Thomas*, edited by Daniel Jones, was published in 1971.
- Thomas was well known for his scandalous public behavior, reinforcing the reputation for decadence that artists and poets have enjoyed since the Romantic movement. John Malcolm Brinnin's 1955 memoir *Dylan Thomas in America* records a number of the poet's escapades during time spent in the United States in the years 1950-1953, near the end of his life.
- Brinnin's book begins with a disclaimer from Caitlin Thomas, the poet's widow. Her *Caitlin: Life with Dylan Thomas*, co-written with George Tremlett in 1985, includes many of the same events and details that Brinnin documented, but much more sympathetically.
- Another British writer whose studies of childhood are similar to Thomas's in their vividness and intellectual complexity is Ireland's James Joyce. Some of the short stories in his book *Dubliners* demonstrate a spirit similar to that of "Fern Hill."

of breath through differently shaped openings of the mouth and throat. Thomas's choice of assonance-rhymes, which associate words through shared vowels, thus makes the poem's sound structure reinforce the ideas of open flow and free union presented by the poem's imagery: the passing of day into night and night into day, the joyous movements of the body through open space, the interpenetration of everything with everything else. One might even speak of a sort of metrical symbolism working in the poem, with the masculine and feminine assonances interweaving into a natural bisexual or presexual sensuality of childhood. Similarly, the stanza form and its successive repetition throughout the poem dramatize the slow, imperceptible changes, over the course of time and re-



*The sound structure  
and linguistic texture is  
intended to evoke a boy's  
blissful participation in the  
textures, sounds, forms,  
colors, and intensities of  
the natural world."*

peated experiences, that eventually carried the speaker from his early entanglement with nature to the later reflective maturity in which poems may be given shape.

The first three stanzas represent the boy's sheer, unending pleasure in the natural cosmos of Fernhill farm, a condition in which time does not pass, but rather reigns, personified, as a benevolent divinity watching over the scene. The poem's opening word, "Now," which it pronounces perpetually and repeatedly with every reading, captures the paradoxical fusion of the instant with eternity which characterizes the opening scene. Two of the appearances of the word "time" in these initial stanzas fall at the beginning of the line, which allows Thomas to capitalize the word and hint that "time" does not merely designate a dimension of experience, but rather names an allegorical character. The other appearance sets "time" into a variant of the typical fairy-tale formula for starting a story: "once below a time." The boy is in a fairy-tale world of his own making, in which Time itself is the King who grants the child-hero his favor. By a sort of magical incantation, Thomas projects time from its everyday sphere—where it is tied to money and work, routine and deadlines, boredom and anxiety, aging and death—into a mythic sphere where life flows, pulses, and recurs, with ever-renewed powers.

Thomas makes this mythical condition concrete by his merging of temporal and spatial imagery, so that typical markers of time are represented spatially, while spatial entities become images of time. For example, "night," which usually indicates a stretch of time, becomes a position in the boy's cosmos: "The night *above* the dingle starry," "once *below* a time." Analogously, "sun" and "moon," usually referring to bodies in space,

instead name stretches of time in "Fern Hill": "All the sun long," "All the moon long." Metaphorically, however, time and space are not opposed dimensions, but a single time-space, drawn together within the magic circle of the boy's person. Insofar as he is the focal point of all that happens under the sky, "Time" is none other than the sun or moon, shining its light down on him, granting its grace, inviting him to join the celestial bodies in the heights of the day or night: "Time let me hail and climb / Golden in the heydays of his eyes"; "In the sun that is young once only / Time let me play and be / Golden in the mercy of his means."

A change occurs with the opening of the fourth stanza, at first barely perceptible because of the powerful rhythmic impulse which pushes the reader forward. From this point on, time begins to spread out, becoming linear and irreversible, and hence carrying the speaker from the timeless present of boyhood to the adult world in which the past can only be imperfectly recaptured by memory. The opening phrase of the fourth stanza, "And then to awake," picks up the closing nightfall at the end of the third stanza and might thus seem merely to continue the cycle of suns and moons of the ecstatic opening. But "awakening" is not just a change from dark to light; it is a change in the condition of the boy who is experiencing the cycles of nature. It carries the implication of leaving behind the dream-world and coming to clear consciousness of the real world around him. It also suggests, through images of the crowing cock, of a couple naked in the garden ("Adam and maiden"), and of a pregnant sun ("the sun grew round that very day"), that the awakening is above all sexual: the first stirrings of puberty, which will focus the boyhood ecstasies upon the narrower pleasures of the adult body. This focusing comes at a cost, for it introduces a before and after to the eternal instant of the earlier stanzas. As soon as one recognizes time's passing, the paradise of boyhood is over and can only be imagined. Thomas compares his awakened vision of the day to the first day of creation, God's bringing of the light out of chaos. But his words betray that this original state can only be imagined, but never really recaptured: "So it *must have been* after the birth of the simple light / In the first, spinning place." It must have been something like this, Thomas pleads, but since there is no going back, one can—literally—only take the poet's word for it.

The last two stanzas confirm the shift from blissful celebration to wistful mourning for what has been lost in time. In the fifth stanza, Thomas even puns on the word "morning," implying that

his own present poetic mourning might have been heard already in the "morning songs" that time allowed the boy. Only now, however, when that boy's "heedless ways" are but a memory, can he recognize the "awakening to morning" as a simultaneous awakening of a *mourning* of lost times. The last stanza is strongly marked by the implication of death: "time would take me / Up to the swallow thronged loft by the shadow of my hand." The central lines of this stanza suggest death even more explicitly: "Nor that riding to sleep / I should hear him fly with the high fields / And wake to the farm forever fled from the childless land." "Riding to sleep" implies a hurrying toward death, while overhead, time is "flying," carrying away the fields that were once fields of play or "fields of praise" (stanza 4).

The final tercet returns to the paradox of time's "morning songs," memorably capturing the fusion of joy and grief, life and death, freedom and necessity that the revisited Fernhill farm represents for the adult poet: "Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means, / Time held me green and dying / Though I sang in my chains like the sea." The last line offers a fragile redemption of lost time in the idea of turning the man's lament into poetry, of transfiguring grief into elegiac mourning song. "Sang in my chains," at one level, refers to the chains of necessity, the bonds of time, which hold the adult as they did the boy, however little he knew of such things. But the image of the sea, which ends the lines, admits another reading of the line, which give it a less despairing sense. "Chains" may also be taken to mean the chains of waves which propagate across the sea's surface. They provide an image of natural rhythm, recurrently coming into being and passing away. To sing in chains like the sea, then, sets the poet in a fragile relation with nature, in which his poems are like waves that rise and fall. But as the previous line "Time held me green and dying" reminds us, this "likeness" between the poet and the sea is possible only in the ideal world of the poem, in the medium of the poetic word; in the world of time, the city, and war, this resemblance can only be a passing wave.

Source: Tyrus Miller, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 1998.

### Mary C. Davidow

In the following essay, Davidow discusses how Thomas explores "the physical, emotional, and spiritual development of the artist" in "Fern Hill," using methods similar to those in James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.



*The world he creates  
is the world of a happy  
child: a world where the  
sun is always shining and  
where every sound makes  
music."*

One method of introducing Dylan Thomas' poetry to the uninitiated student is through a recording of the celebrated poet's own reading of "Fern Hill," an exquisite lyric inspired by remembrances of his childhood experiences at the farm of his aunt, Ann Jones, in Wales. The magnificent, resonant quality of Thomas' voice underscores the importance of the aural pattern in the structure of the poem.

There is a Blakian spirit in the aura of innocence which pervades the earlier stanzas of the poem. Thomas' fondness for compound words, for alliterative phrases as well as for the use of assonance and consonance, greatly enhancing the texture of the patterned sounds, indicates his indebtedness to [English poet Gerard Manley] Hopkins. The entire poem, autobiographical in the same sense that [Irish novelist James] Joyce's novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, is autobiographical, tells, in a highly compressed style, of the physical, emotional, and spiritual development of the artist from childhood to young manhood.

The poem's narrative content—if one may call it that—is divided into two major parts: (1) the first three stanzas, dealing with childhood and preadolescent experiences leading to adolescence, and (2) the last three stanzas, describing the youth's emergence from innocence to knowledge, and his gradual development ("by the shadow of my hand") into adulthood as he, at the same time, responds to the call of the creative spirit within him and becomes a poet joining the company of song-makers ("Up to the swallow thronged loft") in a country-style Parnassus. To be sure, the reader is more likely to react intuitively rather than consciously to the impalpable elements in the poem—without doubt the poet's intention.

A major consideration, and one on which the organic development depends, is the poet's treat-



*Thomas' young hero celebrates in 'Fern Hill' the beauty and mystery of the singular experience taking him from innocence to knowledge."*

ment of time. The focus of narrative proceeds from the mind of the adult speaker whose account of childhood's climb toward maturity originates in personal recollection, and thus establishes as a desideratum the sustained use of the past tense. The reader learns that the tad in stanza one grows up to become not only the young man looking back on his "lamb white days" in stanza six, but the poet looking *downward* from his perch in the hay loft where *time* has brought him. Contrary to the conventional notion of depicting time as an *onward* continuum, Thomas, for the most part in the poem, envisions the passing of time as an *upward* extension, paralleling man's physical and, symbolically, aesthetic as well as spiritual growth. In stanza one, two key words relating to temporal progression are *under* and *below*; they suggest a child's aoristic conception of sequential relationships. As "prince of the apple towns," running quite easily, with no need for bending or stooping under the apple boughs" in the orchard, the little boy has only a vague notion of time. In fact, his journey through life has barely begun. Thomas, through the use of the phrase, "once *below* a time," emphasizes tenderness of age by introducing overtones of nursery tales in the echo of the opening line of fairy stories associated with childhood. The device is reminiscent of Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* which begins with the statement: "Once upon a time ... there was a moocow...." Both writers, Thomas and Joyce, fulfill an identical artistic purpose. They elevate the practical and immediate necessity of language to a level of aesthetic magic. The reader's reaction to the fairy-tale diction is one of delight associated with childhood's tales of enchantment.

In stanza two, the reader discovers that the child of stanza one has become less dependent upon the adult world for his entertainment. He possesses greater freedom and mobility in the pursuit of his round of daily activities. A carefree, happy, singing

child, he visits the barns where he is stranger to neither man nor beast; he plays at being huntsman and herdsman; he uses imagination and is cunning in his games of make-believe. Thomas stresses the youth and happiness of his protagonist through the use of significant repetition of such words as *green* and *golden*; at the same time, through this technique of meaningful repetition, he reinforces the unifying links tying one stanza to the next, and thereby achieves organic progression in his poem. The world he creates is the world of a happy child: a world where the sun is always shining and where every sound makes music.

Just as the key colors, *green* and *golden*, unite thematically stanzas one and two, the phrase, "huntsman and herdsman," of the second stanza anticipates the paradox between chastity and sexuality inherent in the diction of stanza three, thus linking the two stanzas together. "Huntsman" suggests Diana, goddess of the hunt as well as of chastity, while "herdsman" brings to mind the image of Pan, god of pastures, flocks, and shepherds; but he is also god of fertility. In the second stanza, the poet indicates the youth's awareness of the passage of time; of the Sabbath, and of holy things. His environment has sensitized the spiritual, ethical, and emotional aspects of his nature. Also, he has acquired a degree of mastery and command, for the calves come to his call. A second level of meaning, however, gives amplification to the huntsman-herdsman paradox. The statement, "the calves / Sang to my horn," suggests Pan once again, while the words "clear and cold" suggest Diana.

In stanza three, the protagonist, now an adolescent, gradually gives up his service to Diana and pays greater attention to Pan. The stanza is replete with fertility symbols: *sun, hayfields, chimneys, watery, fire, stables, nightjars, horses, and flashing*. Since owls, traditionally, are symbols of wisdom, and since nightjars are also known as fern-owls or goatsuckers, the poet, through the use of selective diction, suggests that with the acquisition of wisdom and knowledge, childhood vanishes, or recedes into the past. Hence, he writes: "The owls were bearing the farm away," and then later, "All the moon long I heard ... the nightjars / Flying with the ricks." Toward the end of the stanza, Thomas juxtaposes the symbol of chastity, the moon, with symbols of fertility. Childhood is over as the youth acquires physical maturity; he experiences the first stirrings of the passions and recognizes sexuality as a vital force. The rhythm of the stanza is quickened, reflecting the excitement of newly discovered sensations.

Adolescence at times seems precariously pitched between childhood and maturity. The opening lines of stanza four remind the reader of the ambivalence characteristic of this stage of human development. The farm, symbol of childhood in the poem, reappears. But it is a different farm from that of childhood; it is a Paradise, a Garden of Eden wherein, metaphorically, the first fruits of knowledge were shared in human partnership. Unlike Joyce's Stephen Dedalus after his visit to night-town, Thomas' young hero celebrates in "Fern Hill" the beauty and mystery of the singular experience taking him from innocence to knowledge: "... it was Adam and maiden, / The sky gathered again / And the sun grew round that very day." One should not, nevertheless, ignore the ambiguity in the phrase "the cock on his shoulder," with its suggestion of betrayal of selfness.

With maturity come responsibility and care. "Under the new made clouds" the young man speaking in the poem enjoyed the pleasures of adulthood. In contrast to the innocent joys of childhood which, he tells us, made him "happy as the grass was green," those of maturer years made him "happy as the heart was long." Love, he learned, brings with its excitement and delight an ensuing measure of heartache. A note of nostalgia is sounded. In stanzas one and two, time is personified as an indulgent father: "Time let me hail and climb," and "Time let me play and be;" in stanza five, time is personified as a storybook Pied Piper, an image inherent in the statement that "children green and golden / Follow him out of grace."

In the final stanza the speaker tells his reader how little, during his childhood years, he understood or concerned himself with his ultimate destiny. Clearly time, imperceptibly, has brought him to a position of height (the loft), and has endowed him with wings (Joyce's symbol of freedom for the artist). Since the swallow is recognized not only by his swift flight, but also by his habit of nesting in chimneys and barns, stanza six is linked by the reference in it to "the swallow thronged loft" with stanza three's "tunes from the chimney"; therefore, the swallow symbolizes the swift flight of time on the one hand, and the poet's function as the maker of songs on the other. With his aesthetic sensibilities awakened in childhood and refined in youth, the poet has joined the company of song-birds in the loft. In the concluding lines of the poem, time is once again personified, not, however, as an indulgent father, nor as Pied Piper, but as a tyrant holding all men prisoners. The poet, despite the

tyranny and ultimate conquest of time, lived to create immortal beauty.

Source: "Journey from Apple Orchard to Swallow Thronged Loft: 'Fern Hill,'" in *English Journal*, Vol. 58, No. 1, January, 1969, pp. 78-81.

### C. B. Cox

*In the following essay, Cox discusses how "Fern Hill" celebrates the joy of childhood through its "evocative rhythms and imagery."*

"Fern Hill" is deservedly one of the most popular of Dylan Thomas's poems. Wonderfully fresh and full of vitality, the words combine together in highly original ways to picture the joyful exhilaration of a child. This originality confuses some readers. Striking phrases such as "happy as the grass was green", "prince of the apple towns", or "at my sky blue trades", surprise by their novelty, and at first it is difficult to be sure what effects are intended. These unusual images are evocative rather than precise; and their purpose is to create a strong emotional response, rather than to define a particular attitude. Thomas deliberately uses all his wit and subtlety to gather into each image a wide range of associations. Essentially a romantic poet, he is trying to communicate an experience which is almost beyond expression. In the repetitions "it was lovely", "it was air And playing, lovely and watery ...", he seems to be straining after an ecstasy which can never be wholly confined into words.

This type of poetry has often been held in low esteem by modern analytic critics, who have little to say about the large emotional effects achieved through evocative rhythms and imagery. It is true that some of the images in "Fern Hill" appear to have been chosen at random; for example, what effects are intended by the line: "Down the rivers of the windfall light"? And other similar examples make the poem as a whole a little diffuse; but there is no point in over-emphasising this. Thomas is celebrating the divine innocence of a child, and for him this is a mystery beyond analysis.

The magical landscapes of the poem have a twofold effect. They create anew the freshness and wonder of a child's vision, but at the same time they express Thomas's adult interpretation of his past experience. This is not forced upon the reader by direct comment or moralising, but is shown in and through the concrete pictures of the boy's life on the farm. A good example of this occurs at the end of the second stanza:

And the sabbath rang slowly  
In the pebbles of the holy streams.



*These unusual images are evocative rather than precise; and their purpose is to create a strong emotional response, rather than to define a particular attitude."*

---

These lines remind us how for a child roaming the countryside, time moves slowly through long mornings of pleasure. But much more than this is implied. The noise of water passing over the pebble is like church bells calling the boy to worship. Thomas conveys his adult belief that the boy's awakening to the beauty of nature has a divine significance, and that all human joy is holy.

A comparable example can be seen in the middle of the third stanza. After a day of excitement the child, as he falls to sleep, continues to feel the movements of the day—"as I rode to sleep". But the continuation of movement into the night, as the boy hears the owls and nightjars, suggests a mysterious and unending vitality in nature itself. In the phrases "under the simple stars" and "blessed among stables", the words 'simple' and 'blessed' are introduced not to make explicit a definite religious viewpoint, but to evoke a general feeling of reverence for the innocence of a child.

The gaiety and strength of the poem come largely from this type of adult interpretation. Thomas is aware of the power of time, but instead of becoming melancholy and nostalgic, he sees the joy of his childhood as something for which to be thankful, and as itself part of the wonder of all creation; instead of giving way to regrets he exults in what has been. The boy does not appear in any way separate from his surroundings. This effect is achieved in part by the use of transferred epithets—"the lilting house", "happy yard", "gay house". These words describe how the boy's emotions transform every object he perceives; but also they prevent us from feeling that he lives in an alien environment. The boy is "honoured among foxes and pheasants by the gay house"—an integral part of all created things.

For Thomas the child achieves an exalted state, for he is a 'prince', honoured and 'lordly', a rightful inheritor of the blessings of nature. Lines such as "the hay fields high as the house" evoke a sense of abundance, of a world of plenty of which the boy's exuberance is but a part. He is "green and golden", innocent and yet overheaped with gifts. His mind moves rapidly from one impression to the next; and this energy is reflected in the many quick movements of the poem—"All the sun long it was running ...", where the lilting rhythm, with its light stresses—"happy as the grass was green"—carries the reader on in quick surges of delight. The long sentences, beautifully constructed and controlled by Thomas, give this feeling of continuous pleasure; no sharp breaks interrupt the exuberant flow.

These expressions of mystery and power move to a climax in stanza four. When the boy awakes in the morning, the farm appears like the garden of Eden, a revelation of innocence. It is typical of Thomas that this new awareness is expressed in concrete terms. When dealing with comparable experiences, Wordsworth moves away from the actual towards a mysticism beyond the world of the senses. He talks of "something far more deeply interfused" in nature, and tries to find expression for an awareness of the transcendental—"The winds come to me from the fields of sleep." Thomas's sense of wonder comes from participation in life itself, for he glories in what is revealed through the senses, and does not look beyond. The spellbound horses are mysterious, to be praised in song, not as symbols of a transcendental reality, but for their own force and beauty.

From the beginning of the poem, the child's simple unreflecting vitality is seen as a gift of time, soon to be withdrawn. These references to time have a double effect. The words "all the sun long", "all the moon long", show how the child measures time by light not by the clock, and how each day seems a long savouring of experience; but they also remind us that this experience is not permanent. In the final two stanzas, the facts of time become more insistent, and the pathos of transience can no longer be ignored. Yet even in these concluding lines, no suggestion is given that the child's experience is in any way inadequate. "Nothing I cared" is a simple statement of fact, not a moral comment on the heedlessness of the child. Time may hold the child "green and dying", but he sings in his chains; he is "like the sea", full of abundance and infinite power.

The effect of the last line is essentially imprecise, and its success comes largely from the music of the poem. Thomas was a constant experimenter in verse, and always used words deliberately for musical effects. The quality of this poem comes largely from a careful use of ecstatic rhythms; in the last line, we have a last flourish of rhythmic exaltation, with the image of the sea gathering together into itself all the previous evocations of heroism and abundance.

In the literature of the post 1945 world, so often full of anger and despair, Thomas's faith in life seems to some people naive. But in this poem time and death are accepted as undeniable facts, yet Thomas's attitude is one of courage and sanity. In a world faced by total destruction, he reminds us of the wonder and mystery of individual experience, and for this we ourselves should be thankful.

**Source:** "Dylan Thomas's 'Fern Hill'" in *The Critical Quarterly*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Summer, 1959, pp. 134-38.

### Sources

Deane, Sheila, "Kinship and Craftsmanship," in her *Bardic Style in the Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, William Butler Yeats, and Dylan Thomas*, UMI Research Press, 1989, pp. 197-215.

Matthews, H. C. G., and Kenneth O. Morgan, *The Oxford History of Britain, Volume V: The Modern Age*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Tindall, William York, in his *A Reader's Guide to Dylan Thomas*, Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1962, 297 p.

### For Further Study

Thomas, Caitlin, and George Tremlett, *Caitlin: Life with Dylan Thomas*, New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1986.

Biography by Thomas's wife.

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

Contains several critical essays written during Thomas's life or soon after his death, including poet Karl Shapiro's reflections on Thomas's career from the perspective of a peer who knew him. Also particularly significant is John Ackerman's "The Welsh Background," which highlights some of the social themes that can be found in Thomas's work.

Emery, Clark, *The World of Dylan Thomas*, Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1962.

Provides lengthy literary analyses of each of the 90 poems in Thomas's *Collected Poems*. For "Fern Hill," Emery draws attention to autobiographical points of reference, as well as similarities to the poets William Wordsworth and William Blake.

Sinclair, Andrew, *Dylan Thomas: No Man More Magical*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975.

The author of this book is a novelist who adapted Thomas's play *Under Milk Wood* as a feature film. The analyses of the poems offered here are a little less formal than most academic works.

# High Windows

*Philip Larkin*

1974

The title poem of his 1974 poetry collection, "High Windows" is one of only 117 poems the highly respected poet Philip Larkin published during his lifetime. The collection itself was the last of only three volumes of poetry he published at intervals of almost a decade. "High Windows," with its frank sexual language, traditional form, and search for transcendence in the everyday world, is often cited by critics as an example of Larkin at his stubborn and cranky best.

The poem, triggered by an older speaker's envy at seeing a younger man and woman whom he speculates are sexually involved, quickly widens in scope to raise questions of personal freedom, definitions of paradise, religious transcendence, and even the act of writing poetry itself. Driven by an undercurrent of sexual jealousy bordering on rage, the poem moves quickly from image to image, perhaps to reflect the speaker's obsessive train of thought. Some critics have said that "High Windows" may look, at first glance, like a poem about sex, but that it turns into a commentary on religion. By the end of the poem, Larkin's relentless questioning leads him to a surprising and almost inarticulate revelation. Larkin published no more poetry after *High Windows* and died in 1985.



## *Author Biography*

Although Philip Larkin only published five slim volumes of poetry during his lifetime, by the time



*High Windows* was published, he was regarded as one of the greatest British postwar poets, commonly known as "England's *other* Poet Laureate." In fact, he was officially offered the position when it became available in 1984, but he politely declined, insisting instead on keeping a more private life away from the public eye. Even when his work was most popular, he refused to choose a career exclusively in poetry, working instead as a librarian while also writing novels, criticism, and essays on jazz.

Born August 9, 1922, in Coventry, Warwickshire, England, Philip Arthur Larkin was the second child of Sydney and Eva Larkin. His father being the city treasurer, he grew up in a "quite respectable house" in a middle-class neighborhood. His poems reflect a negative view of these early years, which he described as an "opaque childhood" punctuated by "forgotten boredom." An undiagnosed near-sightedness, combined with a speech stammer, caused Larkin to withdraw from other children, learning instead to dislike them outright. After years of considering himself an "unsuccessful schoolboy," he began feeling more comfortable during his final terms at the King Henry VIII high school, where he learned to balance his love for cricket, football, jazz music, and reading in his father's extensive library. It was during these late teen years when Larkin began writing prose and poetry, inspired by the lush novels of Henry James, whom many critics consider his biggest writing influence. He continued to write at Oxford in 1940, where he enrolled in St. John's College and, later that year, published his first poem "Ultimatum" in the school literary magazine *The Listener*.

World War II required many college students to join the British military, but due to his poor eyesight, Larkin was free to finish up his schooling in English language and literature. Acquiring a deep love for W. H. Auden's and W. B. Yeats's poetry, he remained at the university until 1943, when he received a First Class B.A. degree. Larkin received his M.A. from Oxford in 1947. Larkin decided not to pursue a teaching career due to his stammer, which persisted late into his life. Instead, he chose to work as a librarian at the Wellington urban district council in Shropshire while completing a professional accreditation in a librarianship correspondence course. In 1946 he was appointed assistant librarian at the University College in Leicester, and shortly after that appointed sub-librarian at Queen's University in Belfast, Northern Ireland. Perhaps faster than expected, Larkin was settling into his lifetime career; in 1955 he became

librarian of Brynmor Jones Library of the University of Hull in Yorkshire, where he worked until his death in 1985.

The drudgery of work became a common theme throughout Larkin's work, most notably in the two half-serious poems "Toads" and "Toads Revisited." "Why should I let the toad *work* / Squat on my life? / Can't I use my wit as a pitchfork / And drive the brute off?" the speaker of "Toads" asks. As a younger poet Larkin told an interviewer for the *Guardian* "Work encroaches like a weed over the whole of my life.... It's all the time absorbing creative energy that might have gone into poetry." But an older Larkin learned to balance work with his creative vocation. As the speaker of "Toads Revisited" writes, "No, give me my in-tray, / My loaf-haired secretary / ... Give me your arm, old toad; / Help me down Cemetery Road." It was while working at the public library in Shropshire that Larkin wrote his first two novels, *Jill* (1945) and *A Girl in Winter* (1947). Stories of "displaced working-class heroines," they reflect a cheerless and gloomy postwar England. Both novels were critically praised for their carefully textured landscapes, and *A Girl in Winter* was so well received that Larkin's publisher pressured him for a third book of prose, though by this point his energies were shifting back toward poetry.

Although Larkin's first collection of poetry, *The North Ship*, was published before his two novels, it was not until Marvell Press published *The Less Deceived* in 1955 that he began to gain a reputation as a poet. His inclusion in the influential anthology *New Lines*, in which editor Robert Conquest first dubbed Larkin a member of "The Movement," further reinforced his place in modern British literature. Larkin's work appeared regularly in such notable journals as *Atlantic Monthly* and *The Partisan Review*. These poems were later collected in the book *The Whitsun Weddings* in 1964. It was another ten years, in 1974, before *High Windows* appeared as his final collection of poetry.

Publishers Faber and Faber celebrated Larkin's 1982 birthday with the publication of *Larkin at Sixty*, which was a collection of tributes from friends and colleagues. By this point in his life Larkin had earned an international reputation as, in the words of Alan Brownjohn, "the most technically brilliant and resonately beautiful, profoundly disturbing yet appealing" poet to be writing in the second half of this century. He received many honors, including several doctorates, appointments to the National Manuscript Collection of the Contemporary Writers Committee and the literature panel of the Arts Council for Great Britain, as well as such literature awards as the Queen's gold medal for Poetry in 1965 and the Lioness Award for Poetry in 1974. In addition, Larkin was made a Companion of Honour in the Queen's Birthday Honours List. A man who saw life "more as an affair diversified by company than as an affair of company diversified by solitude," Larkin died shortly after an operation for throat cancer in 1985.

### Poem Text

When I see a couple of kids  
And guess he's fucking her and she's  
Taking pills or wearing a diaphragm,  
I know this is paradise

Everyone old has dreamed of all their lives—  
Bonds and gestures pushed to one side  
Like and outdated combine harvester,  
And everyone young going down the long slide

To happiness, endlessly, I wonder if  
Anyone looked at me, forty years back,  
And thought, *That'll be the life;*  
*No God any more, or sweating in the dark*

*About hell and that, or having to hide*  
*What you think of the priest. He*  
*And his lot will all go down the long slide*  
*Like free bloody birds. And immediately*

Rather than words comes the thought of high  
windows:

The sun-comprehending glass,  
And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows  
Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.

### Poem Summary

#### Lines: 1-3

These first lines establish the dramatic situation that triggers the rest of the poem: the speaker records his response to seeing two young people together whom, he assumes, are lovers. He calls them "a couple of kids," suggesting that the speaker is older than they are. The speaker immediately supposes that the boy is "fucking her and she's / Taking pills or wearing a diaphragm." Modern birth control—and its contribution to the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s—was a fact of life at the time the poem appeared, but was not a common theme in mainstream poetry. The narrator's hasty assumption serves as the basis for everything to follow; it is the first clause of a sentence that will stretch into the third stanza. The sight of the couple and the speculation about their sexual activity leads the speaker to examine his own, perhaps "less fulfilled," life.

#### Line: 4

Following the clause that begins the poem, "when I see a couple of kids," the speaker continues, "I know this is paradise." We have already learned that the speaker is older than the couple, and from the tone he establishes in the first three lines, we might guess that he is saying this fourth line sarcastically, with wry regret, or with an edge of jealousy. How would this be paradise? Viewed from a Judeo-Christian point of view, the original paradise was the Garden of Eden where Adam and Eve were innocent—or ignorant—of sexuality before the Fall. In this sense, the young couple—sexually active but protected from the risks or consequences of their actions—might represent a modern-day Adam and Eve, the opposite of the Biblical couple. Although the phrase "I know this is paradise" may not be meant seriously, the religious reference is reinforced and developed further throughout the poem.

It is important to note as well that the first stanza ends without punctuation, letting the speaker's train of thought flow from line to line and stanza to stanza without pause. This technique is called "enjambing." Larkin may have used this

technique to let the form of the poem reflect the building tension in the speaker's voice and the momentum of thought that continues to push his ideas forward.

**Lines: 5-7**

Here the speaker develops further how the young couple's way of life might be paradisiacal. He also specifies that it is "everyone old" who considers this a paradise, associating himself with that group. The younger generation can engage in premarital sex without much risk of unwanted pregnancy, and they no longer have to worry about the "bonds and gestures" associated with old-fashioned "courting." Instead, the youth push the older generation's traditions "to one side / Like an outdated combine harvester." Larkin makes the fairly abstract ideas of tradition, emotional bonds, and old-fashioned "gestures" concrete by using a simile, or comparison. To perhaps emphasize the magnitude of the gap between his generation's idea of courting and the modern concept of dating, Larkin compares the "outdated" traditions to a hulking, obsolete piece of farm machinery.

**Lines: 8-9**

Often the process of aging is referred to as "heading downhill," or as being "over the hill." Larkin may be thinking of those terms when he muses that for the very young, who are healthy and active, oblivious to their own mortality, this downhill journey still seems to be a "long slide / to happiness." Not only is it a pleasant journey for them, it is seemingly "endless" and without consequence. Line 9 ends the first sentence of poem, a long run-on depending more on the energy of the speaker's voice than perfect grammar to carry it forward. It is useful to read the sentence as a whole before moving to the next lines.

**Line: 10**

Beginning with the end of line 9 and continuing through line 10, Larkin shifts the perspective of the poem by wondering if anyone looked at him "40 years back" the same way he is looking at the young couple. Gradually, the speaker has been revealing just how old he is in relation to the couple, and here we learn specifically that he may be more than 40 years older than they. This shift is important because it is the second main "leap" of thought in the poem (the first was the sight of the couple, triggering the speaker to begin). He progresses from observing "the kids" to imagining himself "in their shoes," which perhaps shows that

## Media Adaptations



- *Readings (by the Poets): Philip Larkin; Thom Gunn; Ted Hughes; Seamus Heaney; Douglas Dunn; Tom Paulin; Paul Muldoon.* Audio cassette and paperback. 1995.
- *Douglas Dunn and Philip Larkin* book and cassette (Faber Poetry Cassettes). Faber & Faber, 1984.

he is trying to empathize or better understand them.

**Lines: 11-14**

Imagining what a person his current age would have thought of himself as a younger man, the speaker wonders if they might have been just as envious of him as he is now of the young couple. Did someone see him as a young man and think "*That'll be the life?*" (Note that the italics indicates a new voice in the poem that is not necessarily the speaker's.) This raises a question concerning the possible cause of envy, and the first answer the speaker gives is that there is "*no God anymore.*" This sudden statement may seem a unexpected and drastic leap to a new theme, but the question of paradise is raised as early as the fourth line. What made the speaker first think of paradise was the absence of the old-fashioned "bonds and gestures" for the couple living without consequence, like a modern Adam and Eve.

Having taken this religious turn, the speaker continues his list. Without God, of course, there is no "*sweating in the dark / About hell and that,*" because without a heaven there is no hell—where humankind is punished for its sins—about which to worry. And on a lighter note, Larkin finishes off the list of reasons that "*that'll be the life*" with not "*having to hide / what you think of the priest.*" Of course, if the speaker is concerned with concealing his opinion, it is not likely a kind one. This adds to the tone of the poem, which has been interpreted as sarcastic, bitter, and as seething with jealousy.

**Lines: 15-16**

Larkin returns to the downhill-slide image first mentioned in the second paragraph. He is still imagining what an older observer might have said about him forty years earlier. The simile, or comparison, "*like free bloody birds*" adds fuel to the argument that the speaker is quite bitter ("bloody" is a mild British swear word similar to "damn" or "hell" in American speech).

**Line: 17**

Beginning at the end of line 16 and continuing through line 17, Larkin makes a final shift in the poem, in an attempt to reckon with where his thoughts have taken him. Perhaps envious at seeing the young couple and forced to face his own aging, the speaker wants to say more, but does not seem able to. He has seen the couple, thought about sex (present in their lives but, apparently, no longer in his), wondered if anyone thought of him the same way when he was still young, questioned a life without God or hell ... where does all of this lead him? "Rather than words," he says, indicating an inability to articulate his feelings, "comes the thought of high windows." Again he brings us back to subtle religious imagery, the "high windows" perhaps evoking the stained glass in a church. The word "high" also means elevated or transcended, which also carries religious connotations. Rather than having a logical response to the flood of emotion depicted in the poem, the speaker has only the thought of windows—an image that is both a transparent barrier and a source of light.

**Lines: 18-20**

Since no more words come to the speaker, only the image of "high windows" in these final lines, it is the glass that "comprehends" the sun. Any last ounce of understanding is achieved by the intimate object rather than the speaker. Beyond the glass he imagines "the deep blue air," but this still doesn't reveal anything more to him. Instead, it "shows / Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless." If these last lines seem to break down or even trail off rather than explode into a fanfare of revelation, it may be because the speaker lacks the ability to explain the depth of his emotion. The more personal the feeling or experience, especially something extremely private such as sex or religion, the more difficult it is to put into words.

We should note that the last word of this poem is "endless," which mirrors the earlier image of "everyone young going down the long slide / To happiness, endlessly." Larkin may finish the poem

in this way to give structure to an otherwise purposefully elusive ending. It also leaves the reader with a sudden sense of open space—a void where words no longer communicate.

**Themes****Sex**

The triggering subject of "High Windows" is the speaker's sight of "a couple of kids" and his assumption that they are sexually involved and that the girl is using birth control. To the older speaker, this realization fuels a deep jealousy toward the couple that, in turn, leads him to explore larger questions. In another of Larkin's poems he reported feeling excluded and "out of touch" when it came to sex: "Sexual intercourse began / In nineteen sixty-three / (Which was rather late for me)." The older speaker's envy, though, is more than a simple reaction to feeling sexually excluded or impotent. Although Larkin chooses to shock us early on with his deliberately colloquial word choice, he spends more time describing the couple's possible birth control methods than the sexual act itself. The effectiveness of the diaphragm and the birth control pill radically changed a young generation's perception of sex. Suddenly young couples could eliminate the consequence of unwanted pregnancy. Before the side effects of these birth control methods were known, and before the outbreak of incurable and fatal sexually transmitted diseases, a "sexual revolution" took place in the 1960s and early 1970s. What triggers the apparent resentment toward "the kids" is the speaker's realization that the younger generation has more sexual freedom than did his own, and that they are no longer restrained by the "bonds and gestures" enforced on his generation.

**God and Religion**

Assuming that the young couple is having "protected" sex—and are thus free to fulfill their desires without the consequence of pregnancy—leads the speaker to much larger issues of religion and spirituality. He considers their sexual freedom the "paradise / Everyone old has dreamed of all their lives," as if the couple were a new Adam and Eve, no longer requiring the sexual ignorance imposed on their tenure in the Garden of Eden. "High Windows" raises many theological questions. If man can now control or prevent the creation of more life, what then is the role of God? If young couples can "sin" without the natural conse-

quences, why do we need to “[sweat] in the dark / about hell and that” anymore? Who cares “What you think of the priest? / He and his lot will go down the long slide / Like free bloody birds.” Although Larkin paints a picture of a new world without God, he doesn’t dismiss an underlying hope for spirituality. The sexual freedom the speaker is most jealous of is only part of a larger search for personal freedom and possibility of spiritual transcendence. “Rather than words,” Larkin concludes the poem, “comes the thought of high windows,” as if language can no longer describe the place where these questions have led him. What Larkin leaves us with is an image which reminds of the stained glass windows of cathedrals, but doesn’t locate us specifically in a house of worship. And it is ultimately not the speaker who understands what this all means, but the “sun-comprehending glass, / And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows / Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.”

### Human Condition

The speaker’s feelings of spiritual isolation in the poem may reflect the overall mood of people living in post-World War II England. Some critics cite Larkin as the postwar poet who most articulately and poignantly recorded the spiritual desolation of a world in which the large majority of people have abandoned the religious faith that once gave their lives meaning and hope. Larkin finds a connection between the young who have dismissed the moral code of the previous generation and pushed all “bonds and gestures to one side / Like an outdated combine harvester” and the resulting rejection of religion. This is a new world, without God, hell, or concern about hiding “what you think of the priest.” This new generation has unrestrained sexual freedom and an absence of religious morals. Nevertheless, religion is the fundamental structure and source of meaning in many lives. What does it say of the human condition if a new generation is growing up spiritually “desolate?” If the younger generation has rejected the faith that structured the lives of their parents and gave them meaning, what will take its place to give their lives meaning and structure?

### Style

Larkin combines formal poetic structure with colloquial language to create a refreshingly interesting speaker’s voice in “High Windows.” Using traditional poetic devices borrowed from William

## Topics for Further Study



- During lunch with friends over a period of a week or so, keep a journal of interesting phrases and slang expressions you hear. Write a poem in four-line stanzas, rhymed xAXA, using only language you recorded from everyday conversations.
- Some community leaders have banned the teaching of “High Windows” because of its use of profane language. Does the poem have enough “redeeming educational value” to justify its inclusion in textbooks? How so?
- Begin a poem with a simple image, perhaps something you saw on the way to class or on television the night before. Using a speaking tone similar to Larkin’s, write as fast as you can, exploring the questions this subject raises and making sure you don’t repeat any idea or image as the poem progresses. See how far this frantic pace and exploration can take you from the original scene.

Butler Yeats and Thomas Hardy, he contains an otherwise obsessive and wandering train of thought inside five quatrains (four-line stanzas). The stanzas themselves are built on an xAXA rhyme scheme, which means that although the first and third lines don’t have end rhymes (indicated by an “x”), the second and fourth lines do. Larkin loosens the rules a little, though, with the use of “slant rhymes,” or words which may have matching consonant or vowel sounds, but not both. An example of this is in the first stanza, which rhymes “she’s” with “paradise,” or the third stanza which matches “back” with “dark.” This use of “half” or “slant” rhymes, made famous by Emily Dickinson, helps soften and hide a traditional form so the content of the poem isn’t overshadowed by its “container.”

Larkin often used traditional meter, or a set structure of accented and unaccented beats per line. The most famous of metric beats, the iamb, with its daDUM daDUM rhythm, is the building block of most traditional forms, matching the human

heartbeat. Although Larkin doesn't use this meter exclusively throughout the poem, it is the most prevalent of rhythms, adding a driving beat to the speaker's voice. The second line of the poem contains four perfect iambs (otherwise known as an iambic tetrameter), composed using far from traditional language. It is this marriage of traditional meter with the most common "tavern" language which characterizes Larkin's poetic voice the best: "And GUESS he's FUCKing HER and SHE'S ..."

Another device Larkin uses in "High Windows" is heavily enjambed lines. These lines have no punctuation to slow or stop them at the end, so they enjam, or "run over" to the next line without pause. Lines which do end with punctuation are called "end-stopped lines." Whereas an end-stopped line slows down the pace of the poem with a comma or period, enjambed lines let each thought flow without pause. Because the speaker's voice in "High Windows" seems to grow increasingly frantic and fast-paced, perhaps Larkin chose to employ more enjambed lines than end-stopped lines to help reflect the obsessive mood of the poem. This technique also helps hide the end-rhymed words in each stanza by "blending" them into the flow of an image or idea which may span several lines without pause.

### Historical Context

Some critics cite Larkin as the postwar poet who most articulately portrayed the spiritual desolation of a world which has lost the religious faith that had previously structured human lives. This paints a grim view of the postwar England in which Larkin lived and worked. He had been rejected for military service because of poor eyesight. While he studied literature and language at St. Johns College, many of his peers were fighting and dying in Europe. Nazi bombing during the Blitz devastated many cities in England, and citizens lived under a constant threat of death amid severe shortages of basic goods, including food and clothing. Some biographers cite this grim period in England's history as the root of Larkin's pessimism and isolation.

"High Windows," published in 1974, is one of Larkin's later poems, yet the speaker is still searching for "the last rages of religious faith." The sexual freedom of the young is of almost obsessive interest to the speaker: "When I see a couple of kids / And guess he's fucking her and she's / Taking

pills or wearing a diaphragm / I know this is paradise."

"The Pill," a hormone-based contraceptive that suppresses ovulation, was introduced to the British public in 1961. A 99 percent effective form of birth control, its development had a huge impact in both Britain and America on how an entire generation viewed sex. It eliminated the risk of unplanned or unwanted pregnancy, allowing people to explore their sexuality with limited consequences (in the 1970s, most known venereal diseases were easily curable and none were known to be fatal). The speaker in "High Windows" considers this open approach to sex a type of paradise, all of his generation's values, "bonds and gestures pushed to one side / Like an outdated combine harvester." But where does he fit in this new sexual freedom? The speaker's age and solitary condition reinforce his isolation from the vibrant sexuality of the young couple. The commonplace sight of two lovers walking down the street triggers an emotionally charged narrative.

### Critical Overview

Much of the commentary on "High Windows" is woven into the larger criticism of Larkin's work as a whole. Many critics focus on the often isolated and distanced tone of Larkin's work. In *The Dictionary of Literary Biography* Bruce Martin describes the speaker of Larkin's poems as often an "unmarried observer," "a staple in Larkin's poetic world" who "enjoys only a curious and highly limited kind of communion with those he observes." Andrew Sullivan, writing for the *Harvard Observer*, calls the overall tone of Larkin's work that of an "irrelevant and impotent spectator." This quality may be intended to mirror the mid-century, postwar human condition. Peter King claims in the introduction to *Nine Contemporary Poets: A Critical Introduction* that Larkin is the postwar poet who "most articulately and poignantly [reflects] the spiritual desolation of a world in which men have shed the last rages of religious faith that once lent meaning and hope to human lives."

In *Out of Reach: The Poetry of Philip Larkin*, Andrew Swarbrick writes that the voice in "High Windows" is that of "an older man jealous of youth's sexual freedom." In another Larkin poem, "Annus Mirabilis," a similar jealous or perhaps wryly regretful narrative voice states, "Sexual intercourse began / In nineteen sixty-three / (Which

## Compare & Contrast

- **1960:** Enovid 10, the first oral contraceptive for women, is introduced by G.D. Searle.

**1970:** The Pill may cause blood clots, the FDA warns over 300,000 physicians in an urgent letter. The notice requires doctors to fully explain the risks of the hormone treatment to their patients before prescribing the drug.

**1993:** Numerous compounds and dosage levels of contraceptive pills are available. Research suggests that taking birth control pills may decrease the risk of some cancers in women. The Food and Drug Administration approves Norplant, an under-the-skin implant for women which releases the hormone progesterin into the bloodstream and prevents pregnancy.

- **1974:** President Richard Nixon becomes the first American president to resign after the House Judiciary Committee votes to impeach him on grounds of obstructing justice and failure to uphold laws.

**1997:** House Republicans call for a House Judiciary Committee investigation into President Clinton's alleged campaign finance illegalities. Other members of the government call for the president's impeachment on the grounds of personal misconduct, including extramarital affairs and sexual harassment while serving as the Governor of Arkansas.

- **1974:** The British company EMI develops the "Catscan," an invaluable new medical diagnostic tool which uses computed axial tomography to create colored cross-section images of the human body. EMI, formerly known as Electronic Musical Instruments, uses profits from Beatles musical recordings to develop the machine.

**1997:** British surgeons perform the first human brain cell transplant.

**1997:** Scientists in Scotland successfully clone a sheep. Worldwide debate erupts about ethical and moral issues concerning cloning.

was rather late for me)." Many critics see sexual jealousy as the driving force of "High Windows." This emotion leads the speaker of the poem, which "starts out looking like its about sex but becomes a poem about religion," to a transcendental ending which is more inarticulate than it is logical. Swarbrick contends that the poem represents the speaker's search for "an imagined escape into pure freedom, a freedom from all desire and language, an escape from identity and expression," leading Larkin to the final image of "deep blue air that shows / nothing."

### Criticism

#### Bruce Meyer

*Bruce Meyer is Director of the Creative Writing program at the University of Toronto. He has taught at several Canadian universities and is au-*

*thor of three collections of poetry. In the following essay, Meyer provides historical background for "High Windows" and argues that the poem explores "the issue of human sexuality in relation to morality and belief."*

According to Andrew Motion, Larkin's biographer and author of *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life*, Larkin's original title for "High Windows," was "The Long Slide." In the original draft of the poem, dated March 3, 1965, Larkin raises the question of the new sexual freedom sweeping England during the 1960s and tells the reader "all the writers / Born Eighty years ago said this is what we wanted ..." Larkin's initial reaction may have been to view the poem as a statement on the change in public mores, on the relationship between hope and realization, and on the widening gulf of the generation gap. What "High Windows" became by the time the poet had revised it two years later was a very different statement: an examination of the distance between

## What Do I Read Next?



- Larkin saved over 700 of his personal letters, revealing fascinating biographical information which lends interesting perspective to his creative writing. *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin 1940-1985*, edited by Anthony Thwaite, 791 p.
- Calvin Bedient's *Eight Contemporary Poets: Charles Tomlinson, Donald Davie, R. S. Thomas, Philip Larkin, W S. Graham* provides an excellent sense of Larkin's work within a larger poetic context.
- Salem Hassan explores Philip Larkin's role in British poetry in his book *Philip Larkin and His Contemporaries: An Air of Authenticity*.
- Another British poet who wrote during the same period as Larkin is Stevie Smith. Her *Collected Poems* is available from University of Oxford Press.

---

a man caught out on the edges of life and the reality and sensuality of love, passion, and human contact in a changing world that had left him behind. As pathetic a note as "High Windows" sounds on the part of the persona, it ends with a vision of eternity, extemporality, and nothingness—a small glimpse of heaven, a possible afterlife, and another world. The poet's perspective in this examination of the distance between life and himself is the "god-like" vantage point of a "high window" that is remote, isolated, and dislocated.

Philip Larkin is a poet of distances. In many of his best poems, such as "The Whitsun Weddings" where he watches couples boarding a London-bound train on their wedding day, or in "Church Going" which parallels many of the concerns of man's relationship to the spiritual, Larkin's role is that of the observer of events. He simply narrates what he sees, but comprehends and narrates the action with the sadness and pathos of one who has become detached from life. This sad, "observational" voice is not only supported by the narrator's position in the physical situation described

in "High Windows," but it is also further reinforced by the rhyme scheme. Larkin mixes off rhymes, such as "she's" (line 2) with "paradise" (line 4) and "back" (line 10) with "dark" (line 12), and true rhymes ("hide" in line 13 and "slide" in line 15) with the colloquialism of the nonrhyming end words "kids" and "diaphragm" in lines 1 and 3. The poem opens as if it is searching for some sort of order, as if the voice behind the words is attempting to find some sort of structure—moral or otherwise—in a world that has become dissonant, irregular, and disaffected with the ideals of the past.

This sense of disaffection found in the rhyme scheme is almost lost through the poet's use of the word "fucking" in line 2 when he views young love in carnal terms. His frankness reduces the innocence of the "couple of kids" not through evidentiary observation, but through surmise. Thus, young love is not viewed from the high window as something that is naive, but as something experientially jaded by the perceptions of a world-weary voice who is measuring the past against the present. The discrepancy this measurement or comparison of the past and the present creates is twofold. On one hand, the reader senses that the past is something old and corrupt, a world of double standards in which longing and desire were subordinated to high ideals; on the other hand, there exists the concept of a present world on the verge of hopeful liberation, where "bonds and gestures" are "pushed to one side / Like an outdated combine harvester." Certainly, the hypocrisy of poetic idealism is something that no longer holds any credence for the persona.

It is well to remember the context out of which Larkin's best poetry emerged when reflecting on what "High Windows" accomplishes in its technical effects and its argument. Philip Larkin belongs to an aesthetic development in British poetry following World War II that sought to rid poetry of its lack of clarity, frankness, and contact with reality. During World War II, British poetry had become a questionable vehicle for all manner of political, sociological, psychological, and aesthetic concerns. Larkin and many of his contemporaries argued that the works of the Dylan Thomas generation had produced poetry suffering from "the debilitating theory that poetry *must* be metaphorical." Such poetry of the 1940s, as Robert Conquest suggested in his introduction to the landmark *New Lines* anthology of 1956 (which included a selection of Larkin's work), was little more than metaphor heaped on metaphor, a jungle of jumbled utterance and an unwrought, unpoetic expression that simply posed as poetry. The poets who pre-



sented their work in Conquest's *New Lines* anthology became known as "The Movement." They quickly gained widespread popularity for the clarity of their work, for their restored sense of poetic form and lyricism, and for the manner in which they were able to link the tradition of the lyric—last practiced with any force in England by Thomas Hardy—with the expression of realistic daily life and unmetaphorical observation. For poets such as Larkin, the "refusal to abandon a rational structure and comprehensible language, even when the verse is most highly charged with sensuous or emotional intent" was the avenue they sought to restore form and vitality to the dying tradition of English lyricism. Conquest, however, tempered his convictions about a return to "formalist" poetry on the part of The Movement poets when he stressed that their poetry was "not worth much unless it is given the flesh of humanity, irony, passion or sanity."

The impact of The Movement was far-reaching, embodying the spirit of British arts in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The desire to confront realism, however stark and bleak it might be, attached itself to the outlook of a whole new generation of British dramatists—a group of playwrights who became known as "The Angry Young Men." Novels such as Alan Sillitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958) and plays such as John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956) and Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker* (1960) and *The Birthday Party* (1958) embraced the new aesthetic of the "anti-phoney, anti-wet" attitude of the postwar era. By the mid-1960s, the impact of The Movement and of the work of poets such as Philip Larkin was being felt by a succeeding generation of poets, many of whom were included in A. Alvarez' anthology *The New Poetry* (1962), which presented the work of both British and American poets—voices such as Plath, Sexton, and Lowell—who had, by then, either embraced the new British aesthetic or been secunded by it. Alvarez declared in his essay "Beyond the Gentility Principle" that "we are gradually being made to realize that all our lives, even those of the most genteel and enislanded, are influenced profoundly by forces which have nothing to do with gentility, decency or politeness." By the time Larkin began the composition of "High Windows" in 1965, Alvarez had already moved the aesthetic of British poetry beyond that of mere realism and into the realm of the violent, the psychological, and the sexual.

In the scheme of British poetry, then, "High Windows" stands as a fine poem, which for all its formal tricks—such as the off-rhymes, the shocking use of the word "fucking" in the second line,



*For the persona of  
"High Windows," the new  
distance lies not just  
between age and youth, or  
between the high window  
and the street below, but  
between the individual and  
God."*

and the argument that poses as statement of relief that some sort of psychological and sexual liberation has finally taken place—is an afterthought, an expression of nostalgia bordering on a sigh, and a lament for a lost youth. What Larkin feels is the passage of time, measured not just in what the "old dreamed of all their lives," but in the distance that the voice has, itself, come from the epoch of its own innocence to the distant observation of a new era that is both the fulfillment of age-old dreams and desires for a sexually liberated world and a lament for what has come too late. He sighs,

I wonder if  
Anyone looked at me, forty years back,  
And thought, *That'll be the life;*  
*No God anymore, or sweating in the dark*  
*About hell and that or having to hide*  
*What you think of the priest.*

For the persona of "High Windows," the new distance lies not just between age and youth, or between the high window and the street below, or even heaven and earth as suggested by the final stanza, but between the individual and God. The idea is that God and an old, cast-off code of morality that once governed the lives of everyday people is now represented by "the deep blue air," an emptiness that "shows / Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless." The suggestion, although not explicit in the ending of the poem, is that the price of freedom has been bought with an apostate vacuum into which the individual, without benefit of the new liberation, is cast. It is into this vacuum of "nothing" and "nowhere" that many of the finest poems of Larkin's later life are cast, such as the frightening "Aubade" in which an older man wakes in the night to confront the prospect of his own death in a heavenless universe.

The question of the “long slide” repeated twice in the poem, in lines 8 and 15, raises further theological concerns. Where is the slide going? Is progress a slide away from something—perhaps away from God? Where do our dreams lead us if they lead us to a universe that is Godless and empty? In these terms, the poem is an examination of the weight of faith and of the burden that human desire imposes upon individuals who feel obligated, by belief or by fear, to practice a code of morality that is contrary to their natural inclinations. As in the novels of D. H. Lawrence, the issue of human sexuality in relation to morality and belief is never quite resolved, no matter how hard the individual may try to argue a position for or against the age-old indictments of belief and behavioural codes and the guilt, anxiety, and sadness that often stem from the tug between the hormonal and the theological systems. And, perhaps, as Larkin admits in such poems as “Church Going,” where the persona enters an empty church out of both curiosity and the need to experience the spiritual presence within, the distance between the individual and certainty is too great to comprehend, and all one is left with, as in “High Windows,” is the sense of a gulf, an expanse, and a process that is “endless.”

Source: Bruce Meyer, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 1998.

### R.S. Gwynn

In the following essay, Gwynn examines the structure, themes, and influences of “High Windows,” claiming the poem to be representative of Larkin’s work.

“High Windows,” a lyric of twenty lines which became the title poem of Philip Larkin’s fourth and final collection of verse, appears roughly midway through the *Collected Poems*, and its position there is paradoxically both emblematic and deceptive. I say emblematic because Larkin consistently steers a middle course between opposites—between freedom and formal restraint, between naked confession and coy diffidence, between desire and the realization of desire. “High Windows” is, in many ways, the poem that best represents Larkin’s entire body of work. Yet its central location in the printed record of Larkin’s poetic career is deceptive; Larkin wrote only a handful of important poems (some would argue only one—“Aubade”) between the 1974 publication of “High Windows” and his death in 1985. It could well be that the poem’s final image, which Larkin describes as something

“rather than words,” signaled that he was nearing his personal limits of expression and would henceforth find little new worth saying.

Many of the poets of Larkin’s generation, both British and American, sought a workable compromise between traditional English versification and modernist experiments with free verse or open form. While Larkin continued to write strictly traditional verse throughout his life (the next poem in *Collected Poems*, “The Trees,” is composed in regular iambic tetrameter quatrains, Tennyson’s stanza from “In Memoriam”), some of his best poems contain elements of both formal and free techniques. “High Windows” is metrically uneven; the lines range in length from seven to twelve syllables and contain anywhere from three to six stresses. While an iambic meter may lurk in the background, only the second line, a tetrameter, and the fifth, a pentameter, display much regularity. Similarly, the poem’s use of rhyme is variable. The first two quatrains rhyme abcb; the final three abab. The types of rhyming sounds range from exact (side / slide) to slant (if / life, back / dark) to so-called light rhymes, in which stressed syllables are made to rhyme with unstressed ones (or vice-versa) as in windows / shows and glass / endless. The loose form is in keeping with the slangy conversational tone of the poem (“And guess he’s fucking her . . .” “He / And his lot will all go down the long slide / Like free bloody birds.”), and most of the rhymes, even the repeated -ide rhyme, are hidden by heavy enjambments (“And everyone young going down the long slide // To happiness, endlessly.”). The light rhymes in the final stanza seem particularly effective, for they resist closing the poem with a crescendo, thus underscoring the ambivalence contained in the final images. In all, Larkin has written a poem with a considerable amount of formal control which sounds like an open-form poem.

Many poets have celebrated youth, but Larkin is a poet who seems to have passed from childhood to middle age with almost nothing in between. The unfulfilled sexual longings of the adolescent inhabit the body of a middle-aged man who realizes, like a latter-day version of T. S. Eliot’s J. Alfred Prufrock, that time has passed him by. In “Annus Mirabilis,” a poem from the same period as “High Windows,” Larkin observes:

Sexual intercourse began  
In nineteen sixty-three  
(Which was rather late for me)—  
Between the end of the Chatterley ban  
And the Beatles’ first LP.

Larkin's biographer Andrew Motion claims that this admission is not literally true (Larkin, unlike most "confessional" poets, is relatively unconcerned with a recitation of "facts"); however, it does capture the sexual confusion which confronted a generation who were reared with old-fashioned attitudes toward sex and saw most of the traditional rules of sexual conduct rendered irrelevant by the new freedoms of the "swinging" 1960s.

So, on one level at least, "High Windows" is a poem about sex, the tensions between freedom and frustration that surface when Larkin enviously observes a pair of young lovers. The matter-of-fact use of "fucking" in the second line displays the banner of the new frankness, Larkin's belated realization that the old euphemisms for sexual intercourse no longer apply and have been "pushed to one side / Like an outdated combine harvester." The "Bonds and gestures" that constituted the manners and mores of sexual behavior have been rendered obsolete by the advent of easily obtainable methods of contraception ("Taking pills or wearing a diaphragm"); now that none need fear unwanted pregnancy all restraints are loosed, with "everyone young going down the long slide // To happiness, endlessly." The simile of a neglected piece of harvesting equipment is doubly appropriate here, since sexual activity in the Age of the Pill does not necessarily have procreation as its end.

But "High Windows," which Larkin originally titled "The Long Slide," is ultimately about more than sex; it is a religious poem that connects thematically to earlier Larkin poems like "Church Going" and poses a typical existentialist question: if God is dead and everything is permitted (as Nietzsche claimed) then why is no one particularly happy about it? The religious motif is initiated in line four with "paradise" and becomes predominant in the third and fourth stanzas:

I wonder if  
 Anyone looked at me, forty years back,  
 And thought, *That'll be the life;  
 No God any more, or sweating in the dark*  
*About hell and that, or having to hide*  
*What you think of the priest. He*  
*And his lot will all go down the long slide*  
*Like free bloody birds.*

Here Larkin claims that his own generation experienced a parallel kind of liberation, not the physical rush of unbridled sexuality but the spiritual emancipation that supposedly followed their rejection of traditional Christianity. Ironically, he invents an older "Anyone" for an equally envious earlier observer, and he uses the same metaphor, "the



*On one level at least,  
 'High Windows' is a poem  
 about sex, the tensions  
 between freedom and  
 frustration that surface  
 when Larkin enviously  
 observes a pair of young  
 lovers."*

long slide," for both generations' exhilaration at having shed the baggage of the past, as if they have been allowed an "endlessly" extended moment of pleasure in the children's playground of the world. Still, Larkin leaves unsaid what should be obvious: the "kids" in the first stanza will eventually grow into their own adult disappointments and will doubtless cast covetous eyes on the illusory freedoms of an even younger generation.

But there is irony in Larkin's choice of simile. "Free bloody birds" do not "go down the long slide"; they soar, or at least they should. The downward motion of the lovers and Larkin's own "lot" is symbolic, for both are vouchsafed only temporary respite from gravity (i.e. mortality), the ultimate leveler of all life and joy. The slide may be a long one, but it does not continue "endlessly." In the absence of God and any afterlife and in a world where the physical body has become the measure of all, Larkin feels no freedom at all, only discontent. This vague dissatisfaction, which comes in a manner "rather than words," leads to the poem's epiphany:

...the thought of high windows:  
 The sun-comprehending glass,  
 And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows  
 Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.

These "high windows" are obviously symbolic, but what kind of windows are they and what do they represent? I have had it suggested to me they embody a death wish, an imagined leap from an upper story into the great nothingness, the ultimate downhill slide, but I do not think that the answer is so simple. Motion quotes Larkin as saying they represent an "ultimate symbol of freedom from ... restrictions." Motion himself indicates that the

poem's conclusion "toys with the idea of vanishing into a wild blue yonder. However improbable an escape into 'deep blue air' might be, it offered a temporary release from the struggle to reconcile disparate elements of the everyday." Motion further observes that many of the poems in *High Windows* create "a dramatic conflict between a plain idiom and something more nearly Yeatsian, Symbolist, or even Eliotic," adding that their "final lines are offered as something 'rather than words', while remaining words all the same." Larkin seems to have borrowed from the very beginnings of the modernist experiment, from the French *symbolistes*, for his conclusion. Stéphane Mallarmé's "Les Fenêtres" (1863) offers a striking parallel:

Ainsi, pris de dégoût de l'homme ... l'âme dure  
Vautré dan le bonheur, où ses seul appétits  
Mangent, et qui s'entete ... chercher cette ordure  
Pour l'offrir ... la femme allaitant ses petits,  
Je fuis et je m'accroche ... toute les croisées  
D'où l'on tourne l'épaule ... la vie, béni,  
Dans leur verre, lavé d'éternelles rosées,  
Que dore le matin chaste de l'Infini,  
Je me mire et me vois angel! Et je meurs, et j'aime  
—Que la vitre soit l'art, soit le mysticité—  
A renaître....

[Just so, disgusted with complacent Man,  
Whose appetites devour him, whose sole quest  
Is to fetch home what scraps of filth he can  
To please the hag with urchins at her breast,  
I rush, I cling to all those windows where  
One turns his back on life; transformed by light,  
Washed by eternal dew and swathed in air,  
Reflected in the dawn of the Infinite,  
I see myself an angel! die and seem  
—Let this be Art! Let it be Mysticism!—  
To be reborn....]

Indeed, Larkin's mention of "the deep blue air" evokes *l'azur*, the pet *symboliste* emblem of escape and transcendence. I find it ironic that Larkin has appropriated the symbolism of the previous century's "free" generation, the symbolist poets whose behavior likewise caused consternation in their time.

What words, finally, can we supply to express the meaning of a poem that wishes to conclude with something "rather than words"? Is Larkin nostalgically thinking of church windows, whose stained-glass panes are indeed "sun-comprehending"? Is there a further religious hint in the inescapable pun between sun and Son? Is the poem's final desire not for escape but for a retreat into the sureties that religion once offered? At the end of "Church Going" Larkin observes:

someone will forever be surprising  
A hunger in himself to be more serious,

And gravitating with it to this ground,  
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,  
If only that so many dead lie round.

Surrounded but hardly comforted by an empirical knowledge that "shows / Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless," this most cynical of poets may not be able to restrain himself from yearning toward the infinite that lies beyond all speech.

Source: R.S. Gwynn, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 1998.

### Stephen Burt

In the following excerpt, Burt analyzes Larkin's use of profanity in his poems, specifically in "High Windows."

When Philip Larkin published *High Windows* in 1974, what everyone noticed, besides its general excellence, was its profusion of foul language. Larkin himself told John Betjeman that "whenever he looked at his book he found it was full of four-letter words." It is, too....

By his own account, Larkin's language is "performative," does something to or for his audience: every poem "is an action of some sort," as Larkin also said [in a 1973 interview with Raymond Gardner in *The Guardian*]. Moreover, Larkin sees his foul language as related to the language of the time, to the generational shifts in talk and behavior that were especially rapid, exciting and unavoidable in the late '60s and early '70s. The rapidfire "fuck" and "crap" with which Larkin begins some poems from this period—especially by contrast with the elevated diction and stately rhythms of the poems' endings—come across, as [Robert] Crawford (quoting Blake Morrison) has said, as "Larkin's equivalents of dialect" [in his 1987 article "Larkin's English" in *Oxford Magazine*]. But whose dialect?

Sometimes Larkin's four-letter words invoke all-male or working-class worlds. Sometimes, too ... dirty words can be a means of aggression or derogation, solitary grumbles against all of society. As often, however, the dirty words evoke the world of youth. "This Be The Verse" shows the poet negotiating with the feelings, illusions, and speech he attributes to the young. The gap in diction between the beginning and the end of "High Windows," (or of "This Be The Verse" or "Sad Steps") is a generation gap [according to Janice Rossen in her book *Philip Larkin: His Life's Work*]. As Alan Bennett has said [in his "Instead of a Present" in *Larkin at Sixty*], the "real Larkin" of the poems was someone "who feels shut out when he sees fifteen-year-

olds necking at bus stops,” and one of the ways he reacts in that poem is to move into, and then out from under, their language. Larkin is cultivating, or pretending to have shared, or questioning whether he himself ever did share a solidarity of experience with the common adolescent.

Are kids (and men, and working-class people) more likely than others to use four-letter words (in the form of exclamations, vague approbatory adjectives, generalized derogatory verbs, and so on)? If so, why? What special effects can four-letter words have to make some people enjoy using them and force others to leave the room? Dirty words can obviously, as means of aggression or derogation, demean or devalue their targets. Also, they can be used in order to get attention; they break rules of discourse and establish the speaker's desire to epate whatever parent surrogates can be found. Dirty words are thus signs of affiliation with other speakers and listeners who have the same “enemies,” who want to offend or drive off a given authority. This makes them signs of disaffiliation from, of not-being-like (because not talking like) that authority. By saying “fuck” in a room or on a record, an utterer invites his or her listeners to ask: Who does this speaker belong with? Who does this speaker emphatically not belong with?

The utterance of “fuck” (and in Britain, “bloody”) can be powerful on the basis of these functions alone—aggression, attention, affiliation, disaffiliation: By using these words the utterer shows on whose side he or she wants to be...

So “High Windows” and “This Be The Verse” ... use dirty words as subcultural indicators, as powerful ways of calling into question who the poet sounds like, who he wants to sound like, and why. But in these poems, Larkin not only appropriates the way kids talk, but also talks about his not being like the kids whose speech he has appropriated. Both poems end in another register entirely, one that is more traditionally “poetic.” The subcultural indicators, then, can only be part of the force. In “High Windows,” the word “fucking” sounds aggressive, like a smear on the girl and maybe also on the boy in the poem. But this aggressive or derogatory effect is reversed when, further into the poem, the word gets reclassified as high praise: “I know this is paradise.” What sounds early on like simple resentment or jealousy modulates into jealous admiration. And since the aggressive qualities of “fucking” set the reader up to expect more derogation, this admiration comes as a neat surprise. The same kind of elevating transition, this sudden



*Larkin's foul language doesn't simply foreground his sad, distant, empathetic, and resentful relation to the kids whose speech he echoes.”*

shifting upward from the bottom of the poet's speech register, also occurs, I think, in the movement from the sexist language of “he's fucking her” to “paradise / Everyone old,” since “Everyone” has to include both genders. It is this inward, self-critical turn away from his own prejudiced impulses and toward self-examination that marks the best of Larkin's poems from this period. It also distinguishes the Larkin of these poems from the less attractive man who suffers and swears his way through Andrew Motion's 1993 biography *A Writer's Life*.

Yet four-letter words ... are not only sites of aggression, affiliation and disaffiliation, but also of ambiguity. Sometimes we can't even be sure what a particular dirty word means, how figuratively to construe it, whether it's a compliment or a slap: “She thinks he's the shit.” ...

The dominance of their performative function, their high level of ambiguity, and their large stock of overlapping figurative meanings all contribute to that untranslatability—the sense of thickness or opacity—which words like “fuck” often have, as opposed to words such as “coffee” or “incarnadine.”

Now the effects that I claim some dirty words set in motion (the creation of irresolvable ambiguities, the foregrounding of expression, and the confounding of denotation) ought to sound familiar. These effects have been claimed not only for the phrase “They fuck you up”—or even for its most basic occluded component, “fuck you”—but also for Art In General, or for poetry. “Poetry is what is lost in translation,” said [American poet Robert] Frost, which is what [Kathleen] Raine says of obscenity: the writerly element, the effect that exceeds its meaning and which Barthes wanted in his art, is effectively built into all four-letter words. [Dick] Hebdige argues [in his 1979 book *Subculture: The*

*Meaning of Style*) that the offensive postures of first-generation punks “gestured toward a ‘nowhere’ and actively sought to remain silent, illegible.” Isn’t gesturing toward a nowhere, into a silence beyond words, one of Philip Larkin’s favorite ways of ending poems? Aren’t the attention-getting swear-words with which Larkin liked to begin his late poems, in both their opacity and their distracting, disruptive quality, a lot like the gestures offstage and into the endless elsewheres, nothings and anywheres with which Larkin ends some of these same poems? So Larkin’s foul language doesn’t simply foreground his sad, distant, empathetic, and resentful relation to the kids whose speech he echoes. It also foreshadows and reflects the same self-isolating, sadly certain rejection of ordinary language and society that is realized, at the poem’s end, in a negationist gesture out of and away from everything.

“High Windows” closes by looking up to wordless, endless, and radiant nothingness. Of course, the poem is about the end of religion (the windows seem to be those of a church) and the agnostic’s fear of death. But, like other poems from this period, it is also about the relation of the poet and his language to the social and to the private, and about the relation of one generation and its pleasures to the next and theirs. Radiant high windows and high diction on the one hand, fucking and four-letter words on the other. And while these pleasures may at first seem rivalrous or opposed, they turn out to mean, and reveal, the same thing: disrupted and disrupting negativity, resistance to meaning and relation, and—most of all—the common unavailability, for the poet, of two contrasting kinds of consolation and joy. Other people, “High Windows” says, especially young ones, seem to me to have wonderful, satisfying, earthly, social, and sensual rewards, though of course it probably doesn’t often seem that way to them (any more than it seemed to me, when I was young, a great relief to be rid of the fear of God), and those joys will never be available to me: and, second, the rewards that art can offer me, the rewards I am really built and suited for, are even at their best characterized by deferral, remoteness, vacancy. With Larkin, the rewards that art or “thought” can offer the reader or writer who is old or distant or lonely enough to need them always begin in privacy and end in privatization. The invisible, endless, wordless “Elsewhere” in those windows is a final figure for two kinds of emptiness or regret—we might call them social and private, or young and old, or bodily and linguistic, or even life and art—for which the shaky

ametricality and confrontational diction of the first stanzas, the fucked-up lines about fucking, comprise a first figure.

We say to ourselves “That’ll be the life” far more than we say “This is the life.” And what this indicates (a feeling of deferral, the hope that we might have the right experience later, the sense that someone else might be having it now but we haven’t or can’t) applies to our desires for artistic enlightenment as well as to those for sensual satisfaction. This common experience of the unattainability of whatever we want, or think we want, is one of Larkin’s great subjects. It is also the subject of Andrew Swarbrick’s *Out of Reach*, by far the best critical book solely about Larkin. Swarbrick argues that even “the most triumphant of Larkin’s poems are about failure and . . . ultimately prefer silence to words.” The “failures” and “silences” of “High Windows” are then twofold: one is sexual and social, the other is private and abstract. Larkin can’t think about the one without the other. Some deep groove in his head connects an inability to reach or speak to the young with a sense of sexual unfulfillment, and associates both with an almost deconstructive despair at the failure of words (and of art) to mean or cohere. . . .

Larkin’s confrontational “fucks,” like his gestures to elsewhere and nothing, respond to this loss, to this sense of failure, which is both spiritual (and private) and social (and sexual).

Source: “High Windows and Four-Letter Words: A Note on Philip Larkin,” in *Boston Review*, Vol. 21, No. 5, November, 1996.

## Sources

King, Peter. *Nine Contemporary Poets: A Critical Introduction*. Methuen, 1979.

Larkin, Philip. *Collected Poems*, edited by Anthony Thwaite. Farrar, 1989.

Martin, Bruce K.. “Philip Larkin,” in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 27: *Poets of Great Britain and Ireland, 1945-1960*. Detroit: Gale, 1984.

Motion, Andrew. *Philip Larkin: A Writer’s Life*. Farrar, 1993.

Sullivan, Andrew. “Philip Larkin” from *The Harvard Advocate*, May, 1968.

Swarbrick, Andrew. *Out of Reach: The Poetry of Philip Larkin*. London: Macmillan, 1995 pp. 130-37.

### For Further Study

Latre, Guido, *Locking Earth to the Sky: A Structuralist Approach to Philip Larkin's Poetry*, Peter Lang Publishing, 1995.

Exploring Larkin's use of traditional form, Latre discovers many fascinating relationships between his tight poetic structure and everyday language.

Motion, Andrew, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life*, Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1993.

Motion draws from Larkin's entire archive of work to make both literary and psychological conclusions regarding the "cranky" and "overwhelmingly humorous" poet.

Tolley, A.T., *My Proper Ground: A Study of the Work of Philip Larkin and its Development*, Edinburgh University Press, 1991.

Tolley weaves biographical information with critical analysis to trace the scope and development of Larkin's poetry.

# “Hope” Is the Thing with Feathers

*Emily Dickinson*

1861

“‘Hope’ Is the Thing With Feathers” is believed to have been written in 1861. It was initially published posthumously in the second collection of Dickinson’s work, *Poems by Emily Dickinson, second series*, in 1891. In this poem, “Hope,” an abstract word meaning desire or trust, is described metaphorically as having the characteristics of a “bird,” a tangible, living creature.

The word “bird” is rich with connotation. Birds are often viewed as free and self-reliant, or as symbols of spirituality. The bird in this poem is courageous and persevering, for it continues to share its song under even the most difficult conditions. By describing “hope” in terms of this bird, Dickinson creates a lovely image of the virtue of human desire.

## *Author Biography*

Dickinson was born in Amherst, Massachusetts, in 1830 and lived there all her life. Her grandfather was the founder of Amherst College, and her father, Edward Dickinson, was a lawyer who served as the treasurer of the college. He also held various political offices. Her mother, Emily Norcross Dickinson, was a quiet and frail woman. Dickinson went to primary school for four years and then attended Amherst Academy from 1840 to 1847 before spending a year at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. Her education was strongly influenced by Puritan religious beliefs, but Dickinson did not accept the teachings of the Unitarian church at-





tended by her family and remained agnostic throughout her life. Following the completion of her education, Dickinson lived in the family home with her parents and younger sister, Lavinia, while her elder brother Austin and his wife, Susan, lived next door. She began writing verse at an early age, practicing her craft by rewriting poems she found in books, magazines, and newspapers. During a trip to Philadelphia in the early 1850s, Dickinson fell in love with a married minister, the Reverend Charles Wadsworth; her disappointment in love may have brought about her subsequent withdrawal from society. Dickinson experienced an emotional crisis of an undetermined nature in the early 1860s. Her traumatized state of mind is believed to have inspired her to write prolifically: in 1862 alone she is thought to have composed more than three hundred poems. In that same year, Dickinson initiated a correspondence with Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the literary editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* magazine. Over the years Dickinson sent nearly one hundred of her poems for his criticism, and he became a sympathetic adviser and confidant, but he never published any of her poems. Dickinson's isolation further increased when her father died unexpectedly in 1874 and her mother suffered a stroke that left her an invalid. Dickinson and her sister provided her constant care until her death in 1882. Dickinson was diagnosed in 1886 as having Bright's disease, a kidney dysfunction that resulted in her death in May of that year.



Emily Dickinson

### Poem Text

"Hope" is the thing with feathers—  
That perches in the soul—  
And sings the tune without the words—  
And never stops—at all—  
  
And sweetest—in the Gale—is heard—  
And sore must be the storm—  
That could abash the little Bird  
That kept so many warm—  
  
I've heard it in the chilliest land—  
And on the strangest Sea—  
Yet, never, in Extremity,  
It asked a crumb—of Me.

### Poem Summary

#### Lines 1-2:

One of the uses of quotation marks is to alert the reader to a special or unusual word or use of a

word. Dickinson rarely uses this technique, but when she does it is often in attempting to define certain abstract words. Here, the word "Hope," which is traditionally defined as a feeling that what is wanted will happen, is described in a metaphor. In line one, "Hope" is not directly called a bird. Instead, the poem's speaker calls it "the thing with feathers." The use of the definite article, "the," indicates that this bird is uniquely identifiable because it is the one "that perches in the soul." The verb "perches" is typically used to describe a bird's settling or resting after alighting. Here, the resting-place is the soul, or the spiritual entity of a human being. This is a figurative way of saying that people carry their hope in that part of themselves which has no physical or material reality, but which is the center of thought and will.

#### Lines 3-4:

Songbirds are famous for their beautiful songs. Although there are no "words" to be understood, people relate to and are deeply affected by bird songs. In fact, the sound of birds singing renews many people's sense of possibility and wonder. On a spring day, the sound seems everlasting, regardless of the conditions outside. "Hope" shares many of these characteristics of the songbird, for it en-

## Media Adaptations



- *The Belle of Amherst*, videocassette, New York: Ifex Films, 1976. Portrays America's foremost woman poet through an examination of her writings and observations of her life and family. Adapted from the play by William Luce.
- *Emily Dickinson*, videocassette, Voices and Visions Series, vol. 3, New York: Intellimation, 1988.
- *Songs* compact disc, Qualiton Imports, KTC 1100, 1990. Musical adaptation of Dickinson's work by Aaron Copeland.

dures under all circumstances and comforts the human spirit.

### Lines 5-8:

When people hear a bird continue to sing even during fierce winds, it is comforting to know that these brave little creatures are not afraid. Likewise, when life is most difficult, hope is an even greater solace. It would take a "sore," or distressingly intense storm, to "abash," or upset, the tranquillity of the little "Bird," which is mentioned by name for the first time on line seven. Like "Hope," the bird's courage and perseverance in the face of difficult circumstances is heartening. Like the bird, "Hope" "kept so many warm" by offering a way to look beyond the harsh reality to the promise of something better to come.

### Lines 9-12:

This courageous little bird is always there for the poem's speaker, even under the most dire of circumstances. For example, it continues to sing beautifully even in conditions of extreme cold and barrenness. It accompanies the speaker "on the strangest sea," a setting that could be lonely and dangerous. However, even in moments of "Extremity," or extreme necessity and great risk, the little bird has never asked the speaker for anything in return. Likewise, "Hope" is a joyous gift with

no conditions or strings attached to it. It dwells in the soul and serves humanity selflessly, if only they wish to recognize it.

## Themes

### Identity

For reasons that remain unclear, Emily Dickinson experienced an emotional crisis in the early 1860s and secluded herself from the world. Some scholars suggest that disappointment in love led to her withdrawal. Dickinson turned thirty in December 1860, and she had not yet married. Aside from the pain she experienced as a result of unsuccessful romances, the failure to marry was likely especially distressing for her. In Dickinson's time, the only avenue open to women was through marriage; unmarried women were essentially without social position, were in certain respects outcasts. Other scholars argue that Dickinson's inability to get her poems published led to her withdrawal. All agree that as Dickinson turned away from the world she turned toward her poetry. She is thought to have composed more than three hundred poems in 1862 alone. Through her poetry she explored the inner workings of her self, her heart, her mind, and her soul. The poems of this period talk of suffering and healing, of death and immortality, of despair and hope.

In "'Hope' is the Thing with Feathers," Dickinson explores her identity in relation to hope, personifying it as a bird. In Christian imagery, "hope" is often figured as a white dove. In the first stanza Dickinson expands this image, imagining the bird sitting in one's soul, singing a wordless tune that is eternal. In the second stanza she moves outward from the enclosed space of the soul, placing the bird in the wider world, amid a raging storm. It does more than merely survive, however; its song seems to rise above the noise of the gale—"sweetest ... is heard"—and, we are told, it would take an extremely terrible storm to overwhelm ("abash") the bird. Moreover, it not only survives itself, it is able to keep others warm. (One envisions a mother bird brooding on her chicks.)

In the third stanza Dickinson introduces a spectator ("I") who sees the bird from outside (or, more precisely, an auditor who hears it). This completes an evolution in the image: first depicted as something within one, in the soul, it is then shown as operating in the world at large, almost as a force of nature, triumphing over storms. Now

it is presented as so completely outside of the self that one may, as it were, observe it objectively. Dickinson emphasizes this change by shifting to a past tense. (The first two stanzas are for the most part in the present tense.) In this stanza there are two figures: the bird and the narrator—the "I"—who hears it. The narrator has clearly seen hardships, has endured frigid lands and foreign seas, and, she states, has encountered the bird there—has found hope amid the most desperate circumstances.

The concluding two lines, beginning with "Yet," imply a contrast or a contradiction—but to what has not been stated. The implication is that the bird has given the narrator something yet has "never ... asked a crumb" in return, even in the worst "Extremity." Hope is a gift that arrives unlooked-for in times of great need and seeks nothing in return.

The poem begins by depicting hope as something that lives inside one, as part of the self, "perching" in the soul, and it ends by showing it as something outside, separate from the self, asking nothing "of Me." This is a paradox. Hope dwells in the human soul but is encountered in wild, alien places. It is part of the self but is independent of it, is free of human control.

### *Nature and Its Meaning*

In "'Hope' Is the Thing with Feathers," nature is divided—or rather, Dickinson employs images from nature for contrasting purposes. In this poem nature is both beneficent and destructive. The division is made between the image of the bird and the images of threatening storms and hostile environments. This split corresponds to a separation between inside and outside, between interior and exterior spaces.

The opening stanza introduces the image of a bird, representing hope. Although it is not explicitly stated, the sense here is of an interior space. The bird "perches in the soul," which is commonly pictured as existing inside of us. The soul is its nest (or perhaps a birdcage), a confined, secure place. The phrase in the second stanza—"That kept so many warm"—suggests a brooding hen, emphasizing the safety of a nest. The images of the bird evoke nature as a positive, nurturing force—as is fitting for a symbol representing hope.

A series of words in the second and third stanzas—"Gale," "sore," "storm," "abash," "chillest," "strangest," "Extremity"—combine to evince a different side of nature, as dangerous and threat-

## Topics for Further Study



- Because Dickinson was fascinated with riddles, she played with them in her poetry. In the first quatrain, "hope" is described as a tiny bird. The rest of the poem gives more "clues" as to "hope's" identity until, by the end of the poem, we have a much better understanding of it. But in the last line, she seems to begin another riddle about "Me." Describe who you think "Me" is.
- Take a concept that means a lot to you, such as "pride," "love," "joy," etc., and find an animal that you think could be used as an example of it. List qualities you think the idea and the animal have in common. Then write a sales pitch promoting the animal as the official spokesperson of the idea.
- Many of Emily Dickinson's poems are punctuated with the dash, instead of with commas or periods to slow or stop a thought. Why did she choose this form of punctuation? Discuss the different ways dashes, commas, and periods affect the reading of a poem.

ening. Here the sense is of an exterior space, wild and unprotected. In this harsh setting, Dickinson tells us, the tune the bird sings is "sweetest," suggesting both that it is the most comforting thing heard amid the noise of the storm, and that, while the tune is sweet when it is heard while one is safe, it is sweetest when one is in danger. Hope, then, is the most comforting emotion one feels when beset with troubles, and, while hope is good to have at all times, it is especially so at times of adversity.

If we look at "'Hope' Is the Thing with Feathers" in terms of Dickinson's life, we can perhaps read a commentary on her withdrawal from the world. Dickinson turned inward into herself and shut out the world, and in this poem she suggests that inside it is peaceful and secure, while outside (out in the world) it is hostile and dangerous. By turning inward she discovered hope—hope that

could support and sustain her when she was confronted with the harsh world outside.

### Style

Written in three quatrains, or four-line verses, "'Hope' Is the Thing with Feathers" is patterned after the alternate eight- and six-syllable iambic line scheme, called common meter, found in many nineteenth century English hymns. This simple, adaptable hymn meter allowed Dickinson the latitude to experiment with language, imagery and stylistic surprise. In the first line of this poem, for instance, she accents her key opening word, "Hope" with quotation marks, then surprises the reader with an unlikely comparison of that virtue to "the thing with feathers," a bird. And she does it in a four-foot line with one syllable missing. In natural scansion, this line has an accented single-syllable foot, an anapest and an iamb followed by an unattached, unstressed final syllable, or catalectic foot:

"Hope" / is the thing / with feath / ers

The poem is rhymed in the second and fourth lines of the first stanza, in alternate lines in stanza two and in the last three lines of stanza three. "Heard/bird," "storm/warm," and "Sea/me" are exact rhymes. "Soul/all" is an example of consonance, or off rhyme; the vowel sounds are different, but not the following consonants. And "Extremity" in stanza three is a vowel rhyme, with the same long "e" sound in its ending as "See" and "Me." The repetition of "That" and "And" in the line openers and the stream of "s" sounds running through all three verses enhance the poem's rhyme. In the third stanza, Dickinson shortens the superlative "chilliest" to "Chillest" to maintain the line's iambic meter and to echo the rhythmic pattern and second-syllable rhymes of two other superlatives, "sweetest" and "strangest." "Chillest" also suggests a degree of cold beyond "chilliest."

Dickinson's capitalization and punctuation in this poem are inconsistent. No internal nouns, not even "soul," are capitalized in the first stanza; "Gale" and "Bird" are capitalized in the second stanza, but not "storm"; and three of the end-words, "Sea," "Extremity," and "Me," are capitalized in stanza three, but not "land." Dashes mark end stops and internal rhythmic pauses, except in the poem's penultimate line which is punctuated with three commas. These inconsistencies support the argument that Dickinson's eccentric capitalization and punctuation may have been habits of handwriting rather than devices for emphasis and pacing.

### Historical Context

The decade of the 1860s was a period of upheaval. As Dickinson was suffering her emotional crisis and beginning to withdraw into seclusion, America was experiencing the social, political, and military crisis of the Civil War, which broke out in April of 1861. In literature, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote some of their finest works. One of the most important cultural influences of the period was the literary and philosophical movement known as Transcendentalism. Founded by the poet and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson in the 1830s, Transcendentalism was a system based on belief in the essential unity of nature and the inherent goodness of humanity. In his Transcendentalist manifesto, *Nature*, published in 1836, Emerson explained that God was everywhere present throughout nature and by means of the human faculty called "higher Reason," "Mind," or "Spirit,"—distinguished from traditional notions of reason and logic—one could communicate directly with God. As God and nature were one, communing with nature and speaking with God were the same. Henry David Thoreau, whose book *Walden* (1854) remains highly influential to this day, was a follower of Transcendentalism.

Although it was greatly influenced by similar movements in England and Germany, the American Transcendentalist Movement strongly encouraged the development of a uniquely American culture, based on indigenous elements. The Transcendentalists also advocated social, religious, and political reform. They supported the Free Religion and abolitionist movements, and they helped establish various utopian societies.

Although Dickinson was never affiliated with the Transcendentalists, the movement's influence was pervasive. Moreover, Emerson lived in Concord, Massachusetts, fewer than one hundred miles from Dickinson's Amherst. He is also known to have visited Dickinson's brother, Austin, and his wife at their home. Dickinson's presentation of nature in "'Hope' Is the Thing with Feathers," particularly its depiction of the bird's beneficent effects, shows affinities to Transcendentalist views. The poem's introspection and emphasis on inner goodness are entirely in keeping with Transcendentalist tenets as well. With this poem, Dickinson, as did the Transcendentalists, offered a hopeful view of humanity even as America was sliding into the darkness and despair of the Civil War.

## Compare & Contrast

- **1861:** The germ theory of disease by Louis Pasteur is published. This is one example of nineteenth-century advances in the scientific explanation of nature and the universe. "‘Hope’ Is the Thing with Feathers" offers a different method for seeing and understanding the world, as Emily Dickinson uses poetry, with its emphasis on sensibility and subjective experience, as an instrument to study nature at hand.

**Today:** The scientific view of the universe dominates Western thought. Astrophysicists such as Stephen Hawking study "black holes," or regions in space where gravity is so powerful that no matter or electromagnetic radiation (including light) can escape. The theory of "black holes," once radical and awe-inspiring, is now a popular figure of speech.

- **1861:** At age 23, clothier John Wanamaker establishes the country's first fixed-price men's clothing store, ending the practice of bartering between customer and merchant. Within ten years, Wanamaker's becomes the country's largest men's retail store.

**Today:** Although "haggling" for a price is not customary in America, street vendors set up shop outside large department stores in many U.S. cities, employing practices common in the rest of the world, in which prices are agreed upon through a process of negotiation between buyer and seller.

- **1861:** The novel *Silas Marner* is published in England. Dickinson greatly admired its author, Mary Ann Evans. Evans was a rarity for the time: a woman who was successful in an arena that was dominated by men; however, in order to succeed, she had to assume a male pseudonym—George Eliot. Dickinson herself was less successful in the struggle against male bias, as editors to whom she submitted her poems rewrote them, returned them, or suggested that she stop writing altogether. The vast majority of her poems remained arranged in packets and locked in a bureau until after her death. She suc-

ceeding in publishing only seven poems during her life.

**Today:** Women and minorities no longer write under assumed names unless they so choose, and Emily Dickinson is acclaimed as one of the finest poets America has ever produced. However, with the rise of movies, television, computer games, and other forms of entertainment, the market for poetry and literary fiction has dwindled. Major magazines, such as the *New Yorker* and *Harper's* publish less and less fiction and poetry, and there are fewer of the "little" literary magazines to fill this publishing gap.

- **1861:** Although Emily Dickinson, like many women of her time, had the opportunity to study beyond primary school, her first responsibility was to family, whether it was through marriage and child-rearing or through caring for her own parents and siblings. Dickinson's father, Edward, expected her to return to the proper "sphere" of the home after she left Mount Holyoke Seminary, and she resented this role. Increasingly, Dickinson "invented" her own greatness with the power of her poetry in a household that did not respect intellectual pursuits for women.

**Today:** More choices are available to women now than ever before in American history. Women are waiting longer to marry and have children, if at all; and, increasingly, they live with their prospective mates before they do so. Most women now have the freedom to pursue a career. However, in many cases their responsibilities to home and family have not lessened. Women are often faced with the competing demands of work and home. Moreover, with the increasing number of divorces, single-parent families have become common, and most mothers work outside of the home out of economic necessity. At the same time, with medical advances and lengthening lifespans, many women are caring for their own elderly parents.

### Critical Overview

"'Hope' Is the Thing with Feathers" has often been analyzed as one of the most famous examples of Dickinson's "definition" poems. David Porter, in a chapter of his book *The Art of Emily Dickinson's Early Poetry*, refers to the poem as an example of a "word trick." According to Porter, Dickinson often uses devices such as "disorienting the reader's expectations by substituting an abstract word for an expected concrete word," or reversing the substitution by "placing a specific image in the syntax where an abstraction is anticipated." "'Hope' Is the Thing with Feathers" is an excellent example of the latter device. Porter believes that this "word trick" device is very effective because it "expands contextual possibilities, increases the reader's awareness, and deepens the emotional experience [Dickinson's] poems recreate."

The literary biographer Cynthia Griffin Wolff discusses the poem in her *Emily Dickinson*. Wolff points out that the "spent terminology of Christian myth permeates [Dickinson's] generally secular verse." Wolff goes on to explain that "Christ and the 'Hope' that He gave to the world were repeatedly figured in traditional emblems as a bird." However, Wolff argues that nothing in the poem suggests that Dickinson was referring to Christ; in fact, it is more likely that she was writing about "every human's potential for music and poetry, brave stays against the brooding dark."

A third critic, Jane Donahue Eberwein, takes a slightly different view of the poem in her book *Strategies of Limitation*. According to Eberwein, this poem, like Dickinson's other definition poems, illustrate her "general concern with naming as an index of power" and her respect for language. However, Eberwein believes that the poem is an example of how "diction often failed to encompass the inexpressible," arguing that the poem is imprecise and that "the tenor overwhelms the vehicle." Eberwein believes that the "analogy breaks down in the puzzling conclusion with its absurd assumption that hope might ever go begging for help."

### Criticism

#### Sean Robisch

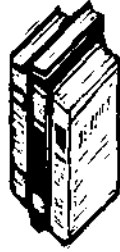
Sean Robisch holds a Ph.D. in American Literature from Purdue University and has taught composition and literature for eight years. In the following essay, Robisch deliberates upon the ques-

tions raised by a careful reading of "'Hope' is the Thing with Feathers."

When you come to an Emily Dickinson poem, you'll be tempted to "answer" it somehow, to say, "Well, I can only guess, so here's what I think this means." The first step in being a good student of her work is resisting such a temptation, for several reasons. Most importantly, you might deny her poetry one of its greatest strengths: it asks questions for which answers are just interruptions, questions that shatter into more questions. This should not result in our finally giving up and guessing at what a poem means. On the contrary, a good strong question lets us consider more than one perspective at a time—we do not have to choose one—while still generating energy in us to investigate, and thereby to support our opinions with words and images, logic and examples. Dickinson works in metaphors, in oblique approaches to big topics (such as hope), giving us some discomfort at times, and inviting us to look not only at the poem on the page, but at what we have brought to it from our own experiences. The theologian and novelist Frederick Buechner once wrote that "doubt is the ants in the pants of faith," that which keeps faith alive and kicking. Dickinson's poetry has lasted through one of the strangest phenomena of critical popularity in the history of American poetry—the poems were not highly touted when they were written, and in fact only seven of them were published in her lifetime. They have gained acclaim partly because Dickinson transcended simple separations of, say, doubt (bad) and faith (good). She was able to see that doubt and faith, or hope and despair, might exist in some other relationship than mere polarity.

Dickinson wrote "'Hope' Is the Thing with Feathers" in 1861. To a greater extent than is true today (though the problem is still certainly alive), the strongly expressed opinions of women on philosophical matters were not given proper currency in America. When the poem appeared in a volume published by Thomas Johnson in 1892, little of the political oppression of women had changed in the nearly thirty years since it had been written, despite a war over oppression and two industrial economic collapses. But by then, Dickinson had been dead for six years, her reputation now almost completely posthumous, and the reviewers and critics had to speculate on the relationship of her life and her views of antebellum American culture to what they saw on the page. And speculate they did; for many years the publishers of Dickinson's work were chastised for simply being disingenuously charita-

## What Do I Read Next?



- For four seminal works of the "American Renaissance," read Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855), Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), and Emerson's essays, "The Poet" (1844) and "Self-Reliance" (1844).
- *Hope Is the Thing with Feathers, and Two Other Short Plays* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1949) includes three plays produced on Broadway under the general title, *Hope's the Thing* by Richard Harrity.
- In *An American Triptych: Anne Bradstreet, Emily Dickinson, Adrienne Rich*, author Wendy Martin shows how the three American women authors formed their own personal visions, which have become part of a larger American, female poetic (1984).
- Two books treat Dickinson's personal vocabulary: David Porter, in *Dickinson: The Modern*

*Idiom* (1981), draws upon close readings of Dickinson's manuscripts to discuss her sense of otherness and absence; and Christanne Miller finds the roots of Dickinson's highly unusual style and grammar to be feminist in *Emily Dickinson: A Poet's Grammar* (1987).

- In *Emily Dickinson and Riddle* (1969), Dolores Dyer Lucas argues that the character and mystique of Dickinson's poetry are closely tied to the form of the literary riddle, pointing out how well the device served the poet in her isolated lifestyle.
- A carefully chosen selection of essays by eight eminent Dickinson scholars is contained in *Emily Dickinson: Modern Critical Views* (1985), one of the Chelsea House series edited by Harold Bloom.

ble to a "fragile" female poet. Some critics slowly came around to the deep root structures of the poems, which had for some time looked to them like a patch of pale little flowers. When the 1955 *Collected Poems* appeared, one hundred years after Dickinson had begun writing, and after her contemporary Walt Whitman had fought considerably to bring attention to his own radical efforts, the criticism of her work began in earnest. With the 1955 edition students of literature for the first time had access to the full body of work, in which poems such as "'Hope' Is the Thing with Feathers" had a context. In the poems Dickinson had composed, gathered into the bundles she called "fascicles," and stored in her dresser a century before, scholars had a means of finding (sometimes a bit too capriciously) groups, themes, stylistic consistencies, and methods refined over many years.

This raises two important issues that a student of Dickinson's work should have in mind when reading one of her poems. The first is that to read one Dickinson poem and consider what she meant

is a bit like reading a single line from a Shakespearean play and forming a conclusion about it. She is best read in hundreds, in long mornings of sitting with the poetry and watching it accumulate like snowfall, recognizing the reappearance of such images as the sun, or winter, or birds. As a result, like snowfall, the accumulation of her poems will change the textures of things. The second is that because her work's survival is unusual among the publication histories of most poets we now know and read, we can't reduce what her poems have accomplished to the catchiness of little rhymed verses that may often be sung to the tune of "The Yellow Rose of Texas." With these warnings in mind, a reader will respect Emily Dickinson even while being puzzled and challenged by her, but will never assume that she was simple, provincial, or quiet (she has been unfortunately popularized as all of these). In one letter she wrote inviting a young man on a date, she included a reference to herself as "Judith of the Apocrypha," and later in the letter explained to him, "That's what they call a metaphor



*We are faced with  
the complexity of a poem  
that, if we read it  
superficially, would breeze  
right by us in an easy  
rhyme scheme."*

---

in our country. Don't be afraid of it, sir, it won't bite." This is sound advice to us as well, as we approach her poetry.

Critics have looked at Dickinson as a mystic, a spinster, a "half-cracked" recluse, a morbid obsessor, a poet of renunciation, and a religious skeptic. Some of these labels may be closer to the mark than others, but they are still merely labels. On the other hand, it is difficult to read Dickinson without considering the influence of her life on her work. Poet and critic John Mann has pointed out that for many students, reading the letters she wrote to her early mentor, Thomas W. Higginson, enriches the reading of her poems. Poets such as Hart Crane and Adrienne Rich have written poetic tributes to Dickinson, which they composed in her style of rhyme and dash, of sparseness, and what one critic has called "intense brevity"; and such tributes remind us that Dickinson is an important figure in American literature. Her place in American letters does not change the quality of her writing, but rather has generated a history of interpretation of her poems, much of which has attempted to figure out somehow "what she meant."

Hope is a recurring subject in her work, and is a tough topic for any poet to render. In this poem, Dickinson approaches hope through two key devices: metaphor and sound. The metaphor of the bird prompts us to answer the question, "What is hope?" with "It is a bird." But many questions arise from that first metaphor of the feathers. Critic Katherine M. Rogers proposes several; for instance, "Why does Hope sing the tune without the words?" and "Do birds sing in bad weather?" The former question asks us to look for answers either within the poem or in our experience; the latter asks for a factual answer (birds do sometimes sing in bad weather). But even these questions, once answered, lead us through the poem and expand or multiply

So what if birds do sing in bad weather? How does that influence our reading of the poem? We propose answers, knowing that other answers might work, and that we could go back through the poem many times and realize many combinations. Finally we read that the Bird, Hope, "that kept so many warm" with singing, never asks "a crumb" of the narrator. Why not? we ask; or, contrarily, Why would it? If the Bird is a metaphor for Hope, what does the crumb represent? To complicate matters further, we are left with Hope *not* asking a question, which implies that Hope may have, in fact, done so at some other time—that it could and does on some occasions ask for a metaphoric crumb.

This brings us to the topic of sound. The bird is shown to us a bit (it has feathers, it is small), but mostly the metaphor is worked out by what we hear. The bird's song runs through the poem—a tune without words in a work of literature that's all about words—and becomes at the end the possibility of a request, a change from one kind of sound (a bird's song) to another (a voice that could ask a question). Right away we are faced with the complexity of a poem that, if we read it superficially, would breeze right by us in an easy rhyme scheme.

Another way Dickinson writes from behind the veil of simplicity is with her use of the dash. This is a famous trademark of her work, and it has been given many critical interpretations. In fact, some published editions of her poems, partly because her handwritten manuscripts were difficult to decipher and partly because editors took liberties with her verses, omit the dashes or change them to other marks, such as commas or semicolons. The consensus today is that she worked deliberately with the dash and that it serves her poems well. Notice, for example, the dash in the last line, after "crumb." It asks us to pause, to add drama to the last two words; but this might not be its only function. That is, the poem may not be quite so self-indulgent, even with the capital "Me." The dash could suggest that the Bird has at some time asked a crumb of someone else, even that it would not deign to ask a crumb of the narrator, whose capital "Me" might then indicate profound humility and disappointment that she/he wasn't asked. The dash at the end of the second stanza implies the simple replacement of a period, and first two could easily be commas. But clearly the dash is not used to solve all matters of punctuation, because in the second-to-last line we find three commas, the last of which is ungrammatical. A reader might desperately want there to be a pattern to all of this, a specific, systematic reason for the punctuation. And Dickinson carefully



chose her words and arrangement; that ungrammatical comma is not a mistake, but a conscious stylistic device. But maybe by assuming that the poem's punctuation must follow some totalizing system, even if not the one we're used to, we might take the dashes individually. They seem to be performing varying functions, rather than one, to exhibit a freedom that isn't normally afforded them by a system of rules and conventions. By calling attention to themselves, the commas add something to a line that already speaks with considerable force ("never," the poet says, and "Extremity" is capitalized). So the punctuation may as easily ask us to look at the lines separately and slowly, to consider each breath we take at each instance. They ask us to listen.

Hope is placed in quotes, indicating something so-called, an abstraction, an idea that might lack proof or substance. But at the same time, the narrator of the poem not only invests Hope with substance, but also gives it power to sing continuously, to weather a storm, to exist in the harshest environments. And after this demonstration of Hope's resourcefulness, the final image in the poem is the narrator, in the first person, standing before the little Bird and realizing that it needs nothing of her/him. To test one possible interpretation, Dickinson implies with this ending that if I put myself in the position of the "Me" narrator, I become the one who needs the song of the Bird, the voice of Hope, and I come to recognize what a potent force it really is.

This finally points out one more element of Dickinson's writing that makes it both fantastic and demanding: a Dickinson poem is not governed by one solitary emotion. Just as speculation about her life might too easily result in labelling who she was, assuming that one of her poems must be either joyful or sad, encouraging or depressing, coy or assertive, faithful or skeptical, will usually sell the poem short. The most powerful emotions we feel are those that come in combination with others, and Emily Dickinson was able to handle those powerful combinations with such depth that what seems like a single note being played may actually turn out to be a full range of harmonics. The way to find the combinations in her poems is neither to come to them with answers, nor to bail out with the weakness of unexamined opinions. The way to learn from Dickinson is to ask and ask again.

**Source:** Sean Robisch, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 1998.

### **David T. Porter**

*In the following excerpt, Porter discusses the various stylistic techniques—including the use of capitalization and dashes—utilized in Dickinson's early poems.*



“

*There is a  
paradoxical formal  
spareness yet connotative  
richness of statement in her  
poetry.”*

---



*She was capable of  
distilling emotional turmoil  
into its essence to the point  
where feeling exists  
dissociated from the outer  
world. The poems become  
experience rather than  
mirrors of experience...."*

---

Source: "New Ways of Articulating the World" in *The Art of Emily Dickinson's Early Poetry*, Harvard University Press, 1966, pp. 125-55.

## Sources

Ditsky, John, "The Two Emilies and a Feathered Hope." *Kyushu American Literature*, Vol. 19, 1978, pp. 28-31.

Eberwein, Jane Donahue, "'My Little Force Explodes': The Poetics of Distillation," in her *Strategies of Limitation*, University of Massachusetts Press, 1985, pp. 128-58.

Fast, Robin Riley, and Christine Mack Gordon, eds., *Approaches to Teaching Dickinson's Poetry*, New York: Modern Language Association, 1989.

MacLeish, Archibald, Louise Bogan, and Richard Wilbur, *Emily Dickinson: Three Views*, Amherst, MA: Amherst College Press, 1960.

Monteiro, G., "Dickinson's "'Hope" Is the Thing with Feathers,'" *Explicator*, Vol. 47, No. 4, Summer, 1989, pp. 34-7.

Phillips, Elizabeth, *Emily Dickinson: Personae and Performance*, University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988.

Porter, David T., "New Ways of Articulating the World," in his *The Art of Emily Dickinson's Early Poetry*, Harvard University Press, 1966, pp. 125-55.

Rupp, Richard H., ed., *Critics on Emily Dickinson*, Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1972.

Wolff, Cynthia Griffin, "Can You Make the World Anew with Words?" in her *Emily Dickinson*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1986, pp. 474-91.

Wylder, Edith, *The Last Face: Emily Dickinson's Manuscripts*, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1971.

## For Further Study

Buell, Lawrence, *Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance*, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1973.

Studies the emergence of a Transcendentalist aesthetic from its roots in Unitarianism. Dickinson is mentioned as a practitioner, but most of the discussion revolves around Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman.

Hughes, Ted, ed., *A Choice of Emily Dickinson's Verse*, Boston: Faber and Faber, 1968.

A British edition of Dickinson's poetry, selected by and including an introduction by poet laureate Ted Hughes.

Mott, Wesley T., ed., *Encyclopedia of Transcendentalism*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996.

In-depth entries provide background for study of the major figures, concepts, and publications of the movement.

Spiller, Robert E., *The Cycle of American Literature: An Essay in Historical Criticism*, New York: The MacMillan Company, 1955.

Provides historical context for the study of American literature, including a chapter on the "inner life" of artists such as Dickinson and Henry James.

Wolf, Cynthia Griffin, *Emily Dickinson*, New York: Knopf, 1986.

A major biography that attempts to explain the intricate relationship between the poet's life and her work, the life of her mind and the voice of her poems.

# Hurt Hawks

Robinson Jeffers

1928

"Hurt Hawks," published in 1928 in the collection *Cawdor and Other Poems*, is one of Robinson Jeffers most noted pieces. In it Jeffers presents life as composed of two primary forces: that which is strong, dynamic, and noble and that which is weak, passive, and tame. Evident, too, in "Hurt Hawks" is Jeffers's overall dissatisfaction with humankind, which he believed to be destroying itself through stupidity and selfishness. The line "I'd sooner ... kill a man than a hawk" has encountered much objection, but many readers are attracted to Jeffers's underlying philosophy of "inhumanism," which he defined as "a shifting of emphasis and significance from man to not-man; the rejection of human solipsism and recognition of the transhuman magnificence"—essentially the belief that humanity needs to rid itself of self-centeredness and egocentrism in order to appreciate the greatness of all creation and establish a healthy relationship with nature, the earth, and the animal kingdom.

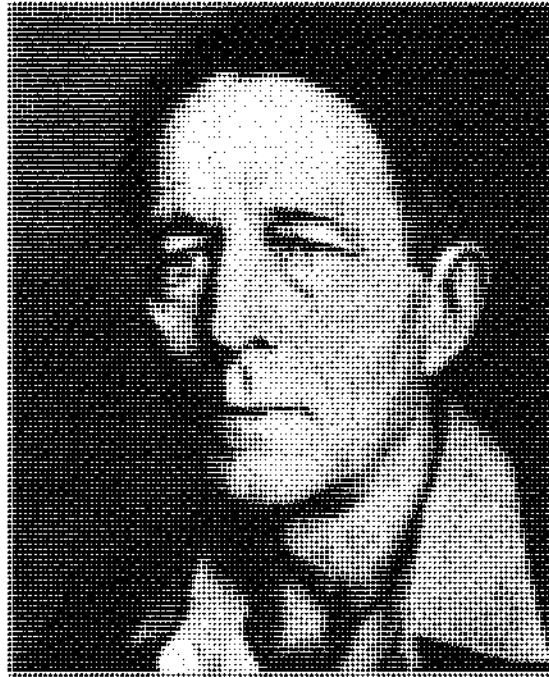
"Hurt Hawks" recounts the narrator's observation of an injured hawk, once powerful and thriving but now doomed to die by starvation. The narrator admires the hawk's pride and determination, finding that humankind as a whole compares unfavorably with this uncompromising wild creature. After failing to nurse the bird back to health, the narrator finally shoots it in an act of mercy, releasing the hawk's spirit from the prison of its broken body.



## Author Biography

Born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1887, Robinson Jeffers was the son of a professor of theology and thusly no stranger to the academic world. He began tutorials at the age of three and a half with his parents, studying biblical history and Greek mythology. By the age of twelve young Jeffers was well read in French, German, Latin, Greek, and English. The University of Western Pennsylvania accepted him for admission when he was fifteen, but his father's failing health prompted the family to move to California. He remained there for the majority of his life, where he came to be known as a "Californian landscape painter," due to his abundance of vivid nature poems. At his new university, Occidental, Jeffers edited the school's literary magazine while taking classes in astronomy, ethics, geology, history, economics, biblical literature, and rhetoric. While later pursuing a graduate degree in literature at the University of Southern California, by then only eighteen years old, Jeffers fell in love with fellow student Una Call Kuster. At the time of their affair she was two years older and already married. Jeffers soon left the country to study philosophy in Switzerland, where he picked up what he would later term "inhumanism," before returning to USC to study medicine for three years. Although he attempted to avoid Una and their affair by moving to Seattle, when he inherited almost \$10,000 in 1912 and moved back to Southern California, they were soon reunited.

After marrying Una in 1913, upon her divorce from her first husband, and tragically losing their baby daughter, Jeffers and his wife moved to Carmel, California, where he built by hand a granite house complete with stone tower. With a clear view of the ocean and the mountains, Jeffers rarely left his isolated fortress, writing over nineteen volumes of poetry from within "Hawk Tower's" stone walls. He used part of his inheritance to self-publish his first volume, *Flacons and Apples*, that same year, which critics ignored; he later wished that he had instead destroyed the collection of "embarrassingly stilted love poems." The southern California landscape, which he compared to the "magnificent unspoiled scenery" of Homer's Ithaca, became his new passion and would dominate the majority of his work from 1914 on. Highly disturbed by two horrific world wars, Jeffers experienced what he later called "the accidental new birth" of his mind, which revealed to him the beginnings of his isolationist philoso-



Robinson Jeffers

phy of "Inhumanism." His wife considered the act of building the stone tower the source of his new vision. "As he helped the masons shift and place the wind and water-worn granite," she later noted, "I think he realized some kinship with it and became aware of strengths in himself unknown before." Jeffers found a strange escape in stone imagery from the suffering in the world. He considered it inhuman but beautiful, permanent, and universal compared to our fleeting time in this world.

Jeffers and Una had twin sons while living in the stone house. Over the course of his career Jeffers drew the attention of many critics. Some rejected his work outright as pseudo-prophetic and bloated, while others praised him as the most original of visionary poets of this century. He was the recipient of numerous awards, including *Poetry* magazine's Levinson, Eunice Tietjens Memorial and Union League Civic and Arts Foundation Prizes, The Borestone Mountain Poetry Award, and an Academy of American Poets Fellowship. A prolific poet and playwright, self-declared philosopher and prophet, Robinson Jeffers died in 1962 in his sleep after four years of quickly degenerating health.

a description of the bird limping, dragging its wing “like a banner in defeat.” Using a simile to compare the injured bird to a soldier retreating with his army’s flag after defeat, Jeffers anthropomorphizes the hawk by projecting human qualities onto the animal.

**Lines: 3-5**

The lines “No more to use the sky forever but to live with famine / And pain . . .” sound like penal sentencing by a judge, and may remind us of the biblical account of Adam and Eve’s banishment from the Garden of Eden to a world of hunger and suffering. But despite its injury and confinement to the earth, the hawk will not be spared a long, drawn out death by another predator because the hawk’s talons make it dangerous prey. Ironically, though, the bird is now in the position of prey, rather than its usual role as hunter.

**Lines: 6-8**

The narrator projects human awareness onto the animal, perceiving it to be waiting for death, when in fact the hawk is simply preserving its life the best it knows how. The phrase “waits / The lame feet of salvation” indicates, importantly, that it is the feet of salvation—and *not* of the bird—that are lame. In the form of death, salvation is coming very slowly, like a lame, crippled person. And again, the bird is described like a person, as having the ability to dream, which it does until the dawn wakes it from its sleep.

**Line: 9**

The hawk, a creature that once graced the sky and feared few enemies, suffers more from this sad fate because the contrast with its former condition and abilities is so great.

**Lines: 10-12**

Curs are mongrel dogs. The term can also describe a surly or cowardly person, and this double meaning enables Jeffers to lash out at the vast majority of people who, in his opinion, oppose the very values and traits that the hawk symbolizes: integrity, courage, and defiance. Despite this torment, the hawk remains fearless (“intrepid”) and fierce, a quality that can be detected in his eyes, which are described as “terrible.” No common, earthly threat can harm the bird. Only death will “humble” such an awesome creature. In this context, death is considered a redeemer because it will free the bird’s strong, noble essence from the prison of its body.

**Poem Summary**

**Lines: 1-2**

The poem opens with the gruesome image of a bird’s injured wing, so badly damaged that the bone “jags from the clotted shoulder” like a “broken pillar.” This metaphor invites the reader to imagine something once solid, strong, and noble, now in ruin. The speaker follows this image with



**Lines: 13-14**

The "wild God of the world" likely refers to death. However, the narrator may be speaking about the biblical God in words that attempt to sum up His complex nature, which permits both beauty and ugliness, goodness and evil, to exist side by side in the world. In another interpretation, Jeffers could be distinguishing between the biblical God and "the wild God of the world," nature. Regardless, because the hawk is arrogant, it will receive no mercy, no quick death, from the God of the poem. In most cases, arrogance is considered a flaw, but here the narrator considers it a sign of the hawk's superiority and unwillingness to bend or submit.

**Line: 15**

In this line the narrator suddenly switches tone from that of a narrator, supplying description and commentary about a scene, to that of an accuser, addressing readers directly, passing judgment: "You do not know him, you communal people, or you have forgotten him." "Communal" means living, working, and eating together, which on the surface does not seem to be harmful or incorrect behavior. Yet Jeffers's personal philosophy holds that humankind has been its own worst enemy, promoting group thinking, suppression of individuality, loss of independence, and disregard for the earth. "Him" refers to the "wild God," who may be the original Creator we have "forgotten" after centuries of building cities, gathering possessions, pursuing pleasure, and, ultimately, worshipping ourselves.

**Lines: 16-17**

After accusing the human race of having forgotten, the narrator tells us that the hawk remembers. The hawk is closer to the "wild God" because he shares the same nature, he is "intemperate and savage." In line 17, we see clearly that the narrator considers wildness an admirable quality, on a par with beauty. In that same line, the narrator adds that dying men, like the hawk, remember the "wild God of the world." Who are these men? They may be those who, through danger or sickness, come face-to-face with death and thereby confront their own mortality. On the other hand, they could be those special individuals who are noble like the hawk but are symbolically dying due to the unhealthy, corrupt state of the societies and communities in which they live.

**Lines: 18-19**

Line 18 is often cited by Jeffers's critics and fans alike as a slogan for his inhumanist philoso-

phy. Upon the ending of stanza 1, the narrative voice shifts from the third person to the first person. Up to this point the speaker has described a scene in which he is not a participant. Now the narrator tells us explicitly what he thinks about humankind. He'd "sooner ... kill a man than a hawk" if he could do it without having to face the consequences, or "penalties." But the narrator realizes for the first time that he may have to put the bird out of its "unable misery."

**Lines: 20-21**

This seemingly simple comment, "We had fed him six weeks," reveals an interesting insight into the dramatic situation of the poem: first, the speaker is not alone; second, he discovered the bird of the first stanza several weeks earlier. The hawk has been in his care for six or more weeks. But even after caring for it and releasing it back into the wild, the hawk limps back over the nearby hills "asking for death." If the hawk cannot fly, it will never survive on its own in the wild, where it belongs. Furthermore, a hawk that relies on humans, as is indicated by its regular return in the evenings, will die on its own.

**Lines: 22-24**

Although the hawk returns "asking for death," it does not do so "like a beggar." Even now, the hawk demonstrates "arrogance." The narrator kills it with a bullet, giving the bird "the lead gift in the twilight," thus answering the hawk's request of line 22. Compared to the amount of time the speaker took to introduce us to this wounded animal, the actual act of killing the bird is summarized briefly in one sentence. This line, which perhaps is the climax of the poem, sets up the final image of release.

**Lines: 25-27**

After the bird is shot, our attention divides into two directions: the "relaxed" body falls to the ground, but something else "soars." Rather than depicting a bloody scene, Jeffers describes the hawk's "owl-downy, soft feminine feathers." If we read line 25 aloud we may notice how Jeffers seems to match the soft sounds of the words with the feathers they describe. Throughout the poem, the hawk is referred to as "he." Yet here the narrator designates the feathers as feminine. The most likely explanation is that the narrator considers the body to have feminine characteristics, while the spirit is masculine.

After six weeks of incapacity and starvation, the hawk's trapped spirit escapes as released en-

## Topics for Further Study



- Write a poem which *anthropomorphizes* a creature or object by giving it distinctly human qualities, much like the way Jeffers compares the hawk to man in the first stanza.
- For some, the thought of a poet living alone in a stone tower seems to perfectly fit the cliché of an artist as solitary figure. Do you feel artists—poets, painters, dancers, etc.—are, as a whole, more removed from society than others, or closer? Give examples to explore and develop your viewpoint.
- Would you “sooner, except the penalties, kill a man than a hawk?” Why or why not?

ergy, a force so strong that even in the distance “the night-herons by the flooded river cried fear at its rising.” But just as sudden as its release from a life of pain, the hawk’s spirit escaped from its physical container, “quite unsheathed from reality.” If the poem begins by setting up a scene of an injured, earthbound bird doomed to walk starving and tormented, the end of the poem suggests a return to the sky, a soaring that finally frees the bird from the cruel reality here on the ground.

### Themes

#### *Flesh vs. Spirit*

The speaker of the poem, used to living in a world of poverty and war, thinks of the bird as something spiritual, belonging to the air, now trapped in a physical world where broken wings and pain exists. The dramatic situation of the poem—a hawk fallen from the air, condemned to limp on the ground and “live with famine”—may suggest a transition from the freedom of the spirit world to the weakness and morality of the flesh. Now the bird can only imagine flying, his dream disrupted each morning by the harsh reality of dawn. Despite his appreciation and respect for the

animal, the narrator realizes that he must do the right thing, that is, release the hawk from its misery and dependence on humans. After giving the bird death in the form of a bullet, or “lead gift,” the narrator sees the spirit “unsheathed” from the flesh, soaring in a “fierce rush,” leaving the physical remains behind.

#### *God and Religion*

“Hurt Hawks” employs much language with religious connotations. Some examples include “salvation,” “redeemer,” “God,” “mercy,” and “unsheathed from reality.” The narrator also implies that the hawk’s spirit rises from the corpse after death. Furthermore, the injured bird is said to stand under the “oak-bush” waiting for salvation, an image that might remind some readers of Jesus Christ on the cross on Calvary. Jeffers, whose father was a theology professor, possessed considerable knowledge of Christianity and Roman mythology, which he drew upon for his poetic images. However, Jeffers used religious themes for his own purposes, in unusual ways. The narrator’s commentary in “Hurt Hawks” appears to support the ideas of religious primitivism and pantheism. Primitivism cherishes the simple life close to nature. Pantheism, which can be viewed as complementary to primitivism, equates God with the forces and laws of the universe. Considering this, we understand how Jeffers might refer to death or nature as the “wild God of the world,” or how he can claim to value the life of a hawk over that of a human being. These beliefs are consistent with his philosophy of inhumanism.

#### *Nature and Its Meaning*

Jeffers wrote so often and so vividly about the natural world he became known as a “California landscape painter.” In “Hurt Hawks” Jeffers uses observations of an injured bird to explore larger questions about nature. Note that nature dominates the poem, with no intrusions of buildings, cars, or humans, other than the narrator. The inhabitants of this world are birds of prey, cats, coyotes, curs, game, and herons. Of paramount importance in this realm are the primal physical sensations of pain, misery, famine, and torment. It is to this primitive world that the hawk belongs, a world where wildness and savagery are required for survival, and where death is the “wild God.” Humans have protected themselves from nature by becoming “communal.” In doing so, they have lost self-sufficiency, awareness of mortality, and appreciation for nature. The narrator knows that if he continues feeding the

hawk, enabling it to live as long as it is in his care, he is doing it no favor. The hawk is a wild animal that must live in nature or die. Unlike humans, it cannot compromise its essence.

### Style

There is a substantial body of criticism, though much of it obscure, on Jeffers's versecraft. Some commentators believe that he employed free verse, while others disagree. In personal correspondence, Jeffers himself asserted that it is not really free verse, but fairly strict strong-stress metric. Here is a reasonable assessment of "Hurt Hawks": the first part presents lines of 6 stresses and 4 stresses, in alteration; the second part is composed of lines of alternating lines of 7 stresses and 4 stresses. However, critics often disagree when attempting to judge versification.

Those who consider "Hurt Hawks" free verse maintain that Jeffers didn't use a set rhyme pattern or traditional form of line length to construct this piece. Free doesn't necessarily mean without form; rather, the poem's shape grows organically from its content, not unlike the way a river carves its own banks. Jeffers believed poems should balance both "substance and sense, a physical and psychological reality." Perhaps driven by this instinct, Jeffers divided the poem into two long stanzas, each identified by roman numerals. Stanza literally means "room" in Italian, and in this poem Jeffers carefully organizes his images in these two rooms: the first stanza establishes a dramatic situation upon which the second stanza acts.

Jeffers uses fairly long lines throughout the poem. These long lines seem to build a momentum of their own, the poet's voice increasing in force as it stretches out across the page. Perhaps Jeffers uses these extended lines to mirror the speaker's disappointed anger in seeing the dying animal; his emotions build as he details the gruesome scene. Even though his lines don't follow a set rhythmic pattern of accented stresses, as in the sonnet, each line's pace seems to match the content it carries. For instance, the poem opens with an injured hawk trailing its broken wing, the once graceful bird of prey limping along in awkward, stilted hops. If we read these first lines aloud and pay close attention to the natural stresses and accents of the words, Jeffers's craft becomes apparent in the way the rhythm seems to mirror the bird's limp: "The BROKEN PILLar of the WING JAGS from the CLOTted

SHOULDer, / The WING TRAILS like a BANner in deFEAT...." Jeffers uses similar tensions between content and form throughout the poem to give an otherwise "free verse" poem a solid and sustaining structure.

### Historical Context

Jeffers was born in 1887 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He was tutored by his father, a Presbyterian preacher and theologian, in various languages, the classics, and the Bible before being sent to boarding schools in Switzerland and Germany. Following his graduation in 1905 from Occidental College in Highland Park, California, at the age of 17, Jeffers earned a master's degree in literature from the University of Southern California; he later spent several years studying medicine at USC and forestry at the University of Washington. A modest inheritance enabled Jeffers and his wife to settle on an isolated plot of coastal land in Carmel, California, where he built a stone house and tower overlooking the Pacific Ocean and devoted himself to his art.

The 1920s, the decade in which Jeffers wrote "Hurt Hawks," was a period of exploration and vision. Many noted "lost generation" writers like Ernest Hemingway traveled the world in search of purpose and inspiration. During this decade Charles Lindbergh also completed the first solo nonstop transatlantic flight, Albert Hegenberger made the first successful flight from San Francisco to Hawaii, and Amelia Earhart scouted her first transatlantic flight as a passenger with two other pilots. Contrary to this national fever for travel and exploration, Jeffers instead chose move his family to Southern California, build a granite house by hand, and live isolated on a remote rocky shore. Jeffers spent the rest of his life there composing books and philosophical essays until his death in 1962. Poems such as "Hurt Hawks" exemplify Jeffers's antisocial convictions and a deeper trust in the natural world than in the booming economy and populace of the United States. While across the country, Wonder Bread was making its debut and "He's got the Whole World in his Hands" was the nation's favorite song, Jeffers sat in his stone tower and accused society of small-mindedness, using religion as a dying convenience, and living in artificial and unsustainable cities of concrete and steel. While the nation experienced sweeping changes and transition between postwar prosperity and the

## Compare & Contrast

- **1928:** Transatlantic telephone service begins between London and New York, costing \$25 per minute and restricted to 3 minutes total duration.

**Today:** The internet, or World Wide Web, provides nearly instant communication and distribution of information over an international network of telephone lines and satellites. Service providers charge private individuals around \$15 per month for unlimited access through their personal computers.

- **1928:** Television technology debuts in the auditorium of New York's Bell Telephone Labs. In a demonstration that is more like a video conference than television as we know it today, this first demonstration enabled audience members to watch Herbert Hoover address them from Washington, D.C., while his hearing his voice over telephone wires.

**Today:** Businesses, universities, and classrooms widely use integrated video conferencing systems for distance learning, employee training, and political debates.

- **1928:** Police arrest more than 75,000 people for drinking alcohol, which is outlawed during the Prohibition Era. Some 1,565 Americans die from drinking toxic homemade liquor, hundreds are blinded, and many are killed in bootlegger wars.

**Today:** Alcohol companies advertise widely on television, radio, and in the print media, convincing the nation that any cause for celebration is "Miller Time." Multimillion-dollar promotional campaigns closely link alcohol with professional sports and America's youth. Over 100,000 Americans die each year of alcohol poisoning alone; countless others are injured or killed in alcohol-related auto accidents and domestic violence arising from alcoholism.

coming Depression of 1929, Jeffers, angry and eccentric, averred that he'd "rather, except the penalties, kill a man than a hawk."

### Critical Overview

It is difficult to find much specific criticism of "Hurt Hawks" and his other early, shorter poems. Overshadowing this poem is the larger criticism of Jeffers as a philosophical poet and writer of long, narrative pieces. Many critics begin their discussion of Jeffers's nature poetry with a synopsis of his fairly obscure personal philosophy. "Inhumanism," as Jeffers called it, "is a shifting of emphasis from man to not-man. It offers reasonable detachment as the rule of conduct, instead of love, hate and envy." This is a repugnant idea to many, including several critics who find Jeffers's work occasionally contradictory or irrelevant. Kenneth Rexroth, in his book *Assays*, judged Jeffers's phi-

losophy "a mass of high-flown statements indulged in for their melodrama alone, and often essentially meaningless." Robert Boyers, in the *Sewanee Review*, similarly observed of his poems, "Structurally, they are sound enough, but the texture of these poems is swollen by effusions of philosophizing and by attempts to impose representative signification on characters and actions." This may apply to the lengths to which the speaker of "Hurt Hawks" goes to impose religious symbolism on the dying bird.

Other critics view Jeffers and his "philosophic-dramatic" poetry as a revolutionary and prophetic work worthy of high praise. In his book *The Concept of Nature in Nineteenth-Century English Poetry*, Joseph Warren Beach points out that in "Hurt Hawks" and other shorter poems Jeffers "celebrates with greatest unction is the peace that lies in the grave. So great are the sufferings and weariness of men, and indeed of all animated beings, that their profoundest longing is for death." James Dickey praises Jeffers in *Babel to Byzantium*, observing

that he "fills a position in this country that would simply have been an empty gap without him: that of the poet as prophet, as large-scale philosopher, as doctrine-giver." Perhaps the greatest praise comes from Nobel Prize-winning poet Czeslaw Milosz, quoted in the *Los Angeles Times* declaring Jeffers "undoubtedly ... one of the great poets of this century."

## Criticism

### David Rothman

David J. Rothman is a poet, critic, and journalist who has published widely and taught English at many colleges and secondary schools. He recently became the Executive Director of the Robinson Jeffers Association, a group of scholars and writers. In the following essay, Rothman describes how Jeffers portrays the "stark beauty and violence of inhuman nature" in "Hurt Hawks," which he considers among the poet's best work.

Robinson Jeffers (1887-1962) was one of the most famous American poets of the twentieth century, and he led a career that ranks as one of the most fascinating, productive, and controversial among all American artists. In 1925, already in his late 30s, Jeffers was relatively undistinguished as the author of two virtually unknown volumes of verse; these would prove to be very different than his mature work. But with the publication of *Roan Stallion, Tamar, and Other Poems* in 1925, he rocketed to a fame shared by only a handful of contemporary writers. In the following twelve years, his output was tremendous: seven lengthy volumes of new poetry, each of which contained one or more long, tragic, narrative poems along with visionary lyrics about nature and the fate of civilization. Several of the books also included verse plays, often based on free adaptations of Greek tragedies. Many of these volumes were highly praised best-sellers, and some are still in print. In 1932, with the publication of *Thurso's Landing and Other Poems*, his photograph, a portrait by Edward Weston, appeared on the cover of *Time*. The anonymous reviewer referred to Jeffers as a writer "whom a considerable public now considers the most impressive poet the U. S. has yet produced."

After this high point, Jeffers's star sank rapidly beginning in the mid-1930s. The causes included his continuing emphasis on what was viewed as social detachment, in a time when more and more writers were calling for politically engaged art; his

## What Do I Read Next?



- Many critics trace Jeffers's theories of inhumanism back to his years of philosophical studies in Zurich. While at the university he read Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche, two philosophers whose works shed interesting light on Jeffers's later poems. Schopenhauer is the primary expounder of pessimism, the doctrine that reality is essentially evil. Nietzsche denounced religion and glorified a class of people who are superior to the vast masses of humanity.
- Jeffers's complete body of poetry, titled *The Collected Poems of Robinson Jeffers*, is gathered in two 300-page volumes, edited by Tim Hurt.
- David Brower recently rereleased a book of poems and photographs originally published in 1965 by the Sierra Club. *Not Man Apart: Photographs of the Big Sur Coast* combines Jeffers's poems with photos by several famous artists, including Edward Weston and Ansel Adams.
- You can read the Jeffers's once-censored poetry in the book *In this Wild Water: The Suppressed Poems of Robinson Jeffers*.

occasionally bitter philosophy of "Inhumanism," in which Jeffers argued that human beings should turn away from human problems to contemplate the more lasting beauty and significance of the inhuman, natural world; his advocacy of isolationism during World War II, including poems highly critical of both Hitler and the Allies; and the harsh judgment by many critics that his poems lacked erudition, complexity, and craft, and were hysterical, by which the critics meant excessively violent and shrill. Although Jeffers published more work of high quality, and his free adaptation of Euripides's *Medea* enjoyed a highly successful run on Broadway in the late 1940s, by the time of his death in 1962 he had been all but forgotten by scholars

“*‘Hurt Hawks’ is an excellent introduction to all that is best in Jeffers: gripping narrative; clear philosophical meditation; spiritual intensity; a tragic view of life; and a sublime vision of nature.*”

and critics. He has, however, always retained a popular following, especially as a poet of the natural world.

Today Jeffers is primarily known through a few anthologized lyrics and some of the shorter narratives (such as “Roan Stallion”). Yet despite general critical indifference and lingering scholarly hostility, he has directly influenced not only poets such as William Everson (who credited his exposure to Jeffers’s work as one of the most important events of his life) and, more recently, Mark Jarman, but also figures as different as O’Neill and Faulkner. The list of recent and contemporary writers who claim to admire him includes Charles Bukowski, Robert Bly, Diane Wakoski, Edward Abbey, Dana Gioia, John Haines, Czeslaw Milosz, Gary Snyder, and many others. As Gioia has pointed out, Jeffers remains the greatest poet to date of the American West; one of the greatest American poets of the natural world, indeed one of the greatest visionary poets of the natural sublime ever to have written, and a crucial influence on the entire modern environmental movement; and one of the greatest narrative poets America has produced. I would add that he is one of the greatest verse dramatists this country has ever seen, perhaps surpassed only by T. S. Eliot. Most important, he conveys his vision of the poet’s place in the world so powerfully that even many who do not agree with him feel compelled to address his art and its claims.

“Hurt Hawks” embodies much of what is best in Jeffers’s work. First published in the volume *Cawdor and Other Poems* in 1928, Jeffers wrote it when he had recently become famous. It serves as a compact and forceful embodiment of what is most

compelling in his work. Although the poem is short, it is clearly both a philosophical meditation and a narrative, which Jeffers presents in two numbered chapters, as if it were a microcosm of his longer poems. “Hurt Hawks” is also obviously a nature lyric, and the descriptions are highly evocative of the harshness and beauty of the inhuman world. The brief story about how the speaker, whom Jeffers presents as himself, tends for a wounded hawk and then kills it out of mercy because it can no longer “use the sky forever” is violent, and Jeffers does not soften that violence in any way. If anything, he uses the stark beauty and violence of inhuman nature as the setting for a story that provokes us into thinking about immense and dangerous questions, including nothing less than the relation of any given spirit—a man’s or a hawk’s, or by extension, any living thing—to the rest of the universe. The poem has a clear, direct, visionary quality that is very much in the spirit of tragic intensity and the sublime, or inexpressible and terrifying. This is the quality that has attracted so many readers to Jeffers’s work. So “Hurt Hawks” is an excellent introduction to all that is best in Jeffers: gripping narrative; clear philosophical meditation; spiritual intensity; a tragic view of life; and a sublime vision of nature.

The first part of the poem is in the present tense, although it implies a story. A hawk has somehow broken its wing, and thus will inevitably die if left in the wild. Interestingly, much of the vivid metaphorical language Jeffers initially chooses to portray this wild thing comes from the world of human civilization: the exposed bone of the injured wing is a “broken pillar” sticking out of the hawk’s body, a compound fracture; the unsupported wing “trails like a banner in defeat.” So the hawk is immediately compared to a stone ruin, and then to a defeated army.

Astonishingly, most critics have downplayed Jeffers’s interest in poetic language, as he did not dwell upon it in his writing about poetry, and his meanings appear at first to be fairly straightforward. In the case of “Hurt Hawks,” Jeffers makes a comparison between an injured animal and the kinds of defeats suffered by human beings, and the language is certainly more direct than that of high Modernists such as Pound and Eliot. Still, Jeffers’s metaphors are highly complex. In order to understand that complexity, we need to have a somewhat better sense of what Jeffers meant by “Inhumanism,” the name he gave to what he called his “philosophical attitude.” In a poem penned a few years before “Hurt Hawks” called “Credo,” Jeffers had

written that "The beauty of things was born before the eyes and sufficient to itself; the heart-breaking beauty / Will remain when there is no heart to break for it." In other words, as he repeated throughout his life, the beauty of nature—in ocean, rock, hawk, sky, and star—has absolutely no need of human beings. In one of his longer poems, the narrative poem "Roan Stallion," he actually called humanity "the last, least taint of a trace in the dregs of the solution" of the universe.

In Jeffers's view, many of civilization's problems, including the problems that led during his lifetime to two devastating world wars, grew out of a childish insistence of considering ourselves to be the center of the universe and always looking inward when we should be looking outward, away from human concerns and toward the wild beauty of all creation. So Jeffers defined Inhumanism as "a shifting of emphasis and significance from man to not-man; the rejection of human solipsism and recognition of the transhuman magnificence." Hostile critics often called this attitude hateful and misanthropic, but it is probably more appropriate to say that Jeffers felt we should not exaggerate our own importance in the cosmic scheme of things. In Jeffers's view, as he wrote in a poem called "The Answer":

... the greatest beauty is Organic wholeness, the wholeness of life and things, the divine beauty of the universe. Love that, not man Apart from that, or else you will share man's pitiful confusions, or drown in despair when his days darken.

This is the approach to life, deeply influenced by modern science as well as traditional Christianity, that has led many to see Jeffers as one of the spiritual founders of the modern environmental movement.

Why, then, if he always seeks to look away from humanity to let nature take its magnificent, indifferent course, does Jeffers begin "Hurt Hawks" with metaphors of ruined buildings and defeated banners, which are exclusively manmade things? Why does he compare "the great redtail" to things from the human world? Perhaps Jeffers's language is more complex than it at first appears. By describing the hawk in this way, Jeffers acknowledges our human interest in it, and tries to relate it to our human experience, which is mostly so different from the hawk's. For the hawk is "intemperate and savage," unlike most of us, who are merely "communal people." The poem, which is itself a manmade thing in praise of wild, inhuman nature, becomes a place where the human and the inhuman meet. This is true not only because the



*Jeffers argued that human beings should turn away from human problems to contemplate the more lasting beauty and significance of the inhuman, natural world"*

human speaker confronts the hawk, but it is true even at the level of the poem's most powerful metaphors, which mix the human and the inhuman, the hawk and the pillar. This observation helps to explain why the poem is called "Hurt Hawks," when there appears to be only one hawk in it—perhaps the other hawk is the poet himself, and by extension that part in all of us that can somehow understand the "beautiful and wild" world of nature, even though we are human.

As the first part of the poem continues, the speaker dispassionately describes how the hawk will die, must die, because it is far too wounded to fly again, and therefore cannot hunt. The hawk will slowly starve, though it will do what it can to survive, driving away cats, "curs," and coyotes, which will go in search of easier prey, "game without talons." The speaker even imagines the hawk "flies in a dream," although "the dawns ruin it." But wait—once again, isn't Jeffers assuming that hawks are actually similar to people? For we have no first-hand accounts of hawk dreams, since hawks cannot tell us about them. For that matter, it is hard to imagine how a hawk might wait for "the lame feet of salvation," an explicitly Christian concept. If we are honest, it is hard to say what the hawk is waiting for, or even if he is waiting in any sense we can truly understand. All we have is our own, human language, which Jeffers cunningly sculpts to evoke something utterly beyond itself: the internal life of an injured raptor. The poet is self-consciously trying to get us to imagine something that cannot really be imagined.

Jeffers is quite aware of what he is doing, that his poem is not a scientific description of a wounded animal's death, but a way of provoking

us into meditation. At the end of the first part, the poet suddenly turns to his readers to accuse us of not even being able to think in such a way as to understand his story. Jeffers says we cannot possibly know or remember "the wild God of the world," the God who will never be merciful to the arrogant hawk, who is somewhat like the stubborn king of a Greek tragedy. This is where the purpose of the poem becomes more clear. It is a kind of sermon, containing a parable that Jeffers uses to provoke us into thinking about the inhuman natural world. We are not hawks, and can never be like them (except perhaps for "men that are dying"); but somehow, through language, we can imagine what it might be like to be in the world the way that the hawk is in the world. We can contemplate the raw, arrogant, utterly wild, extravagant nature of this animal. And if we do so, we find that it is both terrifying and inexpressibly beautiful: sublime. And, for Jeffers, this act of imagining brings us closer to God, who is best described as himself "wild." In Jeffers's scheme it is "death" which is "the redeemer," not Christ.

The second part of "Hurt Hawks" opens in a very different way than the first, and it is immediately more conversational: "I'd sooner, except the penalties, kill a man than a hawk," a line that Edward Abbey modifies and quotes (without attributing it to Jeffers) in *Desert Solitaire*. Jeffers appears to be taking a hard line here, but he identifies himself as the "I," hardly sounding like the enraged preacher of the first part who accuses us of being ignorant, communal people. It is as if Jeffers, after his blast of prophetic fire in the first stanza, is calmer now, speaking more personally and directly to us—with even a bit of dark humor. Notice that Jeffers is not announcing that he is going to go out and kill a man; he only says that he thinks men are probably more deserving of being killed than hawks, who only do what their natures require them to. The passage resonates with Whitman's famous lines from *Leaves of Grass*:

I think I could turn and live with animals, they are  
so placid and self-contain'd,  
I stand and look at them long and long.  
They do not sweat and whine about their condition,  
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for  
their sins,  
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to  
God.  
Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with  
the mania of owning things,  
Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that  
lived thousands of years ago,  
Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole  
earth.

Both poets admire the simultaneous stoicism ("they do not sweat and whine") and freedom ("Not one kneels to another") of wild animals. Jeffers's statement may seem the more shocking, but his acknowledgment of "the penalties" for killing a man suggest that in this part of the poem he is less angry and prophetic and more like one of the communal people who lives by law. In this part of the poem, he is one of the accused, not just the accuser.

The rest of the poem bears out his resignation to and even the spiritual rewards of this destiny. Most of the passage describes, in chronological sequence, how Jeffers tried to nurse an injured red-tail hawk—presumably the hawk of the first part—back to health. In the end, however, it becomes clear that the hawk will never fly again and can only look forward to "unable misery." Jeffers releases it to die on its own, but it returns after a day, "asking for death." Once again, it is irresistible to ask, in what sense does a red-tail hawk ask for something like this? In what sense does a bird "ask" at all? Isn't that something that implies language, which the wild, savage hawk does not have, at least in any sense that we can directly understand? Further, Jeffers goes on to say that the hawk is "not like a beggar," again a human comparison. But now it is Jeffers who acts, shooting the hawk in a twilight mercy killing. He describes this killing not only as an ending, but as a liberation for something in the bird, a "what" that fiercely and magnificently soars and disperses.

Jeffers is extremely careful in this ending. He never refers to what happens as the release of a spirit or a soul. In fact, he says that the bird's "rising" occurs "Before it was quite unsheathed from reality" [my emphasis]. In the end, what the bird was simply vanishes, but even in that vanishing there is astonishing poetic and spiritual force. And Jeffers sugar-coats nothing. The release of this spirit is violent and terrifying: "the night-herons by the flooded river cried fear at its rising."

The final question to ask is why a man who upbraids his audience for being weak and communal spends any time nursing a wounded hawk? Why not simply let nature take its course? The answer is that Jeffers is far from being a one-dimensional character. "Hurt Hawks" is a poem filled with conflict and pain transformed into fierce beauty. The pain lies in Jeffers's forthright acknowledgment of death, that even nature's most beautiful, wild, and free animals, hawks, must die, and often die horribly. Jeffers doesn't like this anymore than anyone else, and in the poem actually goes out of his way



to try to save the hawk. But when he realizes it cannot live any kind of life that would be appropriate for a wild animal, he accepts what amounts to an ethical burden in relation to it. Of course, the killing of the hawk therefore remains an inevitably human act, an act of mercy, unlike anything a hawk would ever do. This contradiction only looks like a problem if we think Jeffers was unaware of it. In fact, it is the contradiction out of which he created the poem.

The tortured, but compelling and beautiful result is that Jeffers describes a connection between the living and the inanimate world, even between the living and something so vast that it includes both reality and that which is "unsheathed from reality." Rather obviously, death will ultimately be our fate as well as the hawk's, which is why Jeffers says that "men who are dying" also remember "the wild God of the world." For Jeffers, the hurt hawk—arrogant, wild, and savage—opens a visionary passage to the infinite and eternal, in comparison to which our lives are insignificant. In awakening us to this sublime comparison, Jeffers evokes profound awe at the very fact of existence, connecting our humanity back to that wild God. If we read carefully, he forces us to stop, look around, and view life with astonishment at its vastness, fierceness, and energy.

It is Jeffers's ability to convey awe, often through terror and uncompromising fierceness, that will make his poetry survive. His strongest work always aims to achieve pathos, the awakening of powerful feelings through the depiction of suffering. Despite his apparent quirkiness and isolation, and his radical differences with the Modernists, poems such as "Hurt Hawks" stand in a great American tradition in which a lonely mind confronts wilderness and through it senses the divine. As much as any poet in this tradition, Jeffers sought to bridge the gap between ordinary human life and a sense of the sacred. Far from denying his humanity, in his best work Jeffers thoroughly acknowledges it and then goes about the great task of giving it meaning by envisioning our place in the largest possible scheme of things, which includes even that dimension into which we will eventually be "unsheathed from reality." Many readers have therefore described Jeffers's project as a religious one, but we should remember that he worked exclusively as an artist, not a minister or theologian. While acknowledging that Jeffers's poems draw on what he called "the religious instinct," we might in the end do better to say that what he sought was not religious knowledge, en-

lightenment, or ecstasy or even a path to any dogmatical grace (death is the only redeemer). Instead, he sought simply to be utterly, completely, and even painfully awake.

**Source:** David Rothman, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 1998.

### **Virginia E. Jorgensen**

*In the following excerpt, Jorgensen provides suggestions for teaching "Hurt Hawks."*

"Hurt Hawks," an old favorite for many of us familiar with the wild beauty of the Point Lobos region, has not lost its impact with the years. Far from fading, this poem has increasing implications and attractions for today's students. But the emotional pitch, the splendid drama in the everyday world of the hawk, may tempt us to find meanings that are not in the poem at all. The very intricacy of the treatment of a seemingly simple subject offers the chance to go ridiculously far afield. This is not, for example, a poem concerned with the question of euthanasia. The hawk is not a symbol of humanity. This is a poem about an injured hawk, a predatory, swift-flying, majestic, terrible bird that Jeffers found an affinity for.

For younger high school students, the kind of compassion Jeffers expresses here is close to their own poignant experiences with dying frogs, wild rabbits, or birds. But if this were merely a nature poem, the sad account of the death of a wild bird that failed to be healed and domesticated, there would be little to discuss with more able older students. The problem is often, instead, that there seems to be too much, rather than too little, to be considered. First, however, a reading by the teacher is necessary. By tone of voice, by careful attention to the long stately lines and their meaningful punctuation, by emphasis of the climax, the teacher's reading should awaken an interest in the dramatic power of the poem. After briefly considering the surface story, we must then begin to ask what the poem is really about.

Because Jeffers brings himself and his experience into the poem, we must be concerned with his purposes. In "Hurt Hawks," the poet comments on nature, man, his God, and immortality. We might begin by asking the class, "What shocks you most about the poem?" Very likely it may be the line, "I'd sooner, except the penalties, kill a man than a hawk." Is this statement merely the anguished, angry cry of the poet, or does it imply deeper meanings? If Jeffers values hawks more than man, does it follow that he necessarily hates man? It may be



*...Jeffers had a desire  
to see absolute,  
inextinguishable values in  
the world. But since he did  
not find these values in  
man, ...Jeffers turned to the  
indomitable hawk as a  
symbol of the immortality  
of spirit."*

---

that Jeffers, who loved all wild nature, feels man is less significant than birds, or a less effective part of the universe. If this viewpoint seems joltingly unorthodox, we might stop to consider "The wild God of the world ... Intemperate and savage" remembered equally well by hawks and dying men. Why does this primitive god fail to alleviate the suffering of both the predatory bird and mankind? A little later, in sharp contrast, the hawk's body relaxes in death, but its spirit magically takes flight. How can we explain this sudden, dramatic picture of immortality?

To guide a discussion intelligently, particularly when it seems appropriate with older students familiar with English or world literature, the teacher should recognize the way "Hurt Hawks" fuses Jeffers' inheritance from Shelley's Platonism and from Greek tragedy. What are the implications of these influences on the poem? Having cast an awful judgment on the hawk, the primitive god mercilessly awaits the hawk's death. Why is it important that the hawk, an Oedipus-like creature, should cling to his "implacable arrogance" (mentioned twice for emphasis) if we are to comprehend his suffering? This terrible retribution is rather quietly interrupted by the poet's killing the bird. The hawk's spirit, then, defying the classical realism of its suffering, speeds upward to become immortal in the serene order of the universe. Like Shelley, Jeffers had a desire to see absolute, inextinguishable values in the world. But since he did not find these values in man, particularly man riddled by the Freudian doubts of his own age, Jeffers turned to the indomitable hawk as a symbol of the immor-

ality of spirit. Thus it is the spirit of the hawk, not man, that concerns Jeffers.

After we have discussed some of the underlying ideas in "Hurt Hawks," we may invite students to read aloud the poem again, or perhaps read it silently. Let us notice the structure, probably an unconscious reflection of the Greek method. The action begins in medias res, the hawk's wing long since broken, its life to be lived but a few more days. Why is it appropriate to begin with the slow, steady building of the pain, and excruciating pain heightened by words like "broken pillar," "jags," and "clotted"? Why is it effective that the hawk is not named until the pronoun without antecedent, "He," in line 6 introduces the majestic, half-dying bird, living halfway between dream and reality? Throughout the stately description of the silent hawk, the pain intensifies, not for physical reason alone, but because "to the strong, incapacity is worse." Although the primitive god will become increasingly "intemperate" in inflicting pain, there is a foreshadowing in "death the redeemer." It is interesting, also, to note the dramatic progress from "lame feet of salvation," the figure appropriately reflecting the bird's previous hopeless condition in line 7, to this foreshadowing in line 11.

After the stage is set (the results of the injury, the building of the bird's character and his dilemma) the poem abruptly shifts to a personal, familiar tone. The poet emerges to give us his viewpoint of the bird's pain, elliptically expressed as "unable misery." He tells us, almost matter-of-factly, what has happened, repeating a description of the broken wing, using even more clinical precision than in the first stanza. The pitiful wing "that trailed under his talons when he moved" reflects the poet's comprehension of the bird's fate: the beauty of the hawk—that is, his power for flight and independence—is ruined. The wing is now only an impediment to his talons (the symbol of only his material needs). Because the poet feels the experience intensely, we can appreciate the quiet control of the words "lead gift" which, in a casual reading, might seem a sugary euphemism.

The poem has begun, then, with measured pace, leading us with deadly inevitability to a final catharsis. After the informality of the first five lines of the third stanza, the chanting tones begin again. If there is a constriction in the tone and feeling of the first part of the poem, there is a balancing in the romantic rush of words that implies the spirit's flight in the ending. There is the awful paradox of the soft, downy, dead creature, and the electrifying fierceness of the hawk's spirit ("its" like "He" once

again with no antecedent). The night-herons, like a Greek chorus, reflect the poet's intense awe, his certainty of the immortality of all wild and beautiful things. At this point, another reading of the poem is in order.

Students who like to follow the building of dramatic unity may also be interested in the contribution of the sound to the sense. I should not take long to point out the binding effect of initial sound in "Hurt Hawks": "cat nor coyote," "week, waiting, without," and "freedom flies." The sentences are long and sweeping, so continuous that Jeffers uses a comma rather than the usual period in lines 1, 2, 5, 8, 9, 11, and 21. In contrast to this continuity is the underlying rhythm, a rhythm as halting and uncertain as the hawk's steps. The lines seem to limp alternately between an underlying seven- and five-foot line. "He stands under the oak-bush and waits" uses the majestic spondee to slow the pace. The rugged sounds of the words in the first part of the poem dissolve into the lyric beauty of those in the last six lines, surely some of the loveliest in all modern poetry.

A short study of "Hurt Hawks" should never try to encompass all a teacher knows (or thinks he knows!) about a poem or a poet. It should follow the interest and the abilities of the class. Let us hope there will be puzzled student to ask their own questions: why "Hurt Hawks" when the poem is about only one hawk? To whom do the phrases "Intemperate and savage" and "Beautiful and wild" refer, the hawk or the wild God? What does the word "forever" really imply in line 3? But whatever questions may arise, and no matter how much the class may digress, a final reading aloud must unify the class's concepts of the poem.

The intellectually curious student may also enjoy drawing parallels with various lyrics of Shelley. He would surely profit by reading Jeffers' poem "Self-Criticism in February," which seems to sum up Jeffers' basic philosophy. Prose selection that are particularly relevant for discussion are Wallace Stegner's "The Colt," published separately from the novel *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* as a short story, and, for older students, the essay "The Bird and the Machine" [in his *The Woman on the Wall*] by the anthropologist Loren Eiseley. This last selection is almost a prose counterpart of "Hurt Hawks" in its description of the freeing of captive hawks. Eiseley's statement, "Sometimes of late years I find myself thinking the most beautiful sight in the world might be the birds taking over New York after the last man has run away to the hills,"

was written in 1955, thirty years after Jeffers' poem. The ideas in "Hurt Hawks," then, seem to be gathering momentum.

Some of the grandeur of the wild country and wild creatures Jeffers loved seems to linger for us in this poem. The imprint of a major American poet is evident in the personal feelings expressed here so deftly. But the real value of a study of this poem would seem to be in an appreciation of the Romantic spirit that rushes on even in these unlikely times, in a tempering of the ear to hear the night-herons.

**Source:** "Hearing the Night-Herons: A Lesson on Jeffers' 'Hurt Hawks'" in *English Journal*, Vol. LI, No. 6, September 1962, pp. 440-42.

## Sources

Abbey, Edward, *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness*, New York: Simon and Schuster, [1968] 1990.

Beach, Joseph Warren, *The Concept of Nature in Nineteenth Century English Poetry*, The Macmillan Company, New York, 1936.

Boyers, Robert, "A Sovereign Voice: The Poetry of Robinson Jeffers," in *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. VII, No. 3, Summer, 1969.

Dickey, James, *Babel to Byzantium*, Farrar, Straus, 1968.

Everson, William (Brother Antoninus), *The Excesses of God: Robinson Jeffers as a Religious Figure*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988.

———, *Robinson Jeffers: Fragments of an Older Fury*, Berkeley: Oyez Press, 1968.

Gioia, Dana, "Strong Counsel," *Can Poetry Matter?* Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 1992, pp. 47-60.

"Harrowed Marrow," *Time*, April 4, 1932, pp. 63-64.

Hass, Robert, introduction to *Rock and Hawk: A Selection of the Shorter Poems by Robinson Jeffers*, edited by Robert Hass, New York: Random House, 1987, pp. xv-xliii.

Jarman, Mark, *Iris*, Brownsville, OR: Storyline Press, 1992.

Jeffers, Robinson, *The Collected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers*, edited by Tim Hunt, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991.

Karman, James, *Robinson Jeffers: Poet of California*, revised edition, Brownsville, OR: Storyline Press, 1995.

Rexroth, Kenneth, *Assays*, New Directions, 1961.

Whitman, Walt, *Leaves of Grass: Comprehensive Reader's Edition*, edited by Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley, New York: New York University Press, 1965.

### *For Further Study*

Brophy, Robert, *Robinson Jeffers: Myth, Ritual, and Symbol in His Narrative Poems*, Shoe String Press, 1976.

Brophy traces connections between Jeffers's deep understanding of Greek mythology and Christianity and the symbols which reoccur in his narrative poems.

Coffin, Arthur, *Robinson Jeffers: Poet of Inhumanism*, University of Wisconsin Press, 1971.

Coffin identifies examples from Jeffers's work to illustrate the role of Inhumanism in the poet's life and writing.

Everson, William, *Excesses of God: Robinson Jeffers as a Religious Figure*, Stanford University Press, 1988.

For those who believe Jeffers's work defined a new religion, Everson finds connections between the poet's work and his philosophically driven life.

Zaller, Robert, *The Cliffs of Solitude: A Reading of Robinson Jeffers*, Cambridge University Press, 1983.

Zaller views Jeffers's work through the lens of the poet's solitary life on the coast of Big Sur in Monterey, California.

# *I Hear America Singing*

First published in the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, "I Hear America Singing" exemplifies Whitman's intense patriotism and his staunch belief in the importance of the "common man and woman" in American society. In the opening line, "I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear ..." the speaker assumes a posture common in much of Whitman's poetry by asserting his unique ability to see America in all its greatness, or in this particular case, to hear "its varied carols." What follows is a chronicle of various characters or figures from the working-class, each singing his or her own song. These lines may be read literally to suggest the speaker of the poem actually hears these various people singing, but references to "song" or "carols" in the poem also serve as metaphors for the various characters' uniqueness.

Each character is "singing what belongs to him or her and to none else ..." and together their individual "carols" blend into one enormous chorus that is America. In this manner the poem alludes to the democratic ideal of a government "of the people, for the people and by the people," each person with a voice—a say in how the government is run. However, by omitting members of the upper-class from the poem, the speaker denies them a place in his particular vision of America. Thus the poem espouses an America in which working people are revered above all others, and by positioning himself within the poem, the speaker asserts his own rightful place in this America. The becomes the speaker's song, his contribution to the overall chorus.

*Walt Whitman*

1860





Walt Whitman

### Author Biography

The second of nine children, Whitman was born in 1819 on Long Island, New York, to Quaker parents. In 1823 the Whitmans moved to Brooklyn, where Whitman attended public school. At age eleven he left school to work as an office boy in a law firm and then as a typesetter's apprentice at a number of print shops. Although his family moved back to Long Island in 1834, Whitman stayed in Brooklyn and then New York City to become a compositor. Unable to find work, he rejoined his family on Long Island in 1836 and taught at several schools. In addition to teaching, Whitman started his own newspaper, the *Long Islander*. He subsequently edited numerous papers for short periods over the next fourteen years, including the *New York Aurora* and the *Brooklyn Eagle*, and published poems and short stories in various periodicals.

Whitman did little in terms of employment from the 1850 to 1855. Instead, he focused on his own work, writing and printing the first edition of his collection of poems *Leaves of Grass*. Over the next few years, Whitman continued to write and briefly returned to journalism. During the American Civil War he tended wounded soldiers in army

hospitals in Washington, D.C., while working as a copyist in the army paymaster's office. Following the war Whitman worked for the Department of the Interior and then as a clerk at the Justice Department. He remained in this position until he suffered a paralytic stroke in 1873. Although he lived nearly twenty more years and published four more editions of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman produced little significant new work following his stroke. He died in Camden, New Jersey, at age 72.

### Poem Text

I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,  
 Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it  
 should be blithe and strong,  
 The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank  
 or beam,  
 The mason singing his as he makes ready for work,  
 or leaves off work,  
 The boatman singing what belongs to him in his  
 boat, the deckhand singing on the steamboat  
 deck,  
 The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench, the  
 hatter singing as he stands,  
 The wood-cutter's song, the ploughboy's on his  
 way in the morning, or at noon intermission  
 or at sundown,  
 The delicious singing of the mother, or of the  
 young wife at work, or of the girl sewing or  
 washing,  
 Each singing what belongs to him or her and to  
 none else.  
 The day what belongs to the day—at night the  
 party of young fellows, robust, friendly,  
 Singing with open mouths their strong melodious  
 songs.

### Poem Summary

#### Line 1:

In the first line of the poem, the speaker establishes his position as an observer and listener. The repetition of "I hear" serves to assert the significance of the speaker's role in the poem. All that follows is filtered through the speaker and is part and parcel of his experience. Thus the poem depends on the speaker, on this individual consciousness, for its meaning. At the same time, the first line introduces the poem's controlling metaphor: "I hear America singing." The speaker envisions America as the culmination of the voices of the American people who are unique individuals.

**Lines 2-7:**

The speaker then begins to chronicle various figures or characters familiar to American society at the time. While each is defined by his occupation, he or she is also singing and expressing his or her own uniqueness. Each figure is of the working class and is depicted going about the day's work. These characters, according to the controlling metaphor, are presented as being "America." Considering the figures from other socioeconomic classes that the poem omits, it becomes apparent that the speaker is presenting a particular vision of America. Though the poem puts forth the ideal of government as by and for the people, the examples of American people limited to those from the working class. In a sense, the speaker denies figures from other classes a place in the poem, and thus in America. By giving himself a place in the poem, the speaker does, however, assert his own position in this vision of America. Thus the poem becomes his song, his work, his individual contribution to the larger chorus that is America.

**Line 8:**

Line 8 is particularly interesting considering the historical context in which the poem was written. By including the figures of the mother, young wife, and sewing girl, Whitman gives women their due place in the working class and acknowledges their contribution to American society and culture at a time when women still did not have the right to vote—when they literally had no voice in government. The poem thus anticipates a vision of America much more proximate to the one commonly held in modern times, in which women are seen and appreciated for their vital contributions both in and outside the home and in which parenting is regarded as an indispensable occupation.

**Line 9:**

The speaker reinforces in Line 9 the metaphor of "singing" to mean individualism. The idea that each character is unique and has his or her own song, that each by virtue of his or her profession is essential to the whole of American society and culture, is expressly democratic in nature. In this way the poem celebrates American individualism.

**Lines 10-11:**

Up until this point, each figure has been described as engaged in various forms of work or has been presented in relation to his or her respective vocation. The speaker broadens his scope at the end of the poem beyond this work identity, extending the poem's definition of self and individuality.

## Media Adaptations



- An audio cassette read by Nancy Wickwire and Alexander Scourby titled *Dickinson and Whitman: Ebb and Flow* is available from Audio-books.
- *Go Directly to Creation*, by Walt Whitman is available on audio cassette from Audiobooks.
- A biography titled *Walt Whitman* was released on video cassette as part of the Poetry by Americans Series and is available from AIMS Media.
- Part of the Voices and Visions Series, Volume 1, is a video cassette titled *Walt Whitman* that is available from Mystic Fire Video.
- *Walt Whitman & the Civil War* is a video cassette released by Video Knowledge, Inc.
- A video cassette titled *Walt Whitman: Poetry for a New Age* is available from Encyclopaedia Britannica Education Corp.

When the day's work is done, "the party of fellows," presumably not including the women figures of the poem, continues to sing. The individuals presented in the poem, while previously defined solely according to their work, are now seen as more well-rounded human beings who exist outside their work as well. Equally important, the chorus of voices that is America is described as "robust, friendly," and the resulting song is "strong" and "melodious." This choice of adjectives suggests Whitman's particular vision of America as a powerful country of "fellows" where goodwill abounds. Most important, Whitman sees an America in which every citizen contributes to the welfare of the whole, and in which all working people are revered.

### Themes

#### Individualism

When Walt Whitman expresses his awe at these Americans singing, he is making a statement

## Topics for Further Study



- What is America singing? Instead of everyone singing “various carols,” write the lyrics to America’s song, which could be sung by all of the people Whitman mentions.
- Many poets and songwriters who write about social issues refer to Whitman. Find a poem or a song lyric that mentions Whitman: based on what you know about him from “I Hear America Singing.” Do you think the writer who mentioned him understands Walt Whitman?
- Do you think people usually sing “what belongs to him or her or none else,” or do people usually sing about what they do not have? Provide examples with your answer.

---

about human greatness by telling the reader that human achievement is not measured by what one does, but instead by how one goes about doing it. He inspires admiration for these people, not by stating outright that he thinks they do great things, but by giving brief, specific images of each one tending to his or her own business and combining their individual jobs with “singing,” which we usually associate with cheerfulness and lightness of spirit. In only one case does the poem direct the reader’s thought by using a specific, judgmental adjective (the positive word “delicious”), but we can assume that this anomaly says more about Whitman’s lack of knowledge concerning domestic life than any change of strategy. This assumption is supported by his vague mention of the young wife “at work,” indicating that he just could not come up with any specific details about what women do, in the way he provided information about such jobs of the carpenter, mason, and boatman. This poem uses opposites to show how wide the range of Americans and their work environments are: male and female, ashore and on water, preparing or finishing work in the morning, afternoon, or evening.

According to the poem, the independence that all of these different types display in their work is left aside at the end of the day, when they come to-

gether as a “party of young fellows” (reflecting the social practices of the day, the females in this poem do not socialize with the males). Here, the corporate mentality that dominates the late-twentieth century is shown to us in its mirror image: While today we think of people working together all day to enjoy “free time” to pursue individual interests at the day’s end, Whitman shows individuals who choose to spend their leisure time by uniting with other people. Perhaps the American way of life has changed this much since the poem was written. Then again, it is possible that the shift in the workplace, from manual labor to manipulating information, has made American jobs less individualistic, or that the rise of self-sufficient leisure activities, such as television and computer games, has given contemporary Americans less incentive to gather with others when the day is through. It could be, though, that the workers in Whitman’s poem reflect an ideal that was just as unreal then as today, while being just as admired today as then. His workers are responsible and proud of their accomplishments and are also friendly and sociable. It is not easy to tell whether these admired traits were more common then, or if Whitman just brought his vision to life in a particularly effective way.

### *Patriotism*

“I Hear America Singing” focuses upon several traits—including individualism and the work ethic—that are considered to have been built into the American character through the country’s historical development. This country was settled, in the seventeenth century, by a variety of groups: the Dutch in New York; the Spanish in Florida and the Southwest; the French through Canadian outposts; and the English, often through for-profit corporations, such as the Massachusetts Bay Company. The group that left the strongest moral impact upon the country’s growth was the Puritans, a collection of religious pilgrims who separated from the Church of England because they felt its values had become too worldly, and thus not spiritual enough. The Puritans believed in hard work for its own sake, not for worldly gain, and their religious convictions were strong enough to drive them halfway across the world into an unfamiliar wilderness to find a place where they could practice their religion without being attacked for what they believed. It is easy to see why Puritan attitudes would have a predominant influence on the American personality. As the various European settlements cultivated the land and drove off or killed the Native Americans, the most successful, obviously, would be the ones



who absorbed hardship as God's will and who thrived on work. Many of the rest would have died or retreated back to Europe. Since Colonial days, Americans have traditionally admired hard workers and individuals who were not afraid to leave their past behind and work alone, or independently, the way the Puritans did. Using these values as a base, Whitman's poem elevates the common working-class American to an image of near perfection.

Because it is a democracy, and therefore lacks the rigid class structure of traditional European governments from centuries gone by, America is often referred to as a "classless society." This is only partially true. Although we do not formally categorize people by their social class, we do have separate expectations for people according to their level of economic prosperity. It is generally the nation's wealthiest citizens who are considered its finest, most exemplary, citizens; they are the ones who attract the attention of politicians and the press, who donate sizable sums to charities, and whose names are memorialized after death on roads, libraries, and hospital wards. In this poem, though, Whitman reminds us that the Americans who truly deserve our esteem are those of the working class: they are the ones that he identifies as "America," and they have his admiration. The fact that these people are singing expresses more than just their joy, because to a poet, one's "song" is not just a mild diversion but one's very identity. In this poem Whitman defines America by its working class, in the same way another writer might define a nation by its more conspicuous or intellectually advanced citizens.

### Style

"I Hear America Singing," like much of Whitman's poetry, is written in free verse. Free verse is characterized by no regular pattern of meter and, as in this poem, usually incorporates no pattern of rhyme.

The major poetic device employed in the poem is its controlling metaphor. A metaphor is simply a figure of speech in which one thing is substituted for or used to identify another. A controlling metaphor impacts, controls, or unifies the entire poem. The expression "I hear America singing" substitutes "America" for "American people," and the effect is to identify the two—as well as the people the poem depicts—as one in the same. This distinction, while subtle, is important because the rest

of the poem builds on this metaphor by offering examples of the sorts of persons the speaker thinks quintessentially "American."

Similarly, references to "Singing," "song," and "carols" also serve as metaphors in the poem. "The varied carols" the speaker hears suggest the uniqueness of the persons singing them, and they become metaphors for individuality. Finally, when read in light of the controlling metaphor, such references appear to allude to "American" individualism in particular.

### Historical Context

It is a measure of Walt Whitman's love for his country and his faith in the nation's citizenry that he produced this poem in 1860, just as America was starting, after decades of tension, to rip apart into the two sides that would fight each other in the Civil War. The 1860 election of Abraham Lincoln set off a series of states resigning their membership in the United States, or "seceding." Lincoln had run on a platform of moderation regarding slavery: he accepted its existence in states where it was already established, but he opposed it personally and did not want to see the practice extended in the future. Feeling threatened by the new President-elect's views, South Carolina voted to secede from the Union on December 20, 1860; during the following January, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, and Louisiana also seceded. On February 4, 1861, the six states banded together as the Confederate States of America. Neither the Union nor the Confederacy would accept the other as a legitimate power, and, as was inevitable, the mounting hostility broke out into armed conflict on April 12, at Fort Sumter, in the harbor of Charleston, South Carolina. Lincoln responded by drafting 75,000 citizens to fight in the Union Army. By the time of the first major battle of the war, the Battle of Bull Run on July 1, 1861, all of the southern slave states were members of the Confederacy.

No single preventable action caused the country to tear in half like this. In a way, it was programmed to happen from the very birth of the nation, when the Declaration of Independence, which proclaimed that "all men are created equal," was signed by men who participated in and supported the institution of slavery. At first, the United States government simply proceeded as if this were simply another issue that had two sides, but the supporters of each side felt so strongly about their be-

## Compare & Contrast

- **1860:** The first Pony Express rider carried mail from St. Louis, Missouri, to Sacramento, California, in a journey of ten days. Despite its place in American folklore, the Pony Express only lasted until the following year, when transcontinental telegraph lines made it impractical.

**1876:** Alexander Graham Bell developed the first working telephone, replacing the telegraph.

**Today:** The popularity of the Internet has revived the importance of reading in up-to-the-minute communications.

- **1860:** The United States population was 31.1 million, double what it had been twenty years earlier.

**Today:** The U.S. population is expected to be over 268 million by the year 2000.

- **1860:** The first major labor strike occurred at a shoe factory in Lynn, Massachusetts. The workers' demands were met, although their union was not given official recognition.

**1885:** The American Federation of Labor was founded. One of the nation's most powerful and durable unions, the AFL is still prominent today.

**1894:** Labor Day was established as a United States holiday to honor the contributions of the American worker.

**1935:** The Congress of Industrial Organizations was founded during the pro-labor period of the New Deal, as Americans struggled to work their way out of the depression. In 1955, it merged with the AFL to form the AFL-CIO, which is an important political force today.

**1981:** President Ronald Reagan fired air-traffic controllers who were on strike, setting a precedent for anti-union sentiment that has contributed to the decline of union power in this country.

**Today:** Union membership has dwindled to about 18 percent of the work force.

---

liefs that they could not give anything up nor accept any gains by their opponents. As early as 1803, Congress was forced to deal with the fate of the growing country, when the Louisiana Purchase greatly expanded America's land territory in the west. Debate raged over whether or not slavery should be allowed to expand into the new territory.

In 1818, when the Missouri Territory wanted to become a state, the issue reached a point of crisis. At that time, there were eleven states that permitted slavery and eleven free states, and neither side wanted the other to achieve a majority in the Senate. The agreement that was reached in March of 1820, called the Missouri Compromise, was supposed to settle the issue: Missouri was admitted as a slave state, Maine was admitted as a free state, and the deal stipulated that with future additions to the country, slavery would only be permitted in states that fell south of Missouri's southern border. This compromise may have kept politicians on both

sides happy, but throughout the country, the issue became increasingly volatile. In 1850, the same man who had authored the Missouri Compromise, Congressman Henry Clay, devised a series of five acts that were meant to retain the balance of power and calm the more dangerous elements of both sides. Two of the Compromise Measures of 1850 were seen as losses for the supporters of slavery: California was admitted as a free state and slavery was abolished in the District of Columbia. The third act established the territories of New Mexico and Utah, where the slavery issue would be settled by popular vote, and the fourth allotted millions of dollars to pro-slavery Texas for border disputes. The fifth, the Fugitive Slave Act, angered opponents of slavery to an unexpected degree: it made it a federal crime to aid escaping slaves and paid government money to bounty hunters to capture black persons, determine if they were escaped slaves, and return them to their owners. Since these hunters

were paid twice as much for each returned slave as they were paid for each person they declared a free citizen, they often enslaved innocent, unsuspecting parties. The outrage felt across the free states in response to this act helped the Abolitionist Movement gather supporters for the cause of eradicating slavery. By 1853, Clay's Compromise had proven itself to be no solution to the dispute. Senator Steven Douglas of Illinois—the man who is best remembered today for being Lincoln's debate opponent—proposed yet another compromise scheme, the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act, which ended the federal government's attempts to balance slave states with free states by letting new states vote on whether to allow slavery. The Act raised the fighting over the slavery issue to an unheard-of degree of destructiveness. Abolitionists and slave holders poured money and guns into the Kansas territory, leading to violent attacks and retribution as both sides tried to influence the vote through bribery and intimidation.

Given that the country had been divided from the start over the issue of slavery and that the fighting over this issue had become increasingly bitter for almost a century—to the point that it was about to cause the country to disband into separate halves—it is difficult to imagine how Whitman could have written a poem in 1860 praising the American spirit: in fact, it is difficult to see how he could even see something that could be considered "American" at that time of division. In the years since the poem was written, though, it has touched something basic in all Americans and helped the country unite with a common identity.

### Critical Overview

"I Hear America Singing" encompasses many of the poetic themes and attitudes for which Whitman has become most well known, particularly his democratic vision, which heralds the importance of "the common man and woman" in American culture and society. English poet William Michael Rosetti may have had "I Hear America Singing" in mind when in his essay titled "Walt Whitman's Poems" he described *Leaves of Grass* as "the poem of individual personality and of world-wide diffusion, or of potential ideal democracy." After all, "I Hear America Singing" is explicitly concerned with this "ideal democracy," one made up of individual personalities and voices. Similarly, in his essay "The Good Gray Poet," William Douglas O'Con-

nor makes reference to "I Hear America Singing" when he describes *Leaves of Grass* as "a work purely and entirely American ... sprung from our own soil; no savor of Europe nor the past, nor any other literature ... a vast carol of our own land, and of its Present and Future."

It is both the present and future that are the concerns of "I Hear America Singing." The poem espouses both Whitman's vision of what America should be and in some sense what it already is. According to the poem then, this American ideal is already comprised of the working class, the strong, cheerful, robust, and free class of people that make up the majority of America. Nevertheless, it is Whitman himself who best expresses his belief in the importance of the "common man and woman" when he writes in his introduction to the original edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1855): "The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem.... The United States is not best or most in its executives or legislatures, nor in its ambassadors or authors or college or churches or parlors, nor even in newspapers or inventors ... but always most in the common people."

### Criticism

#### Sean Robisch

Sean Robisch holds a Ph.D. in American Literature from Purdue University and has taught composition and literature for eight years. In the essay below, Robisch considers Whitman's intent in "I Hear America Singing" by analyzing the author's many revisions to the poem as well as his general philosophy concerning democracy in America.

The critical and marketplace failure of his self-published *Leaves of Grass* in 1855 was a blow to Walt Whitman, who aspired to be a contender with Longfellow for the title of Great American Poet. But it left him undaunted; he revised the manuscript, and after garnering a supportive jacket comment from Ralph Waldo Emerson, began to infiltrate the circle of American poets and critics. Today, he is considered one of the most influential poets in American history. Unlike most writers, whose manuscripts remain intact after their first publications, Whitman earned his fame partly from his rewriting and re-issuing previously published work. Considering *Leaves of Grass* to be not a book, but a man's life (and thus constantly chang-

## What Do I Read Next?



- Editors Jim Perlman, Ed Folsom, and Dan Carpian brought together a collection of essays about Whitman by writers through the generations from 1855 to 1980. The famous writers represented here include Emerson, Thoreau, Swinburne, Hopkins, Robinson, Pound, Lawrence, Stevens, Hughes, Ruckeyser, Kerouac, Neruda, Roethke, Ferlinghetti, Simpson, Bly, Ginsburg, and dozens more. The book, *Walt Whitman: The Measure of His Song*, was published in 1981 by Holy Cow! Press of Minneapolis.
- One of the most complete and pleasant to read stories of Whitman's life is Philip Callow's 1992 biography *From Noon to Starry Night*.
- The American Social History Project of the City University of New York has compiled a series of books entitled *Who Built America?* that chart the influence of laborers on America's historical development. The series' subtitle, *Working People and the Nation's Economy, Politics, Culture and Society* should make the series' relevance to the spirit of this poem obvious. These books are written clearly and laid out in a way that is easy to follow. The world familiar to Whitman is covered in the first volume, "From Conquest and Colonization through Reconstruction and the Great Uprising of 1877." The series was published in 1989 by Pantheon Books.

ing), Whitman took it through six major revisions, a thirty-seven-year project that straddled the Civil War and lasted until just before his death, when he left permission to distribute a "definitive" edition in 1892.

The critical response to *Leaves of Grass* has been influenced greatly by these changes in the work over time. As a literary figure, Whitman ranges from messianic or "Hellenistic" (praised broadly by nature writers and Jeffersonians) to agonistic (the "true Whitman" according to one

critic), who covered with realism and sadness the tragedies of war and classism. This distinction is often founded on a division of his ante-bellum and post-bellum work, especially the 1855 "Song of Myself" found in *Leaves of Grass* and the 1865 collection, *Drum-Taps*. This is too simple a distinction. Whitman was a dynamic poet—a reviser. "I Hear America Singing," which he altered between 1860 and 1867, is an excellent example of his ability to simultaneously change and preserve a poem's celebrational timbre according to changes in the nation and despite its civil warfare.

Whitman removed "I Hear America Singing" from a cluster of numbered "Chants Democratic" (it was #20), and gave it its own title. He then made several changes to the 1860 version's first line, first rewriting it from "American mouth-songs" to one with a more dactylic meter, like a waltz—or a carol—which prompted several composers to put the piece to music. (Eventually, over 300 musical scores would be written to interpret Whitman's poems.) He added the "I," the voice of the observing poet who hears a whole nation and then writes to us what he hears. He included the adjective "varied," to describe the carols, implying at least two major possibilities: that the carols are variations on old standards or themes; and that all songs are varied by nature, different for each singer. Finally, he omitted the last three lines of the first version, which had read, "Come! some of you! still be flooding the States / with hundreds and thousands of mouth-songs, / fit only for the States." The melodious voices of a whole America, rather than the lines of statehood, would structure the poem.

Two of Whitman's most famous techniques are his use of the list or catalog without resorting to formal conventions of rhyme and meter, and his use of parallelism to connect the elements in the list. In "I Hear America Singing," these devices indicate that while each singer is composing an individual carol that "belongs to him or her," each one is also part of a choir, listed by occupation as a member of the American labor force. The repetition of the participial "singing" gives us an active and present event that briefly turns to the possessive, the woodcutter's song. Small pivots in the poem, such as this change in a part of speech, accomplish much. They remind us that we are in a poem, surprised by language when its patterns are broken even briefly. They draw our attention back to the facts and names of occupations, Whitman's journalistic view of the world merged with his poetic one. And they work musically in Whitman's arrangement of individual pieces, working to form

a kind of rondo. The amalgamation of his skills, well-represented by "I Hear America Singing," would allow Whitman to accomplish what one critic has called his "most fundamental intention: to indicate the path between reality and the soul."

Whitman alters his repetitions to prevent a sing-songy rhythm that might erase the individuality of each singer. A fine example is the boatman, whose song, like the woodcutter's, contributes to the motif of ownership that will eventually expand to include days as well as workers. The boatman's song is his while he is in his boat, implying that once he leaves the boat he will sing a different song. And just in case we are tempted to think that only the owner of the boat is allowed to sing, the poet listens to the deckhand, whose mouth is as open and voice as strong as his boss's. Each song not only belongs to the singer, but to "none else."

By 1860, when the poem appeared in its first form, ownership had become the key determination of a person's class in America, so the boatman's position is important. His title, "boatman," rather than the military or industrial captain (a title Whitman would later use in a famous metaphor), especially in the context of the poem's other laborers, intimates that the boat belongs to the company for which he works. The deckhand is of even lower station, so Whitman's inclusion of both men indicates that different classes may sing for America, even while the poem implies by its omissions that the so-called upper classes are either songless or unheard. Leadership for Whitman is not found in social or economic power, but in the fulfillment of Emerson's quest, the poet's achievement.

*Leaves of Grass* is governed by the metaphor of poetry as song, and for as long as this metaphor is sustained, manual laborers are its bearers. For Whitman, democracy was an experiment in more than law, it was the potential government of American culture, of agrarian idealism; and its religion was built not on organizations but on individual souls. This means that the America Whitman hears singing is comprised of working-class voices that do not sing the same old anthems of despotism. When Whitman began writing poetry the search for an exclusively American literature, one that broke from especially British views, was still being conducted. He responded to Emerson's passionate quest for an American poet in a way that Longfellow could not. Whitman took poetry out of the study and put it on the workbench. Infused with prosaic language and metric variation, his poetry lionized the worker, celebrated the self, sang the



*Whitman took poetry out of the study and put it on the workbench. Infused with prosaic language and metric variation, his poetry lionized the worker, celebrated the self, sang the natural world, and rendered the mystical experience in common terms."*

natural world, and rendered the mystical experience in common terms. And he did so during a pre-mass media culture that David Reynolds described in *Walt Whitman's America* as conducive to "performances in everyday life," taking "I Hear America Singing" beyond metaphor. This established his work as what William Saroyan called "the beginning of American poetry ... when the unschooled took to the business."

Whitman assumes the role of the poet-as-leader, a keen listener of the laborers' democratic chants. He uses the repetition of "I hear" at the beginning and end of the first line to stress that listening, rather than speaking, is the mainstay of his occupation, and though the composition requires a conductor, it belongs to the common laborer, not to the captains of industry, to political leaders, or even to the poet.

Whitman's goal is to proliferate these songs by praising them. Two singers receive specific compliments; the mechanic's song is "as it should be blithe and strong," and the women's songs are "delicious." These are the first and final people listed, implying that the poet's praise bookends the whole of American singers as a collection of open mouths. If we read the poem as a circle, looping back to the first line from the last, then we have a clearly holistic praise of America as a choir of individuals singing strong, melodious, and varied carols. This is praise beyond mere patriotism. Whitman specifically approves of the individuality of the carpenter as the plurality of America, of the shoemaker's

sitting as the hatter's standing, of one mechanic's song as well as a collective song for mechanics (note the plural mechanics and singular "it"), of both men and women at work.

This is certainly not a politically radical poem by current standards; the women's work is "woman's work," and only the men carouse to the night's music. Whitman is not particularly interested in including other nations, either. But presentism asks too much; the poem's subject is the connection between physical labor and the paradox of the individual/American voice, in which Whitman includes women as well as men, and which must by necessity focus on the identity Whitman wanted to see America achieve. The color of a worker's skin is irrelevant in Whitman's America, and singing is free, both by law and by expense. Money is also absent from the poem, though labor is present in nearly every line. So the slave, the indentured servant, the free laborer, all have the right to own a song, and by Whitman's declaration, the right to sing as an American. It was certainly not enough for Whitman that to be American one merely needed to sing. On the contrary; he declares that despite inequality and hardship one *may* sing, and one's song will inevitably affect both America's harmony and its dissonance.

Just as each occupation has its singers and each singer a song, so do the day and night have their own music. The only line lacking some form of "to sing" leaves the verb implied: "The day [sings] what belongs to the day ..." Characteristic of Whitman's philosophy, a day implicitly has a song that it must sing in order to be a day at all. These resonate with American labor, as the night's ring with parties and friendship after work. When the day's verses end, the poem's only obtrusive punctuation introduces the coda, a dash beginning the night life of the men. We can imagine one of the masons here, forecast in the fourth line that he will sing after he "leaves off work." We can see him singing beside the ploughboy who changes his song at noon and sundown. Whitman edited out all of the dashes he had used in an earlier version to separate the singers, except this one separating day and night, labor and leisure. He extends Christ's lesson of letting the day's troubles be sufficient to the day by giving the night music, in this case (as in many of his poems) the music of male friendship.

"I Hear America Singing" reminds us that there is nuance to what Whitman once called his "barbaric yawp." He articulates his belief that a

symbol must be spoken plainly in order for poetry to become the musical analogy of facts, the song of the self that would shape leaders out of poets and poets out of carpenters. This he accomplished by changing the sentences of critics and authors, the speeches of politicians and citizens, the moods of listeners and troubadours alike.

Source: Sean Robisch, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 1998.

### Chris Semansky

Chris Semansky is a teacher, freelance writer, and sole proprietor of *Apocalypse Joe's*, a merchandising firm specializing in millennial kitsch. Here, Semansky offers an interpretive overview of "I Hear America Singing," in addition to critical and popular response to the work, concluding that the poem embodies Whitman's "vision of the country as a whole."

We have all read or seen catalogues, those glossy-covered magazines that arrive in the mail and offer detailed descriptions of products we just cannot live without. A catalogue, however, is also a name for a list, frequently a systematized list, of items. It is helpful to keep both of these meanings in mind while reading Walt Whitman's short poem "I Hear America Singing," for the poem describes items, in this case working people, in an effort to sell the reader on a particular vision of America. Included in the "Inscriptions" section of *Leaves of Grass*, "I Hear America Singing" announces the book's themes and the poet's approach to them. As such it serves as a kind of introduction to the form and content of Whitman's masterpiece. Readers do themselves a disservice if they read only the shorter poems and believe they can grasp the scope and power of *Leaves Of Grass*.

Listing occupations and activities of the mid-nineteenth-century American citizen, "I Hear America Singing" celebrates the American dream. In cinema-like fashion Whitman presents verbal snapshots of working people "singing" their "varied carols" as they "should be."

- The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam,
- The mason singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work,
- The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat, the deckhand singing on the steamboat deck,
- The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench, the hatter singing as he stands,

The wood-cutter's song, the ploughboy's on his  
way in the morning, or at noon intermission  
or at sundown

Whitman's eye zooms in on individual workers engaged in their daily activities. Happy and healthy, they "sing" for the sheer joy of participating in worthwhile labor. Their pride in what they do is obvious; they embody the American myth of freedom. By illustrating the embodiment of an economic and political system, Whitman shows us his vision of the country as a whole. Whitman critic James Miller observed in *A Critical Guide to Leaves of Grass* that "These songs of one's own ('what belongs to him or her') are carols of spiritual possession—of the possessed individuality, of possessed life and potentiality for contribution to the onward stream of life." It is only by doing our own part (happily) as individuals that we can join in the life of the country, in building a republic where everyone is valued for his and her intrinsic worth as well as for the work they do, whether that be building bridges, loading boats, or laying bricks, Whitman suggests. In his preface to the 1855 edition of *Leaves* Whitman proclaims that "The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem.... Here is action untied from strings, necessarily blind to particulars and details magnificently moving in vast masses. Here is the hospitality which forever indicates heroes." American workers are Whitman's everyday heroes, and Whitman their spokesman and champion.

However, while Whitman describes the men in relation to their occupation, he describes the women primarily in relation to men ("mother," "wife").

The delicious singing of the mother, or of the  
young wife at work, or of the girl sewing or  
washing,

By reversing the chronology of women's roles (mother-wife-girl) he conflates their individuality into a kind of generically feminized identity. The vision of Whitman's America, then, is a vision of gendered stereotypes, where men are revered for their masculinity, robustness, and procreative possibilities and women for their capacity to joyfully serve those men as mothers and wives. Notice how the young girl is not presented as playing but as laboring. Miller noted that the portraits of the "young fellows" and "young wife" are thematically linked and anticipate the paired sections of *Leaves*, "Calamus," and "Children of Adam," which in more detailed catalog-like fashion celebrate man's love for

his fellow man (what Whitman called "adhesive-ness") and man's love for woman (what he calls "amativeness"), respectively. This listing of men and women, however, tells us more about the listener than the listees. "There is little or no dramatic effect in [Whitman's] poems," Roy Harvey Pearce wrote in *Continuity of American Poetry*, adding, "even with those huge casts of characters; for the items which are named in them do not interact, are not conceived as modifying and qualifying one another, so as to make for dramatic tension. They are referred back to their creator, who does with them as his sensibility wills."

The almost generic simplicity of the descriptions account for this poem's popularity. "I Hear America Singing" employs the same strategy of a Hallmark card by relying on one-dimensional emotion and vapid generalizations to appeal to the widest audience. It is these generalizations, literalness, and optimistic tone that also places Whitman in direct opposition to another tradition in American poetry whose lineage is rooted in the more inward, sometimes bleak and claustrophobic poetry of Emily Dickinson.

Unlike other poetries written at the time, Whitman's was an oratorical poetry, written to be preached as much as read. Notice how "I Hear America Singing" is composed of just one sentence. After the bardic announcement which opens the poem—"I Hear America Singing"—we are presented with what the poet hears—"the varied carols," after which we are presented with an inventory of those carols. The poem's imagery moves from general to specific until, finally, we are presented with the image of the "open mouths" of the "young fellows" singing "their strong melodious songs." The accumulation of detailed illustrations of the carols has an almost hypnotic effect on readers. By the end of the poem we too can hear what the poet hears.

Whitman's voice is meant to be representative of the American voice. Though in other poems he sometimes participates in the work and scenes he describes, in this one he does not. His unidentified first-person narrator is satisfied to merely name and celebrate his observations. Naming, for Whitman's speaker, is an Adamic act. As Pearce has noticed, "The poet is a father, giving his name to all he sees and hears and feels. His office is to make everything part of the community of man; the sense of community is revealed as he discovers, and then yields to, his infinite sense of himself." "Singing" for Whitman is not the literal activity in which the



*'I Hear America Singing' employs the same strategy of a Hallmark card by relying on one-dimensional emotion and vapid generalizations to appeal to the widest audience."*

---

workers are engaged; rather it suggests the emotional response Whitman himself believes they have toward their work, and the response he wants us as readers to have as well. Ezra Greenspan noted in *The Cambridge Companion to Walt Whitman* that "the poem blends the individual acts of singing into a harmonious participial ensemble of America singing." The carols also refer to the songs that Whitman himself will sing about these workers throughout *Leaves of Grass*. In this way the poem is *self-referential* because it is about poetry as much as it is about the people the poem describes.

Whitman's reliance on the long sentence as his primary poetic unit, his incantatory, speech-based rhythms, his neglect of traditional poetic categories such as rhyme and conventional metric patterns, and his assumption that one person can speak for an entire nation have both pleased and frustrated many critics. Richard Ellmann and Robert O'Clair wrote in *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* that "In the history of modern poetry, Whitman has been a rallying cry, a battle ground, an inspiration, and a bad example.... His joyful experiments with language, his pretense of telling all while leaving much to be gathered, his reckless assumption that the poet, his language, his subject matter, and his readers are all a part of one expanding community, have endowed him with patriarchal importance."

This importance, however, was not always appreciated. Charles Dana, an early reviewer, wrote in the *New York Daily Tribune* that the poems in *Leaves of Grass* are doubtless intended as an illustration of the natural poet. They are certainly original in their external form, have been shaped on no pre-existent model out of the author's own brain. Indeed, his independence often becomes

coarse and defiant. His language is too frequently reckless and indecent though this appears to arise from a naive unconsciousness rather than from an impure mind. His words might have passed between Adam and Eve in Paradise, before the want of fig-leaves brought no shame; but they are quite out of place amid the decorum of modern society, and will justly prevent his volume from free circulation in scrupulous circles."

This spontaneous approach to poetry composition forces readers to either dismiss Whitman's work as being unpoetic or to embrace it for its unstudied and unpretentious manner, for its celebration of the common man, and for the belief that all human endeavors are inherently sacred. It is this vision and its legacy with which poets who came after Whitman have had to contend.

Source: Chris Semansky, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 1998.

**James E. Miller, Jr.**

*In the following excerpt, Miller discusses the characteristics and merits of Whitman's short poems from *Leaves of Grass*.*





*It is surprising that  
in such brief poem so much  
of Whitman's total concept  
of modern man could be  
implied."*

---

Source: "The Smaller Leaves" in *A Critical Guide to Leaves of Grass*, University of Chicago Press, 1957, pp. 142-60.

### Sources

Allen, Gay Wilson, *The New Walt Whitman Handbook*, New York: New York University Press, 1975.

Billington, Ray Allen, and Martin Ridge, *Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier*, fifth edition, New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, Inc., 1982.

Broderick, John C., ed., *Whitman the Poet*, Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 1962.

Dana, Charles A., "New Publications: *Leaves of Grass*," in *New York Daily Tribune*, 23 July 1855, p. 3.

Davis, Kenneth C., *Don't Know Much About the Civil War*, New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc. 1996.

Ginsburg, Allen, "Taking a Walk Through *Leaves of Grass*," *The Teachers & Writers Guide to Walt Whitman*, Ron Padgett, editor, New York: Teachers and Writers Collaborative, 1991, pp. 1-35.

Greenspan, Ezra, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Walt Whitman*, New York: Cambridge, 1995.

Miller, James E., *A Critical Guide to Leaves of Grass*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957.

Miller, James E., *Walt Whitman*, Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990.

O'Clair, Robert, and Richard Ellmann, eds., *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, New York: Norton, 1988.

O'Connor, William Douglas, "The Good Gray Poet: A Vindication," reprinted in *Walt Whitman*, by Richard Maurice Bucke, Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1970.

Pearce, Roy Harvey, *Continuity of American Poetry*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961.

Rossetti, William Michael, "Walt Whitman's Poems," reprinted in *The Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman*, Simon & Schuster, 1949.

"Walt Whitman's Claim to Be Considered a Great Poet," *Chicago Tribune*, November 26, 1881, p. 9.

### For Further Study

Asselineau, Roger, *The Evolution of Walt Whitman: The Creation of a Personality*, Cambridge, MA: Bellknap Press of Harvard University, 1960.

This book is only slightly biographical: for the most part, it focuses on the various editions of *Leaves of Grass*, examining their technique and their social impact.

Bradley, Sculley, and John A. Stevenson, editors, *Walt Whitman's Backward Glances: "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads" and Two Contributory Essays Hitherto Uncollected*, Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1947.

The title essay by Whitman describes his process of putting together *Leaves of Grass* through the various editions from 1855 to 1892.

Cady, Edwin H., and Louis J. Budd, editors, *On Whitman: The Best from American Literature*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1987.

This book sifts through articles that have appeared in the journal *American Literature* since its first issue in 1929, gathering the literary studies about Whitman. Varied in subject and not difficult to read, these essays are written for true students of poetry.

Marx, Leo, ed., *The Americanness of Walt Whitman*, Indianapolis: D.C. Heath and Company, 1960.

This book, a part of the *Problems in American Civilization* includes essays by some well-known thinkers (deTocqueville, Santayana and Van Wyck Brooks among them) about just what the book's title says, which is one of the focal themes of the poem.

Miller, James E., Jr., *Walt Whitman*, New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1962.

Miller dismisses "I Hear America Singing" quickly, in a discussion of the poet's brief lyrics, but he gives a great deal of detailed background and analysis regarding *Leaves of Grass* in general.

# The Man He Killed

*Thomas Hardy*

1902

Hardy is probably best remembered for his novels *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Having enjoyed the success of novel writing, which brought him acclaim and wealth, Hardy turned to poetry later in his life. His first book of poetry, *The Wessex Poems*, was not published until 1898 when he was fifty-eight. In the following thirty years he wrote nearly one thousand poems. "The Man He Killed," first published in 1902, has a message that is timeless; its subject matter is the curious nature of war that allows for such behavior as killing a man with whom, under more mundane circumstances, you would sit sharing drinks. The poem itself comes to no great or deep understanding of war, nor does it propogandize against war. It simply poses a question which, it seems, the speaker does not intend to answer. The matter-of-fact tone of the poem may serve as a contrast to the seriousness of the situation but it may also indicate that the speaker of the poem chooses to maintain a certain level of emotional distance even while considering disturbing subject matter.

## *Author Biography*

Hardy was born in 1840 and raised in the region of Dorsetshire, England, the basis for the Wessex countryside that would later appear in his fiction and poetry. He attended a local school until he was sixteen, when his mother paid a substantial amount



of money for him to be apprenticed to an architect in Dorchester. In 1862 he moved to London, where he worked as an architect, and remained there for a period of five years. Between 1865 and 1867 Hardy wrote many poems, none of which were published. In 1867 he returned to Dorchester and, while continuing to work in architecture, began to write novels in his spare time. Hardy became convinced that if he was to make a living writing, he would have to do so as a novelist. Drawing on the way of life he absorbed in Dorsetshire as a youth and the wide range of English writers with which he was familiar, Hardy spent nearly thirty years as a novelist before devoting himself to poetry. In 1874 Hardy married Emma Lavinia Gifford, who would become the subject of many of his poems. They spent several years in happiness until the 1880s, when marital troubles began to shake the closeness of their union.

Hardy's first book of verse was published in 1898, when he was fifty-eight years old and had achieved a large degree of success as a novelist. Although his verse was not nearly as successful as his novels, Hardy continued to focus on his poetry and published seven more books of verse before his death, developing his confidence and technical competence. With the composition of *The Dynasts: A Drama of the Napoleonic Wars* (1904-08), an epic historical drama written in verse, Hardy was hailed as a major poet. He was praised as a master of his craft, and his writing was admired for its great emotional force and technical skill. Hardy continued to write until just before his death in 1928. Despite his wish to be buried with his family, influential sentiment for his burial in Poet's Corner of Westminster Abbey instigated a severe compromise: the removal of his heart, which was buried in Dorchester, and the cremation of his body, which was interred in the Abbey.



Thomas Hardy

Just so: my foe of course he was:  
That's clear enough; although  
"He thought he'd 'list, perhaps,  
Off-hand like—just as I—  
Was out of work—had sold his traps—  
No other reason why.  
"Yes; quaint and curious war is!  
You shoot a fellow down  
You'd treat if met where any bar is,  
Or help to half-a-crown."

### Poem Summary

#### Lines 1-4:

The poem is being set up; the action in the poem has already taken place and the narrator of the poem is ruminating on this action. This is a technique that in contemporary literature would be considered a flashback. He imagines himself near "some old ancient inn," not a specific inn, but a cozy imaginary place. The diction of the poem (particularly "right many a nipperkin") suggests that the speaker is not a high brow sort, but a common bloke and this diction is important in establishing the persona of the narrator—an educated philosopher he is not. "Nipperkin" is a half-vessel that is filled, in this situation, one suspects, with alcoholic drinks.

### Poem Text

"Had he and I but met  
By some old ancient inn,  
We should have sat us down to wet  
Right many a nipperkin!"  
"But ranged as infantry,  
And staring face to face,  
I shot at him as he at me,  
And killed him in his place.  
"I shot him dead because—  
Because he was my foe.

**Lines 5-6:**

The speaker locates both himself and the other fellow on a battlefield, a far cry from the ancient inn he imagines in retrospect. The men are not distant from each other, but close enough to look into each other's faces.

**Lines 7-8:**

These lines are as jarring and sudden as a gunshot. Two people on opposing lines shoot; one is left dead and the other still enjoys the ability to be able to reflect on the actions. This is the plot of the poem and its climax.

**Lines 9-10:**

In these lines there is a justification for the killing and it is a simple justification, without deliberation.

**Line 11:**

The repetition of the concept of "my foe" and the "of course" in this line signify a need for the speaker to convince himself of his justification for the killing. The "Just so:" which prefaces the repetition is similar to the modern phrase: "That's it; that's the ticket."

**Line 12:**

The "although" in this line serves as the pivot point for the following lines, in which the speaker deliberates his justification.

**Lines 13-16:**

In these lines the narrator begins deliberation, speculating about the man he has just killed and beginning to attribute his own motives to the dead man. Remember that in line 7, they shot at each other, and the narrator could just as easily have been the dead man. In fact, he imaginarily becomes the dead man. We as readers know this is a imaginary life he has placed the dead man within, but we learn something about the narrator's life—that he enlisted ('list) in war because he was out of work, and had sold his "traps" which we can read as "possessions," not because of a cause he believed in, but as something to do. He did it off-hand, without much thought about the possible consequences, including the situation he has just encountered.

**Line 17:**

Now the speaker gives some thought to the condition of war. The word "quaint" is an unusual one to use here. One can think of it as a word which

describes antique shops, not a war, but it can also be taken to mean cunning. Still, the explanation point suggests a tone that is not dire but almost ponderingly wonderous and the word "curious," while suggesting perplexion, does not suggest despair that another speaker in the same situation might have voiced.

**Lines 18-20:**

Here the narrator defines the curious nature of war—you shoot a man, who under other circumstances you would act kindly toward, a man who could possibly become your friend. "Half-a-crown" is roughly about sixty cents, and it is probably not so much that the narrator imagines the fellow as a beggar as it is that he feels that his own character—in a different context—is one which would be willing to do a stranger who needed it, a kindness, and so by the end of the poem he has also arrived at a kind assessment of himself. He has done so with the presumption that his actions are universal, saying, "You shoot a fellow down / You'd treat" in lines 18-19, rather than using the first person as he did in "I shot at him ..." in line 7. This movement from individual accountability to universal justification leads the speaker to a distance within himself and perhaps causes the use of the second person when the poet may still be speaking of himself.

**Themes**

**Brotherhood**

"The Man He Killed" is written in the form of a dramatic monologue, and when it was first published, Thomas Hardy described the setting he had in mind: "Scene: the settle of the Fox Inn, Stagfoot Lane. Characters: The speaker (a returned soldier) and his friends, natives of the hamlet." The speaker, back from serving in the Boer War (fought between the British and the Boers from 1899 to 1902 in South Africa), uses the poem both to recount and to try to understand his action of shooting and killing a man. The first stanza is so warm-hearted and lacking in rancor, it belies the fact that he killed the man about whom he is speaking. The speaker talks casually and warmly of the inn, creating a setting that harshly contrasts with the battlefield where he encountered this man. It is apparent that the speaker feels a bond with his victim, because the poem opens with an air of regret: if we had only met in a tavern like this one, we would have had a fine time together and

we might have become friends. Unfortunately their encounter was in a completely different setting where they had predetermined roles; their only possible roles were as enemies. It seems the most natural action in the world that infantrymen would shoot at and possibly kill each other.

But while they stood there on the battlefield, “staring face to face,” the speaker had time to notice that the man he was shooting at was probably no different than himself. It is that knowledge that confuses the speaker and makes him struggle to grasp the reason for his act. The obvious reason—“That’s clear enough”—is that the men were enemies. But no matter how he tries to convince himself, he cannot get beyond the word “foe.” He stutters over this explanation that fails to reassure him, and, almost involuntarily, he imagines his victim as a man like himself, who had joined the army without much forethought. They were out of work and needed jobs, “No other reason why.”

The narrator’s main dilemma is that he cannot reconcile two very different situations. On the one hand there is the congenial setting of the inn where men buy each other drinks and loan each other money; on the other is the field of battle where men kill each other. The narrator cannot explain how, in each situation, two men could have such converse relationships. The contrast is all the more poignant because from the very start of the poem, the narrator reveals himself as preferring the inn, although he has committed an act completely antithetical to its spirit.

### War

In thinking about his actions on the battlefield, the speaker in “The Man He Killed” must confront the nature of warfare. The voice that speaks is not Hardy’s own; it belongs to a character he created. The protagonist’s artless words and way of speaking as he tries to fathom what happened reflect his simple background and his unsophisticated way of pondering complex issues. He remembers very clearly what happened: “I shot at him and he at me / And killed him in his place.” He only falters when he tries to explain why it happened—that is, why war ultimately is senseless at the personal level. The best he can come up with is a pat answer: because he was my enemy, I killed him. The emptiness of this response is evident by the effort the speaker must make to reassure himself that such reasoning is legitimate: “Just so ... of course he was; / That’s clear enough.”

Although he is relieved to find an explanation that seems to settle his moral dilemma, doubts con-

## Topics for Further Study



- Hardy’s war poems, published thirteen years after the fact, supported Britain’s the war effort. Is it possible to be a pacifist only sometimes?
- The poem’s narrator imagines his victim to be exactly like him. In what ways might the dead man be different from the man who killed him? How might those differences change our attitudes toward his death?
- Imagine you are one of the friends to whom the poem’s narrator is speaking. Write a poem that could be your reply to him.
- Does the narrator accept responsibility for the death he caused? To what degree is he responsible?

tinue to nag him. After settling his argument on why he killed the man, the stanza ends with the word “although,” indicating that there is more to be considered. He goes on in the next stanza to imagine how he and his victim are alike. But, perhaps because he is a simple country man, and even though he realizes the man he killed was as human as himself, he cannot see the logical implications. The most he can conclude is “Yes; quaint and curious war is!” as if he were observing some interesting but useless artifact in a museum. After the speaker’s nearly total identification with the dead man, this remark surprises the reader. It appears as though he has set aside his misgivings. But the poem draws its power from the speaker’s hesitation. Ironically, the speaker best expresses Hardy’s views on war by what he omits from his argument. Because he balks at drawing the obvious conclusion, the reader is forced to do it for him and conclude that war is murderous and wrong.

### Style

“The Man He Killed” is constructed simply, with short meters, lilting rhythms, and a colloquial manner of speech. The rhyme scheme also is sim-

ple: the first and third lines in each of the five stanzas rhyme, as do the second and fourth lines, but what is interesting about the form of this poem is the intent of the line length. Most lines of the poem are written in trimeter but the third line in every stanza is longer, written in tetrameter. The extended length of these third lines may mimic a deeper dramatic weight given to these lines. The poem is written as a dramatic monologue, a frequent technique of Hardy's. He creates a voice not his own to speak in his poems, and this is indicated by the quotation marks bracketing the poem.

### Historical Context

#### The Boer War

The Boer War began on October 11, 1899, when the British declared war on the South African Republic. The Boers were farmers of Dutch and French descent who first settled South Africa in the 1700s. Britain received the Cape Colony at the southernmost tip of the African continent in 1806 as part of the Napoleonic Wars settlement, and it was not long before the conservative Boers became dissatisfied with England's liberal policies, notably the freeing of slaves. In reaction, approximately 12,000 Boers migrated from the Cape Colony to more remote areas of the country between 1835 and 1843. Following what was termed the Great Trek, the Boers and the British managed to coexist peacefully. The British recognized the independence of the South African Republic (also known as the Transvaal) in 1852 and of the Orange Free State in 1854.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the discovery of diamonds and gold—the world's largest gold mining complex was in the Transvaal, just outside of British control—set the stage for war. When the South-African government refused full rights to foreigners, in particular English settlers, the British declared war. The Boers—the allied South African Republic and the Orange Free State—waged a brilliant guerrilla war for a year. The British, however, had an overwhelming numerical advantage. The tide turned when Herbert Kitchener took over as the commander of the campaign. He instituted a brutal scorched-earth policy: African and Boer farms were systematically destroyed and Boer civilians were herded into concentration camps. When the news reached England that 20,000 Boer women and children had died in the appalling camps, the

British public was outraged. Kitchener's strategy was nonetheless successful. In March of 1901, the Boers sued for peace. The bid was rejected by the British, however, and the war continued for more than a year. When a peace settlement was finally reached on May 31, 1902, the two Boer nations lost their independence and were placed under British military administration.

Thomas Hardy was appalled by the Boer War from its outset, considering it nothing more than a war of imperial conquest. He was dismayed by both the human and animal suffering that it caused. Some of the poems he wrote during the hostilities (later known as the "War Poems") drew criticism down upon Hardy for his antiwar sentiments. Nevertheless he steadfastly refused to write the uplifting poems to support the war effort that many expected from him. He was convinced—at least until the carnage of World War I—that man was evolving away from warfare. "Oh yes, war is doomed," he wrote a friend in 1901, as noted by J.O. Bailey in *The Poetry of Thomas Hardy: A Handbook and Commentary*. "It is doomed by the gradual growth of the introspective faculty in mankind—of their power of putting themselves in another's place."

The subject of war was a lifelong interest of Hardy's, and the war poetry he wrote at different times during his life reflects the complex nature of his interest. His poems composed during World War I, for example, reflect none of the outrage evident in those about the Boer War. The later poems are more traditionally patriotic and uplifting, primarily because he felt England was threatened by German militarism. In contrast, his epic-drama *The Dynasts* describes the Napoleonic Wars as the result of a universal power Hardy called the Immanent Will. Here he argues that the ambitions and desires that drove the generals and leaders were not the product of any free will, rather they were the result of the machinations of the transcendent power.

#### The End of the Victorian Age

On January 22, 1901, England's Queen Victoria died. The queen who had been on the British throne longer than any British monarch to date, 62 years, came to symbolize the age. Queen Victoria's reign saw the spread of industrialization, the growth of science, and the decline of religion. During the Victorian Age, the Church of England was threatened by new discoveries in science. The Bible, which had already been under the scrutiny of textual analysis by scholars, was challenged by the



## Compare & Contrast

- **1902:** The bicycle was still a novelty and automobiles were virtually unknown. Trains traveled between cities, but most people relied on horse-drawn transportation.

**Today:** More than 200 million motor vehicles are registered in the United States alone. Supersonic Transports (SSTs) fly from Europe to North America in three hours.

- **1902:** Great Britain was the most powerful nation in the world, with colonies on all five continents.

**1930:** Citizens of the nation of India boycotted British goods as part of the “civil disobedience” movement led by Mohandas Gandhi; this was a start toward Indian independence, which came in 1950.

**Today:** Acts of political violence due to British rule in Northern Ireland have claimed more than 3,200 lives since the 1960s.

- **1902:** Britain fought an unpopular war against the Boers, an enemy that relied on guerrilla tactics instead of traditional modes of warfare.

**1968:** The United States waged war in Vietnam against a nationalist army of guerrilla forces. The news media and domestic protest movement publicized atrocities and illegal actions by the American military in neighboring countries and possibly prevented the American government from using nuclear force, as some were suggesting, to win the war.

**Today:** A multinational force is stationed in Bosnia to monitor an uneasy peace between Serbs, Croats, and Muslims. Disagreement among the nations involved in the action makes actual military engagement of those who violate the peace nearly impossible.

- **1900:** Sigmund Freud publishes *Interpretation of Dreams* in which he describes a technique for decoding the language of the unconscious and, thus, initiates a new kind of human psychology.

**Today:** Neuropsychologists study the physical basis of memory, language, and consciousness, using such modern technology as positron emission tomography.

publication of *On the Origin of Species* in 1859 by Charles Darwin. The Bible had long been considered the final word on how the universe and all things within had come into existence. *On the Origin of Species* put forth the theory, substantiated with scientific data, that living creatures had evolved into their present form; this contradicted the Bible’s account of creation. Though religious authorities dismissed these new scientific discoveries, the theory of evolution had contributed to the decline of religion in Victorian life.

The Victorian Age is now synonymous with sexual repression: human sexuality was not spoken of in public, and it was not mentioned in print. Since it was believed that literature should provide an example of how to live correctly, novels did not deal with socially controversial topics, such as di-

vorce, alcoholism, or promiscuity. Works that dealt with sexual themes honestly, no matter how guarded and careful the treatment, were harshly criticized—when it was even possible to publish them. This was the fate of Hardy’s later novels, especially *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*, two books that were extremely critical of prevailing moral standards. It was the bitter criticism of *Jude* that led Hardy to give up fiction for poetry in the 1890s.

### Critical Overview

David Perkins, writing in *ELS*, states that “one may describe many of Hardy’s poems as a fingering of the theme of isolation and an exploring of roads

out of the dilemma. It is precisely in his sensitivity to the frustration and tragedy of human life that Hardy feels himself cut off from other men." Perkins connects this sense of isolation directly to "The Man He Killed" by identifying the two layers of irony in the poem: the first is that two decent men who have no quarrel with each other would be shooting at each other, and the second is that a decent man can justify that fact in such a matter-of-fact manner. Perkins also states that the understatement of the speaker is essential in that it forces the reader to confront the underlying questions directly. Perkins further says, "Although the outlook of people such as the speaker in 'The Man He Killed' is rooted in a limited awareness, it figures in Hardy's poetry as a ground of happiness. From this point of view, sensitivity or awareness may itself be felt as a burden or blight."

The use of a narrator was common in Hardy's poetry. Perhaps it was because of his background in fiction that Hardy often chose dramatic monologue as a poetic format. William Morgan, writing in *Tennessee Studies in Literature*, divides Hardy's dramatic poetry into two categories—the personal and the impersonal. The critic suggests that both types share "a kind of incompleteness of vision," noting that in the impersonal poems, Hardy "effaces his narrator to bring the experience to the fore, and in the personal poems he binds his narrator's vision to the moment so as to restrict its relevance to the particulars in the poem." Morgan goes on to state "that the impersonally dramatic are incomplete because they are without a context of values, a framework of moral norms; the personally dramatic, because their vision cannot be generalized beyond the temporal and spatial limits specified in them."

## Criticism

### Tyrus Miller

*Tyrus Miller teaches comparative literature and English at Yale University, and has written extensively on twentieth-century poetry, fiction, and visual culture. In the following essay, Miller presents the historical background that led to the confrontation depicted in "The Man He Killed" and examines the contradiction between the implications Hardy made about war and the limited narrative of the poem's protagonist.*

Thomas Hardy's poem "The Man He Killed," first published in 1902 at the end of the Boer War in South Africa, can be counted as one of the first great antiwar poems of the twentieth century. It sets an ironic, disillusioned tone that would become characteristic in the work of such World War I trench poets as Robert Graves, Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, and Ivor Gurney. Hardy's protagonist is a plain-speaking countryman, whose concerns lie with the simple, enduring customs of his locale and not with the ambitious aims of imperial power in far-off lands. Nonetheless, the nation has called him to do his duty, which he has done unquestioningly. Now, however, he is left to explain to himself and to his fellows—the ones with whom he is drinking and implicitly the one he shot down—why he has killed another man so like himself, except for the flag under which he marched.

Hardy had very specific details in mind when imagining his speaker, and he succeeded in evoking them so believably that some critics have speculated that the poem may have been occasioned by a story the poet overheard in a tavern. When the poem was originally published in the New York magazine *Harper's Weekly* on November 8, 1902, Hardy included a set of accompanying stage directions to help his American readers imagine the scene properly. These read: "*Scene*: The settle of the Fox Inn, Stagfoot Lane. *Characters*: The speaker (a returned soldier) and his friends, natives of the hamlet." Stagfoot Lane was a locale previously depicted by Hardy in his novel *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*; it was a thin disguise for the real hamlet of Hartfoot Lane, a village near Hardy's home. Hardy's speaker is thus a native of Dorset, England, sent off to fight in South Africa against the Boers, who had rebelled against the British imposition of rule in their territory.

Writing as he was at the bitter end of the protracted conflict in South Africa, Hardy could assume that his readers would be able to fill in the historical and political subtext that gives his speaker's spare lines their ironic force. For today's reader, however, some historical background is necessary. Great Britain had ended up controlling the colony of South Africa following the defeat of Napoleon's French forces early in the nineteenth century. Most of the white settlers, however, were Dutch: "Boers," as they were called, was a name derived from the Dutch word for farmer. These settlers moved into the territory across the Orange and Vaal rivers, the Transvaal region, seizing control of the land, enslaving the native inhabitants of the region, and fiercely defending their independence

## What Do I Read Next?



- After serving in World War I, e.e. cummings wrote some of the most powerful antiwar poetry of all time. Full of irony and bitter humor, it can be found in his *Collected Poems*. Cummings also wrote a moving, phantasmagorical novel based on his experiences in the war titled *The Enormous Room*.
- The antiwar literature that came out of the World War I is among the most critical ever written. *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque captures the meaninglessness of the war and the horrible human cost as seen by the soldiers in the trenches. Its straightforward style makes the book highly readable.
- In Dalton Trumbo's *Johnny Got His Gun*, a young victim of the war, who is now deaf, blind, and quadriplegic, recalls his life.
- Thomas Hardy began *The Dynasts*, his book-length epic poem about the wars against Napoleon around the time he wrote "The Man He Killed." He did not write about war in his novels, which are by and large social dramas set in the Dorset countryside where he lived most of his life. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, the story of a young woman's conflict with the moral double standard of the village in which she lives, is probably Hardy's most popular novel.

from taxation and centralized rule. England tried to annex the Transvaal in 1877, but was forced to grant the Boers independence in 1881. Then, unexpectedly, gold and eventually diamonds were discovered in the Transvaal. The gold rush brought thousands of foreigners to the region. These newcomers, or *Uitlanders* as they were called, quickly outnumbered the Boers, who viewed them as interlopers and as agents of British interests. Colonists from neighboring Rhodesia attempted to invade the Transvaal and to provoke an uprising of *Uitlanders* which would definitively defeat the Boers. With the stage already set for armed conflict, the German Kaiser, who also had imperial designs on southern Africa, encouraged the Boers to do battle with his British rivals. In 1899, open warfare broke out.

The British, numerically and economically superior to the Boers, were confident that their uncouth enemy could be rapidly defeated. The Boers, however, had lived for decades on the rugged terrain of the Transvaal, and they utilized their familiarity with the landscape to sustain a demoralizing guerilla war with the British for three years. Eventually, the British resorted to the dangerous tactics of clearing the land sector-by-sector, during the course of which they gained the dubious honor of introducing one of its most notorious innova-

tions of the twentieth century: the concentration camp. By the end of the war, forty thousand Boers were being detained under the most inhumane conditions. The unexpected length of the conflict; the solidarity of other rebellious and oppressed peoples in the British Empire with the tenacious Boers (above all, the Irish); the humanitarian outrage of liberals and socialists about the treatment of Boer prisoners; and the dispiriting nature of the war goals all contributed to making the Boer War increasingly unpopular and divisive on the domestic front.

Hardy employs this historical situation to evoke several themes in a concentrated, dramatic way. First of all, his speaker's sympathies are divided: the soldier's roots lie in a specific, traditional part of Britain, but he is also a subject of the modern British nation that was pursuing its imperial designs in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Hardy makes his readers ponder the question of whether this rural man should feel loyalty to the country that is his dwelling place and native home, the land and people of Dorset, or to the bigger country that has its national interests in southern Africa and its armies to protect them. He also contrasts the civilian role of his speaker as a reflective, feeling, if somewhat inarticulate man of the land, to that same man's role as soldier and an impersonal part of an infantry lineup—a cog in a military machine. Fi-



*Through the doubts  
of his Dorset soldier, Hardy  
suggests the larger worries  
that were beginning to  
haunt the British nation  
about the meaning of its  
experience in South Africa."*

nally, the poet also reveals the deep strains placed on the man by the contradictions between his class, which might lead him to identify with his fellow farmer, and his nationhood, which makes that fellow man of the Transvaal countryside his foe. In other words, though Hardy's soldier must kill the Boer as a national enemy, as a fellow Boer (farmer) he has everything essential in common with his foe.

These tensions are set up by the first two stanzas, which establish the single broad irony of the situation: the man he killed might have easily been included among his present drinking companions. At the same time, these stanzas lend several subtle inflections to that perplexing fact. Hardy hints at how important the question of place and placement is to the life and death of his opposed soldiers. Had the Boer soldier been met in such a place as the inn, in the local place of the British soldier, they would have been fellows and friends. Yet in *his* place, the Boer's own local environs, this would-be comrade had to be killed. Hardy thus carefully sets up the symmetry between the two soldiers and the apparently interchangeable nature of their places, only to undermine it in the end. The soldiers stare at one another "face to face," as if in a mirror. Further reinforcing this implied symmetry with internal rhyme (he / me), Hardy presents the men shooting at each other, as if each one shot at a reflection of himself: "I shot at him as he at me." But just as the outcome of this shooting is fatally different for the two soldiers, so too the original symmetry between them proves deceptive. For as Hardy subtly reminds us—and as his speaker perhaps never realizes—there is one irreducible difference between his British soldier and his Boer. The Dorset man is an outsider in South Africa, an invader; the Boer settler is at home—already in that very place where, under other circumstances, he

might meet his British fellow as a drinking companion. But he had no chance to offer the Dorset man a pint of beer; their meeting in *his* home means that they are already enemies. There can be no symmetry or equality between invader and invaded.

Hardy's Dorset soldier is genuinely perplexed by the human dimensions of his story. Yet he also remains profoundly blind to its political truth: that in the end, the places of the British and Boer soldiers are not interchangeable. The unpolitical man, doing his duty without ambition or understanding, experiences this history as a kind of fate that colors invader and invaded alike with its grey strokes. Though Hardy is not unsympathetic with the simple man's perspective, he is equally rigorous in suggesting its narrow limits.

Several touches help to foster a sense of simple immediacy and authenticity in the speaker's quoted voice. Hardy takes up the man's table talk in midstream, creating the illusion that the words begin not, as they actually do, at the top of the page where the poem is printed, but in some unheard speech already in progress before we entered the tavern to overhear them. The poem represents a kind of snapshot of speech, a fragment of an ongoing rotation of a problem, snatched out of time and offered up for view to the reader. Though Hardy does not write in dialect, he does use Dorset slang such as "nipperkin" (a drink) and "traps" (tools, gear), as well as registering the specific oral sounding of "list" (enlist), which lends the man's speech its specificity and local flavor.

Above all, however, it is Hardy's skillful manipulation of the syntax to suggest a psychological rhythm of thought that gives this poem its strikingly dramatic quality. In the latter three stanzas, the pauses and repetitions indicate clearly that the man is anything but convinced of the necessity of killing the man opposite him: because— / Because he was my foe, / Just so: my foe of course he was; / That's clear enough." By ending the third stanza on the word *although*," Hardy makes his poem pivot around a second thought. The fragmentation of the syntax in the fourth stanza makes crumble before the reader's eyes any conviction won in the previous stanza. It is impossible to decide if "No other reason why" refers to the Boer, the Dorset man, or both.

The final stanza does not so much resolve the doubts raised in the earlier stanzas as simply shut them down, at least for the meantime. It is hard to believe, given Hardy's effective beginning in midstream and careful pacing, that this meditation has

truly come to a close. We imagine this returned soldier turning his enemy's death over and over in his mind, being unwilling to face the truth of his act, and being unable to bring it to a conclusion. Hardy's poem points beyond the narrow confines of its protagonist's scope of understanding to encompass the historical world. Through the doubts of his Dorset soldier, Hardy suggests the larger worries that were beginning to haunt the British nation about the meaning of its experience in South Africa: the threats to and from the colonies, the danger of widespread revolt, the decay of national unity at home, and the unchecked drift toward new, barbaric forms of war and politics. The lines crossed—at first unwillingly and unwittingly—during the Boer War had, for Thomas Hardy at least, left behind a faint intimation of the horrors that modern war would bring fully to light in only a few short years.

**Source:** Tyrus Miller, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 1998.

### David Perkins

*In the following excerpt, Perkins analyzed humans' ability to dismiss the suffering of others, using Hardy's "The Man He Killed" as a case in point.*

The sense of personal isolation is one of the most obvious impressions conveyed by the literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. That this should be so implies the convergence of widespread influences; but an artist has only himself to give to his work, and any voice he may lend to a general dilemma will be as he himself feels it rather than as a delegate from some historical era. One need not demonstrate Hardy's urgent preoccupation in his poetry with the hurt of aloneness. Its importance is marked not only by open statement in his poems, but also by the fact that the protagonists almost always appears as a solitary, an outsider, or an individual alienated from the life of his fellows. The intention here is rather to discuss what is individual in Hardy's own response. In Hardy's poetry the feeling of isolation does not primarily stem from the typical Victorian complaint that the forms of society themselves keep people apart. Nor does it arise, as in much of the poetry earlier in the century, from the experience of an inner light, of possessing sources of inspiration and insight unavailable to the generality of mankind. To feel that you have secret springs of insight entails some alienation; but as with Blake or Wordsworth, it also makes that insight more a cause of joy than of un-

easiness. In Hardy, however, the ever-present sense of difference seems to have resulted only in unmingled discomfort. It is something from which the poet would wish to escape. Hence one may describe many of Hardy's poems as a fingering of the theme of isolation and an exploring of roads out of the dilemma—roads which are inevitably obstructed by a nagging honesty to his own experience. It is precisely in his sensitivity to the frustration and tragedy of human life that Hardy feels himself cut off from other men. Much that is usually termed his "pessimism" is a way of looking at things which he felt to be unshared and which prevented him from entering whole-heartedly into the state of mind of his fellows....

[W]ith a state of mind such as Hardy's the shuffling unawareness which permits most people to ease through life without being perturbed by the general view of human suffering becomes a cause of bafflement. In a writer such as Swift, it may also release a powerful indignation; but Hardy seems to have been too gentle and too humble to assert himself in that way. In fact, the reservations implicit in humility gave Hardy's attitude much of its complexity. Perhaps Hardy's most successful exploration of the common mental attitude which permits men to slough their questionings occurs in "The Man He Killed." Here the extreme surface simplicity, the short, almost jingling meters, the colloquial idiom, the total absence of stock poetic associations, the unwillingness to employ the glitter of poetic phrase, bespeak a rigid artistic discipline and integrity in which all has been subordinated to an interplay of character and incident. The situation, of course, is simply that in battle two soldiers, "ranged as infantry, / And staring face to face," have fired on each other, and the survivor narrates that event. The poem turns on the character of the speaker revealed in his reactions to what has taken place. The speaker begins by stating that he had no personal quarrel with the man he killed. This naturally raises the question of why he killed him, and, pondering the question, the speaker can only say that it was "Because he was my foe." But he seems unsure and unsatisfied, and hence reiterates the explanation: "my foe of course he was; / That's clear enough." We are introduced, then, to a rather simple type of person, incapable of thinking past stock and ready-made answers ("he was my foe"), well-meaning and troubled by having killed a man toward whom he felt no rancor. At once the speaker goes on to recognize that the man was not his "foe" at all, but simply a man who happened, like himself, to have drifted into the army....

At this point, the speaker having identified himself with the man he killed, convention would seem to suggest a revulsion from the killing, and a direct attack on war and the meaningless slaughter it involves. But this would take the poem outside the limited feeling and moral awareness of the speaker. Instead the speaker merely concludes:

Yes: quaint and curious war is!  
You shoot a fellow down  
You'd treat if met where any bar is,  
Or help to half-a-crown.

The summing up leading to the conclusion that war is "quaint and curious" suggest that the speaker has resolved his problem and will be no more troubled by it. But in the reader the aroused sense of wrong is in no way satisfied by the words "quaint and curious." Instead, by the drastic understatement of the last stanza, Hardy forces the reader to face up to the situation more or less on his own, and exacts that "full look at the worst" which is a necessary prelude to any possible "Better." Hence it is by the limitations of the speaker that the poem makes its point. But the limitations of the speaker give an additional edge of irony to the poem. For the irony is not simply that two men who have no quarrel should fire on each other, being trapped in the blind moilings of the "Immanent Will." There is the further irony that a decent man, such as the speaker, should not be more disturbed, should be able to appease his discomfort with the words "quaint and curious."

Although the outlook of people such as the speaker in "The Man He Killed" is rooted in a limited awareness, it figures in Hardy's poetry as a ground of happiness. From this point of view, sensitivity or awareness may itself be felt as a burden or blight. Indeed, in Hardy this mode of feeling underlies a frequent metaphysical conceit by which

"the birth of consciousness" on the earth is explained as a mutation, not expected or allowed for in the pattern of the cosmos, and the accidental cause of pain.

Source: "Hardy and the Poetry of Isolation" in *ELH*, Vol. 26, No. 2, June 1959, pp. 253-56.

### Sources

Morgan, William, "The Partial Vision: Hardy's Idea of Dramatic Poetry," in *Tennessee Studies in Literature*, Vol. XX, 1975, pp. 100-08.

Perkins, David, "Hardy and the Poetry of Isolation," in *ELH*, Vol. 26, No. 2, June, 1959, pp. 253-70.

### For Further Study

Bailey, J.O., *The Poetry of Thomas Hardy: A Handbook and Commentary*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1970.

A reference book with a wealth of background material and commentary on every poem Hardy wrote.

Green, Brian, *Hardy's Lyrics*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996.

A detailed, if at times academic, book that discusses empathy and the narrator's conflicting roles in the "The Man He Killed."

O'Sullivan, Timothy. *Thomas Hardy: An Illustrated Biography*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975.

A highly accessible biography of Hardy that discusses his life and major works.

Perkins, David, "Hardy and the Poetry of Isolation," in *Hardy: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Albert J. Guerard, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1963.

A good, straightforward discussion of the themes in "The Man He Killed."

# Mother to Son

*Langston Hughes*

1922

"Mother to Son" was first published in the magazine *Crisis* in December of 1922 and reappeared in Langston Hughes's first collection of poetry, *The Weary Blues* in 1926. In that volume and later works, Hughes explores the lives of African-Americans who struggle against poverty and discrimination. Hughes was dubbed "the poet laureate of Harlem" for his many portraits of Harlem as a crossroads of African-American experience. "Mother to Son" is a dramatic monologue, spoken by the persona of a black mother to her son. Using the metaphor of a stairway, the mother tells her son that the journey of life more closely resembles a long, trying walk up the dark, decrepit stairways of a tenement than a glide down a "crystal stair." The "crystal stair" is a metaphor for the American dream and its promise that all Americans shall have equal opportunities. The mother warns her son not to expect an easy climb or a tangible reward. Through the metaphor of ascent, however, the speaker suggests that her endurance and struggle are necessary to progress toward racial justice and to maintain spiritual hope and faith. In this poem, Hughes represents the personal, collective, and spiritual importance of struggle, endurance, and faith.

## *Author Biography*

Hughes was born in in 1902 in Joplin, Missouri, to James Nathaniel and Carrie Mercer Langston Hughes, who separated shortly after their son's





Langston Hughes

birth. Hughes's mother had attended college, while his father, who wanted to become a lawyer, took correspondence courses in law. Denied a chance to take the Oklahoma bar exam, Hughes's father went first to Missouri and then, still unable to become a lawyer, left his wife and son to move first to Cuba and then to Mexico. In Mexico, he became a wealthy landowner and lawyer. Because of financial difficulties, Hughes's mother moved frequently in search of steady work, often leaving him with her parents. His grandmother Mary Leary Langston was the first black woman to attend Oberlin College. She inspired the boy to read books and value an education. When his grandmother died in 1910, Hughes lived with family friends and various relatives in Kansas. In 1915 he joined his mother and new stepfather in Lincoln, Illinois, where he attended grammar school. The following year, the family moved to Cleveland, Ohio. There he attended Central High School, excelling in both academics and sports. Hughes also wrote poetry and short fiction for the *Belfry Owl*, the high school literary magazine, and edited the school yearbook. In 1920 Hughes left to visit his father in Mexico, staying in that country for a year. Returning home in 1921, he attended Columbia University for a year before dropping out. For a time he worked as a cabin boy on a merchant ship, visited Africa, and

wrote poems for a number of American magazines. In 1923 and 1924 Hughes lived in Paris. He returned to the United States in 1925 and resettled with his mother and half-brother in Washington, D.C. He continued writing poetry while working menial jobs. In May and August of 1925 Hughes's verse earned him literary prizes from both *Opportunity* and *Crisis* magazines. In December Hughes, then a busboy at a Washington, D.C., hotel, attracted the attention of poet Vachel Lindsay by placing three of his poems on Lindsay's dinner table. Later that evening Lindsay read Hughes's poems to an audience and announced his discovery of a "Negro busboy poet." The next day reporters and photographers eagerly greeted Hughes at work to hear more of his compositions. He published his first collection of poetry, *The Weary Blues*, in 1926. Around this time Hughes became active in the Harlem Renaissance, a flowering of creativity among a group of African-American artists and writers. Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and other writers founded *Fire!*, a literary journal devoted to African-American culture. The venture was unsuccessful, however, and ironically a fire eventually destroyed the editorial offices. In 1932 Hughes traveled with other black writers to the Soviet Union on an ill-fated film project. His infatuation with Soviet Communism and Joseph Stalin led Hughes to write on politics throughout the 1930s. He also became involved in drama, founding several theaters. In 1938 he founded the Suitcase Theater in Harlem, in 1939 the Negro Art Theater in Los Angeles, and in 1941 the Skyloft Players in Chicago. In 1943 Hughes received an honorary Doctor of Letters from Lincoln University, and in 1946 he was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters. He continued to write poetry throughout the rest of his life, and by the 1960s he was known as the "Dean of Negro Writers." Hughes died in New York on May 22, 1967.



### Poem Summary

#### Lines 1-2:

The first two lines establish what the title implies: this poem is a dramatic monologue spoken by the persona of a mother to her son. The son never speaks; the mother's life experience and advice may therefore apply to all readers, but particularly to young African-American readers. The metaphor of the crystal stair may represent several things. It may symbolize dreams that the mother once held but which she has learned no longer to expect. The crystal stair may also represent the mother's spiritual quest toward heaven, Christian grace, and redemption. Or, in material terms, it may invoke the large, gleaming staircases that starlets glide down in movies. In each possible interpretation, the crystal stair connotes smoothness and ease, delicacy, wealth, and a clear, well-lit path toward a rich (material or spiritual) destination. These connotations contrast with images in the poem that show how rough and discouraging the mother's actual life has been.

#### Lines 3-7:

In these lines, the mother describes the specific ways that her life's journey has diverged from the ideal of the crystal stair. Grammatically, the "it" in line 3 refers to the subject of the previous sentence: "Life." Thus one might interpret the line to read, "my life's had tacks in it." Or, extending the metaphor of the stairway (of life), the "it" may refer to stairs. Tacks and splinters may be read as figurative hazards one might find on an actual stairway in a rundown building. The tacks, splinters, worn-out carpet, and torn-up boards represent overuse and neglect. Many travellers before the mother have hauled themselves on this journey, and many will do so after her. The damaged parts of the stairway may represent the inability of individual sojourners to repair the structures undergirding their lives (such as poverty and reduced opportunity) or it may represent the disadvantaged state of black life in America itself. The "torn up"

boards may represent someone's attempt to dismantle this stairway altogether. R. Baxter Miller interprets the "tacks" and "splinters" in this poem as threats to the mother's body and soul. Physically, the tacks and splinters represent small, nagging pains that might puncture and infect the mother as she struggles upward. Symbolically, however, these small threats represent potential injuries to "the black American soul." The mother's recognition of these obstacles and her apparent avoidance of them signal her wise negotiation of life's setbacks.

#### Lines 8-11:

Having listed some of the literal and figurative hazards the son might encounter on his journey, the mother affirms the value of persistence and faith in one's goal. From lines 8 to 13, she makes it clear that, despite obstacles, she has continued to make gains. The mother's personal advancement represents progress for the black race as well. The landings and turns in the mother's climb may be metaphors for brief victories or respites from personal, racial, or spiritual struggles. The mother may mention these moments of ease to assure the son that some parts of life's uphill climb will offer glimpses of hope and accomplishment.

#### Lines 12-13:

Like the tacks and splinters in lines 3 and 4, the image of a dark stairway with the light removed, broken, or never installed, calls to mind an actual stairway in a building of poor tenants. Hughes includes such realistic details to make the metaphor of a stairway literal and symbolic at once. It is easier for readers to grasp and remember ideas that they can picture or sense, so poets often include sensory details in their work. In this poem, Hughes carefully includes details that appeal to the reader's vision, hearing, and touch. The tacks and splinters of lines 3-4 awaken the reader's sense of touch and danger; the darkness in lines 12-13 causes the reader to experience the mother's blind groping around obstacles toward an unseen goal. The mother's "goin' in the dark / Where there ain't been no light" may represent her persistent struggles despite her own waning faith or hope. Or, the dark may symbolize the external obstacles despite which she climbs. Hughes may repeat the idea of darkness twice in lines 12-13 to suggest different kinds of darkness: physical and spiritual. Or the repetition may serve to make the mother's words sound like real speech, which is usually more repetitive and colloquial than written words.

## Media Adaptations



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

### Lines 14-20:

From line 14 to 20, the mother's advice takes a final turn. Whereas the first seven lines depict the hardships the son can expect in life and the next six lines assert the mother's example of persistence through adversity, the final seven lines urge the son to keep going, despite setbacks and his wishes to stop or turn back. The critic Onwuchekwa Jemie translates the mother's command in line 15, not to "set down on the steps," into specifically black, urban, social terms. In *Langston Hughes: An Introduction to the Poetry*, Jemie argues that "to stop is to become a sitter on stoops and stander on street corners ... or to become a prostitute, pimp, hustler or thief. To despair is, in short, to wither and die." The mother urges the son not to succumb to the temptation to give up. Having felt despair and resisted it, she knows that the choice to persist benefits the individual and the race. She warns him in line 17 not to fall 'now' because she has brought them so far and is 'still climbin'.' The potential "fall" might symbolize both their falls from spiritual grace as well as a political setback for African Americans. Collectively, if many sons (and daughters) despair and drop out, the struggle for equality is that much less likely to succeed. In the last line, the mother repeats her refrain regarding the moral, spiritual, and political necessity to endure adversity and keep climbing.

### Themes

#### Race and Racism

The struggle that the mother in this poem describes is common to all people of every race and class, but Hughes narrows in on her identity by giving the speaker's voice the dialect of a poor, un-

dereducated African American. Readers who recognize this dialect and who have even a little knowledge about the struggle for racial equality in the United States will be able to associate the "staircase" metaphor and the setbacks that the speaker says she faced with the obstacles faced by American blacks, particularly in the early twentieth century, when the laws of the land permitted discriminatory practices. Particular clues that this is a southern black dialect include the contraction of "I is" ("I'se) meaning a mixture of "I am" and "I have"; the addition of the prefix "a-" to the word "climbin'" to indicate that the action is still going on; and the term of endearment "honey." Independently, none of these stylistic traits would be enough to identify the speaker's culture, but Hughes does such a thorough job of weaving a pattern together, that even a reader who is unfamiliar with the author's racial background would get a sense of who the poem's speaker is.

The difficulties faced by the mother in this poem are symbolized by tacks, splinters, bare floors, and dark hallways—all signs of poverty. In associating this particular black American speaker with these particular images, Hughes is able to hint at the injustice in the relationship between poverty and race. This mother certainly is not poor because she is lazy or weak-willed, since we can see her determination to work and succeed in almost every line. For a woman of such determination to be kept this poor indicates that hardship is not a moral issue, but is related to an external cause, such as the limits that are put on people because of their race.

#### Individual vs. the Universe

The point that the mother is making in this poem is that life is a struggle and that her son would be mistaken to expect anything better than difficulty. She mentions symbols of her struggle that reflect her own life, apparently to show that she knows the subject from firsthand experience, thus assuring him that his own problems are not being unfairly apportioned to him and him alone. Because she has to explain this to her son as if it is news to him, we can assume that she was not the type of person to complain about her troubles while her son was growing up: he might easily have interpreted her quietness as a sign that she was comfortable with her life and, from this, assumed that her life indeed was a crystal stair. She addresses him in this poem in order to correct any mistaken assumption he may have that life should be free of problems just because hers has seemed to be so. In the implied fact that the mother has accepted her diffi-

culties so quietly that her own son was unaware of them and has to have them explained to him, Hughes has raised a few philosophic issues about mankind's relationship to the universe. The most obvious one is that of struggle. When the mother says "Life for me ain't been no crystal stair," we can assume that the same would hold true for many, if not most, honest, hard-working people. The second lesson that is implied here is that we should bear suffering quietly and not draw attention to it. The mother in this poem does not tell her son this directly, but Hughes obviously intends for us to admire her and to learn from the fact that her life's difficulty had been quietly accepted.

### Identity

If the son being addressed in this poem hopes to deny that his situation will be different than the one that is described to him (as seems to be his mother's point in describing her situation at all), it will not be easy: too much connects his own identity to his mother for him to think that life will be very different for him. Usually in human affairs the fates of two family members will turn out more alike than the fates of random strangers. Psychologists explain similarities in families with a range of theories that all touch upon the famed "nature/nurture" argument: that is, different opinions stress whether relatives have similar experiences because they are taught (or "nurtured") to behave in similar ways or because their behaviors are determined by their genetic code (their "nature"). The use of an African-American dialect in this poem highlights the idea that the son should expect certain difficulties, because to some extent society treated all blacks the same. But the fact that it is his mother speaking tells him, and us, that the struggle ahead of him is not just a theory but is his fate.

A more complete identification between the speaker and the intended audience would exist if this poem were "Father to Son." Hughes apparently wanted to make use of the inherent contrast caused by crossing the experienced party in the parent/child relationship with the traditionally "weaker" gender in the male/female relationship. Sons often feel protective of their mothers, but mothers are always more worldly. If the speaker of this poem had been the son's father, he may not have needed to explain the difficulty of his life, because the son would have identified more completely with the older man and known about his life without being told. But our society creates so much distance between the two genders that this son ap-

## Topics for Further Study



- Think of a turn of phrase or a speech characteristic that would mark the way you speak. Write a poem containing the advice you will give your children about living in the modern world. Mention how old you think your child should be when you give your advice.
- Explain why you think this mother would use the image of the "crystal stair" to symbolize a life of comfort. Where would she have seen such a thing? Why would she have imagined it? Write a detailed list of the associations that might have made relevant in the mother's mind.
- In what way does the dialect used in this poem (for example: "I'se," "a-climbin'") help Hughes communicate with his audience? Do you think his use of dialect limits his audience?

parently could not identify with his mother's quiet determination, instead mistaking it for acceptance.

### Style

Since "Mother to Son" is a dramatic monologue, the primary purpose of Hughes's word choices and line arrangements is to quickly and convincingly capture the speech and character of a disadvantaged African-American mother. To more closely approximate the rhythms and folk diction, or word choices, of a black persona or character, Hughes uses a number of poetic and literary techniques. He writes in free verse, meaning the lines are unrhymed and vary in length and meter (the pattern of beats in each line). Specifically, the number of syllables per line varies from one (line 7 is "Bare.") to ten (in line 20, which iambic pentameter). In addition to capturing the rhythms of ordinary speech, the poem's irregular line lengths may mirror the setbacks, turns, and uneven progress of the speaker on her life's climb. Sometimes, a poem's shape on the page reinforces its themes.

Hughes uses other markers of African-American speech, such as contractions and colloquial uses of the verb “to be”: “I’se been a-climbin’ on” and such variations as “set” for “sit”: “Don’t you set down.” Hughes sought to represent African-American speech with dignity and verve for, in the hands of many white American writers, black dialect was used to perpetuate stereotypes of black ignorance. Hughes sought to overturn such caricatures by representing humor, strength, wisdom, and music in the plain speech of his African-American poetic personas. After carefully interpreting the mother’s insights and messages to her son, the reader recognizes that in “Mother to Son” and many of Hughes’s poems, uneducated diction signifies a lifetime of reduced opportunity rather than ignorance or lazy speech. Thus, the emotional drama of the mother’s will to persist is heightened considerably by the disadvantage that her diction bespeaks.

### Historical Context

By 1926, when Hughes published this poem in his book *The Weary Blues*, the artistic movement that we know as the Harlem Renaissance was at the height of its fame and productivity. The Harlem Renaissance, an informal gathering of writers, painters, musicians, and philosophers who worked in the Harlem section of New York City in the 1920s, started soon after World War I ended in 1918 and withered away by the time the Great Depression began with the stock market crash of 1929. To some extent, we can say that it is a happy coincidence that some of the world’s greatest talents all ended up in the same place at the same time. Looking more deeply, though, we see that the outpouring of expression during the Harlem Renaissance was driven not just by talent but by an urgent need to express a cultural identity. Harlem in the 1920s was the place where the artistic sensibilities of black America were inevitably destined to attract the attention of the world.

In the nineteenth century the majority of African Americans lived in the South because they were descendants of slaves who had been brought here to farm the massive plantations in that region. After the Confederate Army of the South surrendered in 1865, bringing an end to the Civil War, slavery was abolished in this country. The Southern legislatures, however, passed laws that made it impossible for blacks to become socially or economically equal to whites. These “Jim Crow laws”

(named after an offensively stupid and lazy black character from a 1832 minstrel show) blocked voting or land ownership by blacks by holding them to nearly impossible “intelligence tests” or “economic criteria” that most whites would have also failed to meet if they had been required. In 1896 the U.S. Supreme Court gave its approval to these discriminatory laws by deciding in the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* that states could offer “separate but equal” facilities to blacks for education, transportation, and public accommodations. The pretense toward fairness in this ruling ignored the fact that the accommodations were almost never equal: less government money found its way to black hospitals, bus lines, parks, etc., and private enterprises certainly offered blacks only their worst. It was not until 1954 that the Supreme Court ruled the “separate but equal” doctrine unfair, in a case called *Brown v. The Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*.

Early in the twentieth century, though, Southern blacks found some form of relief from the unequal conditions with the Industrial Revolution and the growth of major manufacturing centers in Northern cities such as Chicago, Detroit, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, and New York. There was still terrible discrimination in the North, but it was not formally established in the laws. In addition, the factories of the North, producing steel and automobiles, needed laborers, and they paid good wages to workers with no prior experience. When World War I began in Europe in 1914, the push to provide munitions made the North even more inviting to African Americans. A laborer making \$1.10 per day in the South could make \$3.75 in a Northern factory, while a woman working as a domestic in the South for \$2.50 per week could make \$2.10 to \$2.50 a day in the North. The war also opened manufacturing opportunities for blacks by narrowing the number of immigrant workers coming from Europe. The black population in Northern cities ballooned; in New York City alone, the number of blacks went from 60,666 in 1900 to 152,467 in 1920, growing throughout the twenties to 327,706 by 1930.

The urban African Americans began to seek their own identity in ways that they never had a chance to when they were dispersed on farms throughout the South. During the war, approximately 367,000 blacks served in the Armed Forces. Although still facing considerable discrimination in the military, black servicemen brought home a new awareness of how small and temporary many American prejudices were. Military service ex-

## Compare & Contrast

- **1922:** A. E. Staley of Decatur, Illinois, opened the first soybean refinery in the United States. Previously, soybeans had been used for livestock feed.

**1940:** The U.S. soybean crop reached 78 million bushels, up from 5 million bushel in 1924.

**1944:** 12 million acres of U.S. farming land were devoted to growing soybeans. Products created out of oils derived from soybeans included livestock feed, enamel, solvents, plastics, insecticides, steel hardening agents, and beer.

**1945:** Soybean production reached 193 million bushels, almost three times the level of just five years before.

**1966:** Bac-Os were developed by General Mills. Made from isolate soy protein, they taste like bacon.

**Today:** Soybeans will soon outpace wheat as the United States' second largest crop. (The nation still, however, grows more than three times as much corn as either soybeans or wheat.)

- **1922:** Twenty-eight-year-old Angelo Siciliano won a contest sponsored by *Physican Culture* magazine, naming him the "World's Most Perfectly Developed Man." Taking the name Charles Atlas, he opened his own gymnasium in Manhattan in 1926, and by 1927 his corporation was charging \$1,000 per student for mail-order body-building lessons.

**1956:** The President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sport was established.

**1985:** Starting with the motion picture *Rambo: First Blood, Part II*, Hollywood produced a string of movies with muscle-enhanced male ac-

tion stars. Health clubs became more popular than discos as places for young adults to meet. By the end of this trend former bodybuilder Arnold Schwarzenegger had become the most popular movie star in the world.

**Today:** Despite increased awareness of the importance of physical fitness and the multi-billion dollar fitness industry, more than 60 percent of all adults are more than twenty percent over their body weight.

- **1922:** States were allowed to establish laws that required blacks and whites to live in separate places, stay in separate hotels and motels, ride separate sections of buses, use separate drinking fountains, sit in separate areas of movie theaters, attend separate churches, seek treatment at separate hospitals, etc.

**1955:** Rosa Parks, an African-American bus rider in Montgomery, Alabama, was arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white man. The boycott that followed her arrest, organized by Dr. Martin Luther King, brought the matter of segregation to the Supreme Court, who ruled in 1956 that segregation of public transportation was illegal.

**1964:** The Johnson administration passed the Civil Rights Act that President Kennedy had been working on before he was assassinated. Among other provisions, the Act required that schools should be desegregated, so that African Americans would not be left to receive inferior educations in second-rate schools.

**Today:** Despite laws that legislate against discrimination, blacks and whites in America usually live, shop, and attend school in different places.

posed many white Americans to blacks for the first time, and they learned respect. The characteristics that racists had claimed about in blacks in order to oppress them for decades—claiming that they were

simple, naive, ignorant and primitivistic—ironically started looking good to intellectuals, in light of the sophisticated and rational war that had just taken so many lives barbarically.

After the war, the Harlem section of New York City, where blacks comprised over 90 percent of the population, became recognized as a center for artistic and intellectual activity. It offered blacks both the security of a small, self-contained community and, at the same time, as part of America's publishing and entertainment capital, it offered access to national and international audiences. At night, New York's wealthiest went "up to Harlem" in search of clubs that served liquor, which had been made illegal in 1920 by the Constitution's Eighteenth Amendment. Rich intellectuals rubbed shoulders with poor intellectuals: Hughes himself was in fact "discovered by" prominent poet Vachel Lindsay when he slipped some poems to Lindsay while waiting on his table. Together, writers and artists of the Harlem Renaissance raised the world's consciousness of what life was like for Americans of African descent.

### Critical Overview

Commentators on "Mother to Son" tend to focus on either racial, religious, or feminist themes for the poem's forms. Chidi Ikonne, writing in the collection *Langston Hughes*, suggests that this and other poems by Hughes present a stance of "stability which, ironically, has developed from the instability of the speaker's experience" in a racist society. Emphasizing religious themes, R. Baxter Miller, in his 1989 book *The Art and Imagination of Langston Hughes*, argues that the mother in this poem is a "figure of mythic ascent" who is struggling to "merge with Godhead." Miller argues that "we find in her less a progression of the body than an evolution of the soul." With a similar emphasis on religious symbolism, Onwuchekwa Jemie refers to the mother as a "Black Madonna" in his book *Langston Hughes: An Introduction to the Poetry*.

Other critics illuminate the poem's feminist elements. Critic James Emanuel, in his 1967 book *Langston Hughes*, notes that "Mother to Son" is among the first of many of Hughes's poems to portray a strong matriarch. R. Baxter Miller also discusses the symbolic role of women and mothers in Hughes's poetry. Miller argues that Hughes's female speakers represent archetypes, or original models, of human "endurance, ... mortality, [and] marital desertion." In this poem, the woman also represents the continuation of the race. Having given life to the next generation (her son), raised him, and persisted in her struggles for his sake and that of future generations, the mother represents a

figure of female strength, affirmation, and generational continuity.

Still other critics focus on the poem's lyric elements. James Baldwin, a major African-American writer contemporary with Hughes, commented that "Hughes is at his best ... in lyrics like 'Mother to Son' and 'The Negro Speaks of Rivers'." The poem's lyric elements include a first person speaker, an expression of intense personal emotion, and a belief in spiritual transcendence of time and earthly circumstance.

### Criticism

#### Aidan Wasley

*Aidan Wasley is a writer and instructor at Yale University. In the essay below, Wasley explores Hughes's dramatic monologue "Mother to Son," positioning it within the context of African-American culture and traditions and linking the character of the mother with the voice of African-American history.*

"Mother to Son," one of Langston Hughes's earliest poems, takes the form of a dramatic monologue; that is, a poem spoken not in the poet's own voice but in that of a particular imagined speaker, in this case a weary mother addressing her son. The son, as we can surmise from the first line, has either asked his mother a question or complained of his frustrations, to which his mother responds, "Well, son, I'll tell you." She proceeds to recount for her son the difficulties of her own life, telling him "Life for me ain't been no crystal stair," yet suggesting to him that those difficulties are, if not ultimately surmountable, at least worth struggling against:

So boy, don't you turn back.  
Don't you set down on the steps  
Cause you finds it's kinder hard.  
Don't you fall now—  
For I'se still goin', honey,  
I'se still climbin',  
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

The poem's use of the dramatic monologue places the reader in the position of the son, listening to his mother draw a lesson from her life that can be applied to his own. The reader is thus drawn into the poem, as the son's frustrations become our own, and the mother's advice becomes directed at us. The identification with the speaker and the listener which the poem forces upon the reader encourages us to look for ways in which this poem can be seen to address issues beyond the apparently simple scene it

## What Do I Read Next?



- Hughes was the author, along with Milton Meltzer and C. Eric Lincoln, of a 1956 book titled *A Pictorial History of the Negro in America*, which was reprinted in 1983 as *A Pictorial History of Black Americans*. The photos in this book give a vivid sense of American history: the reader can see separate “Colored” facilities at restaurants, movie balconies, parking lots, etc. Hughes’s text reads like that of a moderate intellectual whose patience is wearing thin.
- James Weldon Johnson was a major African-American poet who is considered pre-Harlem Renaissance, although he was still an active writer throughout the 1920s. His introduction to his book of poetry titled *God’s Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons In Verse*, which was first published in 1927 and has since stayed in print, offers one of the most eloquent arguments ever made about the pros and cons of writing in black dialect. You can see Johnson’s influence in Hughes’ second novel, *Tambourines to Glory*, published in 1958.
- Of all the critical histories of black poetry written in recent years, Eugene B. Redmond’s 1976 *Drumvoices: The Mission of Afro-American Poetry* tells the story most coherently. Hughes’s preeminence as a central figure among black writers in America will never be disputed, and Redmond gives him due attention while examining the other writers who have followed.
- Hughes’ career spanned decades. Among his contemporaries at the time he wrote this poem, one of the most fascinating is Jamaican-born Claude McKay. His 1922 collection *The Poems of Claude McKay* examines Harlem in its early years as a center for black Americans from the perspective of an immigrant.

depicts, and raises questions about the poet’s strategies for communicating those concerns.

Hughes, who wrote this poem when he was 21, was—obviously—neither an old woman, nor, as a college-educated intellectual, did he speak or write in the dialect in which the mother’s thoughts are expressed. What then are the implications of this imaginative projection? Why would the young, highly educated African-American poet imagine himself speaking in the voice of an old woman talking about the troubles of her life to her son? What might this old woman symbolize?

In another famous Hughes poem, entitled “The Negro Mother,” we find a similar speaker in a similar dramatic situation, as the title character addresses her African-American sons and daughters:

Children, I come back today  
To tell you a story of the long dark way  
That I had to climb, that I had to know  
In order that the race might live and grow.

In “The Negro Mother,” which was written some years after “Mother to Son,” the speaker also

tells her children about the “dark” and difficult “climb” she has faced in her life, and suggests that her struggles will make those of her children easier to bear. But in the later poem, Hughes makes explicit the connection between the speaker and larger issues of African-American culture, as the figure of “The Negro Mother” comes to be seen not simply as an old woman talking to her children, but as, in some sense, the voice of African-American history itself, recounting its arduous struggle “that the race might live and grow.” In the same way, we can see the speaker of “Mother to Son” as representing a kind of collective voice, the voice of the generations of African-Americans whose troubled history—from the slave-ships, to the plantations, to Reconstruction, to the Great Migration to the urban North—“ain’t been no crystal stair.”

It has been a long, wearying, uphill journey, she says,  
It’s had tacks in it,  
And Splinters,  
And boards torn up,  
And places with no carpet on the floor—  
Bare.



*While 'Mother to Son' shows the influence of Hughes's interest in the blues, ... it lies most directly within the tradition of the spiritual,"*

The speaker equates the history of African Americans with an endless flight of broken-down stairs, such as might be found in the cramped and crumbling tenements in which many poor blacks found themselves forced to live in the ghetto neighborhoods of the northern cities. Yet no matter how frustrating or tiring the climb, no matter how many setbacks she has suffered, she says, "I'se been a-climbin' on." The future of blacks in America, she suggests to her son and to the reader, depends on this willingness to keep climbing, to not turn back, to not "set down on the steps / 'Cause you finds it's kinder hard." We're not at the top of the stairs yet, she tells us, and we may feel like giving up, but it is only by continuing to climb that, in the words of the traditional African-American spiritual, "We shall overcome someday."

The roots of Hughes's poetry run deep into the tradition of African-American music, especially spirituals, jazz, and blues. The title of Hughes's first book, in which "Mother to Son" was published, was *The Weary Blues*, and throughout his career he proved an innovator in adapting the forms and motifs of the blues—with its heavy beats, recurrent refrains, and melancholy narratives—and the improvisatory riffs and earthy themes of jazz, to poetry. While "Mother to Son" shows the influence of Hughes's interest in the blues, especially in its use of repetition and of the idiomatic dialect in which most blues songs were sung (though Hughes also found ample precedent for his use of dialect in the poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar, who gained fame at the turn of the century as the "Bard of the Negro Race" through his colorful verse written in rural black patois), it lies most directly within the tradition of the spiritual, a connection which is made clear through the central image of the poem, the "crystal stair."

In this image we hear an echo of the Biblical story of Jacob's Ladder (Genesis, chapter 28, verses 10-22), in which Jacob sees in a dream a vision of a celestial stairway upon which angels climb and descend between earth and heaven. In the dream God tells Jacob, "This land on which you are lying I will give to you and your descendants [and] they will be as countless as the dust of the earth." That land would become Israel and Jacob's sons, the Israelites. This story held an abiding significance within the African-American Christian tradition—especially in the pre-Civil-War slave-holding South—as it spoke to a faith that, like the Israelites, black Americans too would be delivered to a "Promised Land." The heavenly stairway became a powerful image of liberation and salvation, attainable only through suffering and faith in God. Hughes, along with most African-Americans of his time, would have been very familiar with the associations of Jacob's Ladder with the struggle for freedom and equality of blacks in America, especially in its expression in one of the best-known traditional spirituals, "We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder." This song, which would have been sung first in the fields and later in churches, involves a call-and-response between a singer and a chorus not unlike the relationship of Hughes's mother and son. It speaks of climbing "higher and higher" to become "soldiers of the Lord," includes the exhortation "Keep on climbing, we will make it," and ends with the question, "Children do you want your freedom?"

In this light, it becomes easy to see Hughes's mother figure as something like a racial matriarch addressing her scattered children and exhorting them to "keep on climbing" on their way to freedom. It also shows us how Hughes uses a single image, the "crystal stair," to evoke simultaneously the painful history of blacks in America while pointing to the tradition of faith and hope that has sustained them through it all.

But there is, perhaps, yet another way of reading this poem. In the history of poetry, poets have often included representations in their poems of their "muse." The idea of a poet's muse is based on the notion within Greek mythology of the Nine Muses—sister-goddesses who were responsible for inspiring all the different arts. The figure of the muse—what we might call the personification of the poet's inspiration—is usually represented as a woman to whom the poet gives credit for his or her power to write. It is not uncommon—at least until the twentieth century—for poets to include invocations to or by the muse in their poetry, as in the



case of the the sixteenth-century poet Sir Philip Sidney, whose muse, at the beginning of a long sequence of poems called "Astrophil and Stella," famously tells him, "Look in thy heart and write." In this context, we might read the mother in Hughes's poem not only as a representation of African-American history, but also as a kind of muse-figure.

Hughes was just beginning his career as a poet when he wrote this poem, so questions of what to write about and how best to forge his poetic voice and identity would be pressing issues for him. Would he strive to represent his race in poetry, and be a self-consciously black poet, or would he reject a racial poetic identity, as poets like Countee Cullen would try to do? Would he look to his African-American cultural heritage for inspiration, or was the black American experience, and its tradition of artistic expression, somehow outside the conventional boundaries of poetry? These were difficult questions for the young writer, and if we read "Mother to Son" in terms of these concerns, we see the poet struggling to come to terms with them. In this context, the "son" of the title becomes not the reader, but the poet himself, and the poem suggests that the son's frustration and despair is that of the poet, faced with the impossible task of writing poetry that truly speaks to and for the African-American experience. The poet—the "son" of African-American history and its artistic legacy of spirituals, blues, and jazz—looks to his "mother" for advice and the strength to keep going. Her response is stern, yet supportive: "So boy, don't you turn back. / Don't you sit down on the steps / 'Cause you finds it kinder hard." The task he has before him is an arduous one, she says, but it is an important and necessary one. African-American culture and history keeps moving and it is his job as poet to record it; she's "still climbin'" and he has to keep step.

The poet's "mother," who speaks in the voice of the African-American tradition, teaches him he need not abandon that tradition in order to write poetry. All poetry, she says, need not be about "crystal stairs." It can have "tacks" and "splinters" in it, "and places with no carpet on the floor." It need not conform to white conventions in either form or subject—it can be "bare"—yet it need not ignore those conventions if they can be of use (In fact, the line, "And life for me ain't been no crystal stair" is written in iambic pentameter, the most traditional of English poetic meters). The poet discovers, from listening to his mother-muse, a way to bring the African-American experience into poetry. He finds a way to move forward, to keep

climbing. We can read in this poem, then, a kind of metaphor for the young poet's artistic coming of age. From his "mother" he learns the value and power of his vocation. He hears in her song his own voice.

**Source:** Aidan Wasley, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 1998.

### **R. Baxter Miller**

*In a discussion of the archetype of the Black woman in the work of Hughes, Baxter Miller cites specific examples displayed in the poem "Mother to Son."*

Langston Hughes empowered his various renditions of the Black woman with a double-edged vision. At once it heroically faced the Jim Crow discrimination in the early part of the twentieth century, taking in some comic detachment as well, and showed Blacks transcending the social limitations some whites would impose upon them. What Hughes sensed in the folk source of woman was the dynamic will to epic heroism in both the physical and spiritual dimensions, and while the compulsion revealed itself in varying forms—the disciplined application to labor, the folk trickery that allows comic wit to circumvent defeat, the direct act of social defiance—Black woman incarnated the complex imagination and the masks through which it appeared. When her presence declined in his poetry, as in "Madrid—1937" and "Down Where I Am" (*Voices*, 1950), power and hope diminished somewhat as well. Whether in *The Ways of White Folks* (1934), *The Best of Simple* (1961), or the most telling of the short fiction, the eventual secularization of her previously religious image would increase irony as well as comic distance in the work. Though it was appropriate to Hughes' largesse, as an ethical writer, to restore complex humanity to Black woman in particular and woman in general, he had to replace the great void she had once occupied as idol and type. Then he would have to look at her as the well-rounded human being she was.

Even in the great lyrics such as "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (*Crisis*, June 1921) and "Day-break in Alabama" (*Unquote*, June 1940), where woman disappears as a persona, her symbolic yet invisible presence pervades (to speak in Hughes' metaphors) the fertility of the earth, the waters, and the rebirth of the morning. To trace the complex and rich design of woman in his world means to understand the symbolic movements enacted through the passage of his entire career, with vary-



*For Hughes, Black woman in particular signifies the cycle through which the poetic imagination emerges from history and transcends it but, as in 'Fanny Free' (a tale of Simple), falls back to earth or history."*

ing degrees of free play back and forth from the great lyrics and monologues ("Mother to Son," *Crisis*, 1922), through his melodramas ("Father and Son," 1934; *Mulatto*, 1934-35) and comic detachments (the Madam poems; *One-Way Tickets*, 1949). The poems on women help to establish an overview for all his succeeding genres. They lead from his lighter humor and cryptic "warning" to white American in 1951 finally to the brilliant and underestimated stream of consciousness (*Ask Your Mama*, 1961), subsuming yet transcending them all.

For Langston Hughes the metaphor of woman marks the rise from the historical source, the folk expression of his grandmother in 1910, to the Civil Rights movement and the white backlash in late 1967. For Hughes, Black woman in particular signifies the cycle through which the poetic imagination emerges from history and transcends it but, as in "Fanny Free" (a tale of Simple), falls back to earth or history.

In as statement by Maud Bodkin, one of the ablest critics of Hughes' time, we find a way to read some of his most accomplished poems. Bodkin explains the function of the female image in literature:

Following the associations of the figure of the muse as communicated in Milton's poetry, we have reached a representation of yet wider significance—the figure of the divine mother appearing in varied forms, as Thetis mourning for Achilles, or Ishtar mourning and seeking for Tammuz. In this mother and child pattern the figure of the child, or youth, is not distinctively of either sex, though the male youth appears the older form. In historical times, the pattern as it enters poetry may be present, either as beautiful boy or warrior—Adonis, Achilles—or as

maiden—Prosperine, Kore—an embodiment of youth's bloom and transient splendor. In either case, the figure appears as the type-object of a distinctive emotion—a complex emotion within which we may recognize something of fear, pity and tender admiration such as a parent may feel, but "distanced," as by relation to an object universal, an event inevitable.

Not only does the code make for the coherence in "Mother to Son" (1922) and "The Negro Mother" (1931), possibly the two most famous of the matriarchal verses, but the exploration extends to some of the less well-known poems, thereby helping reveal finally the code of faith and redemption in contemporary American literature and thought.

"Mother to Son" begins the strong matriarchal portraits found in Hughes' poetry and fiction. In twenty lines of dramatic monologue a Black persona addresses her son. Making clear the hardships of Black life, she asserts the paradox of the American mythmakers, who propose that all Americans are equal. Subsequently, she acknowledges the personal and racial progress through her metaphor of ascent. In a powerful refrain she teaches the child her moral of endurance as well as triumph: "And life for me ain't been no crystal stair."

Structurally, the poem provides the folk diction and rhythm that make the woman real: "Well, son, I'll tell you: / Life for me ain't been ..." To simulate the inflections of Black colloquialisms, the individual lines skillfully blend anapestic, iambic, and trochaic cadences:

But all the time  
I've been a-climbin' on  
And reachin' landin's  
And turnin' corners  
And sometimes goin' in the dark  
Where there ain't been no light.

Varied in syllabic length, the lines have ten, nine, eight, and seven cadences; others have four, three, and one.... Although the last line is iambic, the meter of the poem depends more on the noted simulation of Black rhetoric, the actual cadences of folk speech, than on metric form.

In "Mother to Son," the complex of Christian myth informs the portrait of the woman. As a figure of mythic ascent, she becomes only typologically at one with the Vergil of the *Divine Comedy* or the Christ of the New Testament. But she is neither a great and ancient poet nor a god incarnate; rather, she is Woman struggling to merge with godhead. In more than making her way from failure to success, she moves from a worldly vision to a religious one, for hers is less a progression of the

body than an evolution of the soul. Her last line—"And life for me ain't been no crystal stair"—repeats and reinforces her second. Yet through the power of her will and imagination, she has endowed the world far more richly by her inner light than society ever bequeathed opportunities to her. While the social world hardly ennoble her, she nevertheless ennoble it, and the quality of her grandeur marks the depth of her humanity. She cautions her son, "Don't you fall now." Because she associates the quest with her divine vision, any separation from it implies the fallen world, demarcating in itself the descent from heavenly grace.

While Christian myth is central to its complexity of meanings, the poem implies the interwoven designs of quest and self-realization. With the past participle of the durative verb *be*, the mother tells her offspring, "I'se been a-climbin' on." As the vertical ascent anticipates her continued ascent, it looks forward to temporary success or to a respite from future quest ("reachin' landin's and turnin' corners").

Shrouded in religious myth, the Black woman must still confront secular reality, and the tension reveals the idea of Black oppression. The building, that synecdochical and metaphysical sign, becomes life itself as well as the questionable belief in any cosmic order. Dilapidated boards and bare feet imply the presence of deprivation or poverty in the house. Because the mother lived literally in a building that had loose tacks and splinters, she risked physical penetration and infection throughout her life. Yet she has withstood any fatal injury to the Black American soul. Her internal light illuminates the outer world.

**Source:** "The 'Crystal Stair' within The Apocalyptic Imagination" in *The Art and Imagination of Langston Hughes*, University Press of Kentucky, 1989, pp. 33-37.

### Sources

Baldwin, James, "Sermons and Blues," in *The New York Times Book Review*, March 29, 1959, p. 6.

Dubois, W. E. B., *The Souls of Black Folk*, Signet, 1969, p. 3.

Emanuel, James A., *Langston Hughes*, College and University Press, 1967, 192 p.

Huggins, Nathan, ed., *Voices From the Harlem Renaissance*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1976.



... hers is less a  
progression of the body  
than an evolution of the  
soul."

Ikonne, Chidi, "Affirmation of Black Self," in *Langston Hughes*, edited by Harold Bloom, Chelsea House Publishers, 1989, pp. 151-68.

Jemie, Onwuchekwa, *Langston Hughes: An Introduction to the Poetry*, Columbia University Press, 1976, 234 p.

Miller, R. Baxter, *The Art and Imagination of Langston Hughes*, University Press of Kentucky, 1989.

Perrett, Geoffrey, *America in the Twenties: Days of Sadness. Years of Triumph*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982.

Wintz, Cary D., *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance*, Houston: Rice University Press, 1988.

### For Further Study

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

This biography gives more attention than most to the years of Hughes's childhood, before he moved to Harlem, and to his relationship to his mother.

Emanuel, James A., *Langston Hughes*, Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1967.

Although this book has some biographical elements, it is mainly a critical analysis of Hughes's works.

Kent, George F., "Langston Hughes and Afro-American Folk and Cultural Tradition," in *Langston Hughes: Black Genius*, edited by Therman B. O'Daniel, New York: William Morrow & Co., 1971, pp. 183-210.

The background this essay gives about folk tradition and how it applies to Hughes's work in general gives the reader a perspective for the dialect used in this poem, even though the poem itself is not discussed.

Lewis, David Leavering, *When Harlem Was In Vogue*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981.

Going beyond the narrow focus of the Harlem Renaissance artistic movement, this book examines life in general in Harlem at the time Hughes lived there. It was a fascinating period, rendered here in a lively way.

# My Papa's Waltz

Theodore Roethke

1948

"My Papa's Waltz" was first published in 1948 in *The Lost Son and Other Poems*, a collection in which Roethke traces his growth from childhood to maturity. Outwardly, it is a simple poem: four quatrains of alternating rhyme recalling an incident from childhood. But this simplicity belies Roethke's complex interweaving of disparate emotions and moods. A fond reminiscence of a comic dance of a father and his son, it is also a critique of the father's coarseness and drunkenness.

Roethke's relationship to his father appears to have been a complicated one. A German immigrant who ran a successful floral business, Otto Roethke was a demanding parent who required perfection of the son who idolized him. When the elder Roethke died of cancer when his son was in high school, the boy appears to have been left with many unresolved and conflicting emotions about his father. "My Papa's Waltz" seems in some respects to be an attempt on Roethke's part to come to terms with his feelings. In the poem, the father appears as a god-like giant to his son. (The boy's ear comes up only to the father's belt buckle.) He comes across as a figure of misrule, drunk, "romping," disrupting his wife's kitchen, unable to follow the steps of the dance. While such a figure has its comic aspects, it has a threatening side as well. The boy is clearly overwhelmed; he is made "dizzy" by his father and hangs onto him "like death." He is injured, scraped by the father's buckle. The mother looks on with disapproval. We get no sense, though, that the boy sides with his mother. Despite

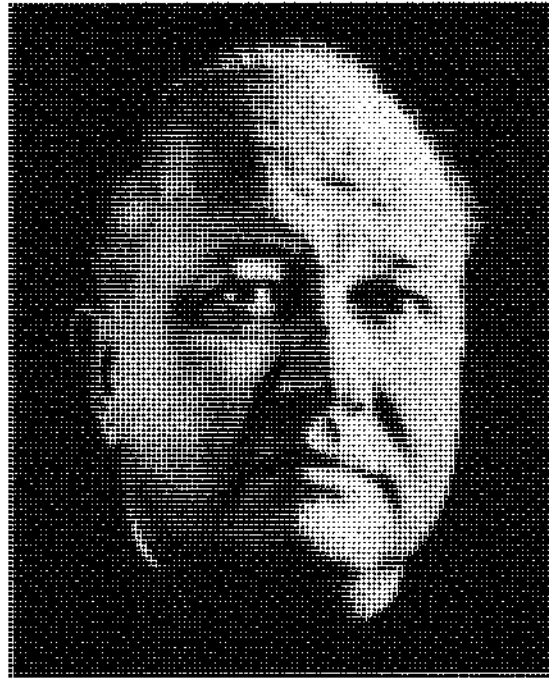


the coarseness of the father's antics, at the end of the poem the boy remains "Still clinging" to his father. Moreover, Roethke subtly offers some justification for the father's behavior by pointing out his battered knuckle and dirt-caked hands. These details suggest that he earns his living by physical labor and therefore may be forgiven if he escapes for a while from the hardness of his life through drinking and horseplay.

### Author Biography

The son of German immigrants, Roethke was born on May 25, 1908, in Saginaw, Michigan. When he was a child his parents owned a large floral and produce business, and the young Roethke spent much time in the greenhouses among the plants, an environment which would greatly influence his early work. At the age of five Roethke entered the John Moore School, and in 1921 he moved on to Arthur Hill High School. Already Roethke had ambitions of becoming a writer, but a writer of prose, not poetry. When Roethke was in his second year of high school, his father died of cancer, forcing Roethke, the eldest child, to become head of the household.

Roethke graduated from high school in 1925 and wanted to apply to Harvard, but his mother persuaded him to stay closer to the family and attend the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. In college Roethke concentrated on literature and language, and began to train himself to become a writer. Upon graduation he entered the University of Michigan school of law, but quickly realized that it was a mistake and withdrew after attending only one class. In the fall of 1930 Roethke headed east to further his education at Harvard Graduate School; however, the Great Depression interrupted his education, forcing him to withdraw from school and find a job before he could earn his doctorate. Roethke began teaching at Lafayette University and later Michigan State College, where students found him to be a superb teacher. Unfortunately, in November of 1935 Roethke suffered a mental breakdown, the first of a number of recurring spells of mental illness which he would endure throughout his life. Upon recovering he accepted a job at Pennsylvania State University and published his first book of verse, *Open House* (1941). Moving on to Bennington College in Vermont, Roethke continued to produce poetry and became well known in the literary community. Roethke accepted a teach-



Theodore Roethke

ing position at the University of Washington in Seattle in 1947, and around this time he began to receive recognition for his work, including a Pulitzer Prize in 1954 for his collection *The Waking, Poems: 1933-1953*. Roethke married Beatrice O'Connell on January 3, 1953 and remained in Seattle the rest of his life, leaving occasionally to study, tour, and teach in Europe. On the first of August, 1963 Roethke suffered a coronary occlusion and died a short time later; he was buried in Oakwood Cemetery in Saginaw next to his mother and father.

### Poem Summary

#### Lines 1-2:

The first order of business in a poem is to establish situation and mood, and Roethke selects the father's drinking as the foremost fact to be conveyed. The tone is slightly comic, as the speaker suggests that there was enough alcohol on the father's breath to inebriate a child. This observation implies that the father had consumed a substantial amount of whiskey, since the smell of it was very potent. These lines also establish a closeness between the two figures. The poem is a direct address from the son to the father, evoking a feeling of intimacy between them.

#### Line 3:

The sense of closeness is further emphasized in this line. Here it is physical closeness, as the child is said to have clutched onto his father. The description "like death" introduces a note of fear or perhaps desperation. A grip "like death" is extremely tenacious, indicating that the person holding on greatly fears the consequences of letting go. The figure is derived from a personification of death as someone who, once he has grasped onto a person, never lets go. The situation here, then, is quite complex. On the one hand, the boy was afraid of letting go of his father, perhaps fearing he would be hurt by his drunken careening. Or perhaps he feared being separated from his father emotionally. He feared a loss of intimacy with his father if he let go, if he didn't participate in the dance. The dance thus serves as a metaphor for the overall relationship between father and son: intimate and vitally important for the boy, but also dizzying and anxiety provoking. On the other hand, the description of the boy hanging onto his father "like death" also evokes the image of a death-figure clutching the man. This is particularly resonant if we consider that Roethke's father died when Roethke himself was still a boy.

#### Line 4:

This line contains the first mention, outside of the poem's title, of the waltz. This is the initial indication that the father and son were dancing. Only

after clearly establishing the complexity of the father-son relationship does Roethke provide the poem's circumstance, its central event. The meaning of the word "waltz," however, is ambiguous here. The waltz is a simple dance, not difficult to perform. In fact, the expression "to waltz" means to do something effortlessly, as in, "The team waltzed through to the finals." (This will be a secondary meaning of the word when it appears in line 15.) In this line, though, we are told that waltzing with the father was, paradoxically, difficult. What should have been easy was hard. On one level, this suggests that the father's inebriation made it a challenge for the boy to dance with him. This picture of a small boy trying to match steps with his drunken father is lightly comic. On the metaphorical level of the dance as representing the entire father-son relationship, this line suggests that the relationship was difficult, that the boy found it hard to keep "in synch" with his father. Or perhaps he felt that he could not—to use another figure of speech derived from dancing—"follow his father's lead," could not do what his father did, could not follow the example his father had set.

#### Lines 5-6:

These two lines reveal the boisterousness of the dancing, which seems at odds with the grace of a waltz. Increasingly, the use of the term "waltz" to describe the father's behavior seems ironic. The verb "romped" carries connotations of exuberance and unruliness, and the vigorousness of the dancing caused kitchen utensils to fall from the shelf. However, "romped" also suggests fun, playfulness, and—significantly—ease of achievement. In this sense, "romp" is synonymous with "waltz." One could just as well say, "The team romped through to the finals" as say they "waltzed through."

#### Lines: 7-8

The mother is introduced into the scene as a rather aloof, disapproving figure. She did not engage in the dancing, and her frowning face indicates that was displeased by it. Curiously, the speaker of the poem addresses the father directly (evoking, as we noted above, a feeling of intimacy), but he refers to the mother with the comparatively impersonal "My mother." Moreover, he refers not to her whole person but to just her face ("countenance"). This figure of speech in which a part is used to stand for the whole (as in "all hands on deck," meaning the entire sailors, not just their hands) is called synecdoche. In a synecdoche, the

essential aspects of the part is used to characterize the whole. In these lines, the essential aspect of the face is a frown, which characterizes the mother very negatively. A further effect of the synecdoche is to depersonalize the mother: she is one big frown that is referred to with the impersonal pronoun "it" (in "itself"). The brusque dismissal of the mother in two lines stands in marked contrast to the poem's lingering examination of the father.

### Lines: 9-12

Even though the boy and his father have been close throughout the poem, they seem especially so in this stanza. The father's hand held his son's wrist. The man's actions had direct consequences for the boy (his missed steps caused the boy's ear to be scraped), as if the two were joined. Both figures were injured, the father on his knuckle, the son on his ear. These hurts introduce a note of pain. The father apparently received his from his labor, but the son's injury was directly caused by his dancing with—his relationship with—his father.

### Lines: 13-14

The picture of the father's hand, hardened by toil, recalls the image of the other one in lines 9-10. This hand kept rhythm on the boy's head in an odd little gesture, as if he meant, as the colloquial expression goes, to drive it into his son's brain. The insistent, Morse Code-like tapping seems intended to convey to the boy how the dance was supposed to go, not how it actually *did* go (with its clumsiness and missed steps). The father-son relationship should have been smooth and easy but in reality was awkward and stumbling.

### Lines: 15-16

On the surface these concluding lines impart a breezy finality, almost a flourish, to the proceedings. Literally, they danced from the kitchen to the bedroom, but, in addition, the connotation of ease associated with the word "waltz" suggests that the father "whisked" his son off to bed. However, the image of the boy "Still clinging" to his father has a plaintive quality. Maybe he still felt fearful of his father's rambunctiousness. Or maybe he held on because he didn't want the dance (or the relationship) to end. If we recall the earlier suggestion of the father's death, perhaps we can read the final line as indicating the son didn't want to be separated from his father by death. In the end, he simply found it difficult to let his father go.

## Media Adaptations



- Kunitz, Stanley, *On Theodore Roethke*. 1 cassette, New York: Jeffrey Norton Publishing, 1966. Poet Kunitz talks about his friend Roethke's life and character, especially his lyrical gifts and passion to succeed.
- *In a Dark Time*, motion picture, San Francisco State College Poetry Center, Contemporary Films/McGraw-Hill. Roethke imparts his views on the sources and functions of poetry and his approach to writing. He reads to illustrate his belief in confessional poetry and discusses his life. Set in his home.
- Untitled, 2 tapes, Seattle: University of Washington Health Science Auditorium, 1959. Humorous, informal reading with comments on poems read, including "My Papa's Waltz."

## Themes

### Memory

*The Lost Son*, which was published in 1948, the year Roethke turned forty, is a collection of poems in which the writer examines his childhood and adolescence. "My Papa's Waltz" looks back at Roethke's experience as a child, dancing with his now-dead father in the family's home. The title seems addressed to an audience and refers to the father in the third person, as if to say, "Here is a poem about my father and a dance he used to do with me." The poem itself, however, is a first-person account directed by a child to his father. This distinction corresponds to a division between Theodore Roethke the objective observer of the past, the poet who records the experience and labels it (gives it a title), and Theodore Roethke the child who subjectively experiences the dance and speaks to his still-living father.

The poem is permeated by the child's sense of his own smallness and weakness in comparison to his father. A "small boy" made "dizzy" by the alcohol on his father's breath and scraped by the father's belt buckle, the child found that waltzing

## Topics for Further Study



- The triple-time rhythm of a waltz can be simple or grand in its effect. "My Papa's Waltz" uses the dance informally as the father and son move about the kitchen, but its formal grace springs from the content of the poem—the relationships between family members. If a poem could be written for Roethke's mother, how might the rhythm and language differ? Why?
- "My Papa's Waltz" is a what Roethke called his "best dramatic lyric," in which one character addresses a silent listener at a critical moment, revealing himself and the situation. The character in this monologue is an adult looking back at his childhood. What is his attitude toward this situation? What does he reveal about himself?

with this parent "was not easy." He was buffeted by the force of his father's movements, and it was all he could do to simply hang on. These are vivid details, richly evocative of the boy's sense of inferiority to his powerful father. Even the phrase "waltzed me off to bed" expresses the disparity in strength between the two. It suggests that the dancing was not an activity that was performed *by* or *with* the boy, but rather something done *to* him.

Although the poem is told from the point of view of Roethke as a child, it is, significantly, told in the past tense. If the poem were truly to view the scene through the boy's eyes, it would be in the present tense and would read something like: "The whiskey on your breath *makes* me dizzy; but I *hang* on like death: such waltzing *is* not easy." The events would unfold as the boy experiences them. But "My Papa's Waltz" is a poem written by an adult looking back on events from long before. Through an imaginative use of memory the poet provides us with a dual perspective on the father. We see the awe-inspiring figure the child sees, but we also see the inebriated and rambunctious laborer that the adult observes.

We need not choose between the two views of the father, nor indeed should we attempt to. The poem is not simply about something that happened

to a child, it is also about what happens when that event is remembered when the child is an adult. The past becomes part of the present in the process of recalling it. The present is the moment of the poem's writing, but that moment is suffused with the past.

### Order and Disorder

"My Papa's Waltz" announces its central image in the title: the waltz, a formal dance. A waltz, like other dances, is a prescribed set of steps that organizes movements in time and in space, giving them order. In the poem it was the father who led the dance, who "beat time" on his son's head. It was he who established the order of the household. The mother was a disapproving but, in the context of the poem, an inactive presence. The boy did all he could just to keep up: "Such waltzing," he states, "was not easy." But the poem also shows that the father was a force of disorder as well. He was drunk. He made his son dizzy, caused pans to fall from the shelf, and scraped the boy's ear. The fact that he missed steps suggests that he could not adhere to the order that he himself had instituted.

There is a sense in the poem that the waltz was not an isolated incident, that it was often repeated. One almost has the feeling that it was a daily pattern, a bedtime ritual. This means, then, that the disorderly dance was, paradoxically, itself a form of order, a regularly recurring event that established a routine in the household. The waltz in the title thus refers not to a dance as it commonly understood, but rather it refers to a regularly performed set of disorderly movements. It was a unique sort of waltz, a unique sort of order that incorporated disorder. It was a waltz created and defined by "My Papa."

### Style

"My Papa's Waltz" follows a loose ballad form. Its four-line stanzas feature an ABAB rhyme scheme—that is, the first line rhymes with the third and the second rhymes with the fourth, as in head/bed and dirt/shirt. The words on each line generally alternate between unstressed and stressed syllables. For example: my MOTH / er's COUN / tenANCE could NOT / unFROWN / itSELF. Each pair (or "foot") of unstressed and stressed syllables is known as an "iamb"; so the meter of "My Papa's Waltz" is called "iambic." Since each line generally contains three iambs, the meter may more precisely be called "iambic trimeter," meaning that each line is composed of three (the "tri" in "trimeter") iambs.



## Compare & Contrast

- **1948:** As the British mandate over Palestine comes to an end, Israel is recognized as an independent state and opens her doors to the world's Jewish population.  
**1997:** A peace treaty is negotiated by American President Bill Clinton between Israelis and Palestinians in April, but breaks down within months as fighting resumes.
- **1948:** The term "cold war" is coined by U.S. presidential adviser Bernard Baruch to express the tacit conflicts between communist and democratic superpowers, the U.S.S.R., and the U.S.  
**November 9, 1990:** The cold war symbolically ends as the Berlin Wall is dismantled. Germany is reunited and the Soviet Union begins its dissolution into smaller entities—in many cases, according to their former ethnic status.
- **1948:** Apartheid, the practice of separating the races, is established by vote on May 26 in South Africa.  
**February 11, 1990:** After 27 years in prison, the president of the African National Congress Nelson Mandela is freed. A few years later, he is elected as president of South Africa.
- **1948:** Jackson Pollock begins to paint with splashes of color and line, reducing painting to its basic formal elements. This trend in painting becomes to be known as Abstract Expressionism.  
**Today:** Gender, politics, ethnicity and other art media have entered the arena of painting, which today can only be called "postmodern."
- **1948:** McDonald's opens its first self-service restaurant in San Bernadino, California.  
**Today:** McDonald's has more than 15,000 restaurants and 21 percent of the fast-food market in the U.S. Because domestic profits are climbing slowly, McDonald's has expanded overseas where less competition, lighter market saturation and its already high profile have brought success.
- **1948:** The long-play 33-1/3 rpm record is introduced, revolutionizing the music industry as the new medium can hold more music than can the 78 rpm record.  
**The mid-1980s:** Forty years later, the compact disc begins another revolution in the industry, replacing vinyl records.

Roethke varies this pattern considerably, however. Several lines have seven syllables rather than six, and in many places the iambic rhythm is disrupted. Line 14, for instance, has a very uneven pattern; only the last two syllables form an iamb: with a / PALM CAKED / HARD / by DIRT This irregular form of iambic meter is called "ballad meter," since many ballads have just such variations in their meters. Irregularities often give a poem an informal, conversational feel. This seems entirely appropriate to "My Papa's Waltz," with its elements of nostalgic reminiscence. The variations in meter also suggest instability, however, and here they emphasize the father's unsteadiness. The poem's departures from the regularity of the iambic meter seem to mimic the father's missed steps.

The unsteadiness is also brought out by the seven-syllable lines. In several cases, the extra syllables are the result of so-called "feminine," or two-syllable, rhymes, as in dizzy/easy and knuckle/buckle. Feminine rhymes are often employed in comic verse, as they have a lighter, less emphatic feel than "masculine," or one-syllable, rhymes. Here Roethke employs them to evoke a sense of uncertainty, a "dizzy" quality that is well suited to the father's erratic dancing.

### Historical Context

The decade of the 1940s can be said to be split into two by World War II. In many respects, the post-

war world looked little like that of the prewar period. The war had brought devastation and death to millions of people around the world. Racism, militarism, and ideologies such as fascism had been the causes of brutality and cruelty such as the world had never before witnessed. To many, life seemed absurd after the war; traditional religions and moral codes seemed inadequate to account for the horrors of the Holocaust and the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. World capitals lay in ruins and once-dominant nations were exhausted. Two nations, the United States and the Soviet Union, rose to the status of "superpowers" in the postwar years, and they established new opposing alliances based on mutual distrust and hostility.

Many people—especially in countries such as Germany, with its record of Nazi atrocities—needed to come to terms with their past. New national as well as individual identities had to be forged from the cultural ruins of the war. In America, which had largely escaped the devastation, this process of redefining oneself took several different forms. Some rejected the past and looked instead to the present moment or to the future, seizing an opportunity to reinvent themselves as America was reinventing itself as a superpower at the center of world politics. The postwar period in America saw the emergence of improvisation and experimentation in artistic pursuits such as Beat poetry, be-bop jazz, and Abstract Expressionist painting. Others in postwar America sought to reexamine the past and to recuperate what was valuable and worthy of preservation.

Roethke displays affinities to both of these groups. Throughout his career he employed traditional poetic forms from both the European and the American past, but he reinvented these forms rather than copied or imitated them. His redefinition and synthesis of traditional elements gives Roethke's work a feeling of an entirely new kind of poetry that has broken with tradition. "My Papa's Waltz" and other poems in *The Lost Son* show Roethke engaged in a similar process with the material of his personal past, recasting it and investing it with new meaning as art.

### Critical Overview

"My Papa's Waltz" is included in Roethke's critically acclaimed collection of poems *The Lost Son and Other Poems*, in which his father, predictably, figures as one of the main subjects. Divided into

four parts, the set of poems outline the growth of the poet's consciousness from childhood to adulthood. "I am nothing but what I remember," Roethke wrote in his notebook, and "I do not wish a sense of the past; only a sense of the continuous." It was the continuity of his own life and his evolving awareness of himself experiencing it that served as Roethke's true subjects. This particular experience, however, was more of the heart and the body than of the mind. Intent on using poetry as a tool for describing the rhythms of emotions, Roethke did not fear the intellect so much as distrust it. In his poem "The Waking," from his 1953 volume of the same title, he writes, "We think by feeling. What is there to know? / I hear my being dance from ear to ear." Of Roethke's poetry Mark Doty says in his article "The Forbidden Planet" of *Character: The Revolutions of the 1950s*:

Thus, with the insistence of one returning to examine a wound or replaying the circumstances of an unresolved conflict, the poems circle around the nature of guilt, identify the anger and loss inherent in the experience of love, and obsessively investigate the poet's relationship with his father. It is a mark of the poems' contemporaneity, within their decade, that despite their carefully controlled formal designs they are enactments of the process of coming to terms; they resist easy resolutions, the consolations of distance and irony.

Critic and poet Brendan Galvin notes that Roethke's contradictory feeling toward his father is rooted in the fact that Otto Roethke died when the poet was only fourteen. "Theodore Roethke ... had lost his whole meaningful world at a time when a boy could still believe that his father was more than a man—perhaps even a God.... Who can say how deeply the loss of his father affects a boy of fourteen? There is the possibility that the awakening of sexuality at puberty and the subsequent death of the father were in some way coupled in the boy's mind. Thus the tremendous guilt and the howling ghost in these poems" [from *The Lost Son and Other Poems*]. But Roethke's chronicle of his own movement from innocence to experience in *The Lost Son* is also a chronicle of his own development as a poet. In his article "Blake and Roethke: When Everything Comes to One," critic Jay Parini calls the sequence of poems in which "My Papa's Waltz" appears "tough, sensual, and concrete" and claims that they "recreate the texture of experience in the manner of [William Blake's] *The Songs of Experience*. It is only by going back to the roots of his own emotional and linguistic beginnings that Roethke the poet can go forward in his own poetic work."

What works for one reader, however, doesn't work for them all. Robert Pinsky, for example, takes Roethke and other romantic poets to task—in his book *The Situation of Poetry*—for their overreliance on intuition, for their relative lack of rationality, which he believes should be an inevitable part of poetic activity. James Applewhite, however, notes in his essay “Death and Rebirth in a Modern Landscape” that “We must also remember that intellectual self-consciousness has become, in our time, a potential imprisonment, a bell jar or bottle enclosing the ship of the psyche.... Having fled from abstraction to childhood and the particular, he must assert his ultimate values through symbols rather than concepts.”

### Criticism

#### Marisa Anne Pagnattaro

Marisa Anne Pagnattaro is a writer and teaching assistant at the University of Georgia, Athens. In the following essay, Pagnattaro provides a stanza by stanza analysis of “My Papa’s Waltz.”

Is this a narrative poem about a sentimental joyful romp or a fearful incident of violent abuse at the hands of an alcoholic father? Critics are often polarized into one of these two extreme views of Theodore Roethke’s 1948 poem, “My Papa’s Waltz,” yet neither interpretation adequately captures the full range of the speaker’s emotion. The adult speaker recalls this vivid scene with his father, revealing the complicated interplay between what was nearly an overwhelming experience for him as a child, but is now merely a poignant remembrance.

Although reading the poem as purely autobiographical is too limiting, a few details from Roethke’s life provide an enlightening background. As a child, Roethke’s father, Otto, immigrated from Germany with his parents who had bought land in the United States to establish a market garden. Financially successful in this endeavor, the family eventually started a florist business, which was continued by Otto. Roethke, who lived in a house adjacent to the greenhouse, was powerfully influenced by both the life-giving process of growing plants and his father’s gift of nurturing beautiful flowers. This admiration, however, was entangled with feelings of ambivalence. For instance, Roethke’s stern father held extremely high expectations that were not always possible for his son to achieve. Moreover, Roethke was never able to fully

## What Do I Read Next?



- Noted critic and Yale Professor Harold Bloom gathers what he considers “the most useful criticism so far available” in *Theodore Roethke: Modern Critical Views* (1988). The volume includes essays by Kenneth Burke, Denis Donoghue, James Dickey, and others.
- Karl Malkoff’s book, *Theodore Roethke: An Introduction to the Poetry* (1966), provides an accessible, “organic” approach to the poet’s work.
- Roethke is discussed among contemporaries such as Robert Lowell, Randall Jarrell, and John Berryman in a book by Jeffrey Meyers, *Manic Power: Robert Lowell and His Circle* (1987).

reconcile his feelings before his father’s death; after a long illness, Otto died of cancer when Roethke was in high school. Later, when Roethke was in his late thirties, he wrote “My Papa’s Waltz” as part of a collection of poems titled *The Lost Son*. In these poems, Roethke seems to be exploring ways to come to terms with his childhood and adolescence. “My Papa’s Waltz,” an introspective look at a young boy’s relationship with his father, is rooted in a continuation of that self-scrutiny.

Even though the title seems to be addressed to a general audience of readers, in effect asserting “I am going to tell you about ‘My Papa’s Waltz,’” the speaker directly addresses his father in the poem. This appears to be a form of tribute to the father, in the sense that it recounts a memory of closeness—albeit fraught with some childhood anxiety. As an adult, the speaker seems to appreciate his father’s rather clumsy attempt to show his paternal love. Emphasizing the father’s awkwardness, Roethke plays with his readers’ notions of the waltz. The overall rhythm of the verse follows the cadence of waltz rhythm, a graceful flowing melody in triple time. The poem begins with a strong first beat, followed by two lighter beats, with the second of these being an upbeat “pushing” into the new first beat. More simply stated, the rhythm is a repetition of: ONE two *three* ONE two *three*.

“  
 Roethke seems to be exploring ways to come to terms with his childhood and adolescence. ‘My Papa’s Waltz,’ an introspective look at a young boy’s relationship with his father, is rooted in a continuation of that self-scrutiny.”

By using the waltz steps, Roethke gives his readers a feel for the movement of the dance. There are, however, a few “missteps” in the form of an extra syllable for emphasis. In five of the lines the extra beat interrupts the smooth flow of the dance. These rhythmic disturbances provide readers with a palpable sense of the clumsiness of the actual dance.

The first stanza opens with the vivid image of the father’s hot whisky breath, an odor that the speaker recalls was potent enough to make him feel giddy and confused as a child. Significantly, he “hung on like death” with great dramatic tenacity because “Such waltzing was not easy.” The evening dance is nearly overpowering for the young boy. This is underscored by the second and fourth lines that contain the extra beat. The effect is to slightly throw off the controlled waltz cadence, which effectively conveys an air of the father’s perceptible intoxication. It is unclear how much the father has had to drink, but an inference of at least slight inebriation permeates the poem.

The potential seriousness of the “death” image in the third line, however, is undercut in the first line of the second stanza by the use of the word “romped.” This unmistakably frolicsome term suggests the lively play of children, not a boy victimized by his father. Moreover, the pans “slide” from the shelf, as if unobtrusively moved along the surface from the vibration of their dance as opposed to a reckless drunken careening about the room. The pair cavort in the kitchen, ostensibly the mother’s domain. Oddly enough in a lyric directed to his father, the speaker refers to his mother as

“My mother,” creating distance between his two parents. The use of the formal term “mother” stands in sharp contrast to the much more familiar term “Papa.” Perhaps this is indicative of the closeness that the speaker feels toward his father. In any event, the mother’s appearance in the poem adds a brief third-party perspective to the memory. She looks on in clear wrinkled-brow disapproval. Her displeasure presumably stems from a number of sources, including her isolation from the waltzing play, her irritation about husband’s drinking, and her perception that her young son is being dragged about the room. Significantly, she holds back, not intervening and allowing the rollick to carry on.

Throughout the two remaining stanzas, the dance continues as a metaphor for the speaker’s fearfully loving relationship with his somewhat rough father. Like Roethke’s father, the father in the poem makes his living with his hands. One knuckle is “battered,” suggesting it has been subjected to repeated assault at work. Instead of holding his son’s hand, which would be customary with waltz partners, the father clasps his son’s wrist. Unable to follow his father’s unsteady lead, the boy’s right ear scrapes against his father’s belt buckle every time his father misses a step. The use of “scraped” creates a physically painful image, yet the speaker evidences no negative emotion toward his father. He merely reports on the scene and uses the extra syllable in the second and fourth lines in the third stanza to once again prompt speculation that the father’s waltzing ability is impaired by alcohol.

The fourth and final stanza echoes the images already established in the poem. With a palm “caked hard by dirt,” the father repeatedly hits his son on the head “beating time.” These lines, coupled with the preceding stanza, could suggest the speaker’s less-than-consensual engagement in the dance, yet the overall lilt of the poem belies such a harsh reading. The two concluding lines are riddled with the speaker’s ambivalence as the result of differences in his adult and childhood perspectives: “Then waltzed me off to bed / Still clinging to your shirt.” The use of the word “clinging” prompts multiple readings. He could be holding on tightly out of fear of his father, in apprehension that he might be knocked to the floor in a misstep. He could also, however, desire to remain close or in contact with his father out of a sense of great attachment, refusing to abandon the connection he feels. In the end, there is something warm about the image of the father dancing his son off to be tucked in for the night.

It is easy for readers to visualize the speaker as a young boy with one hand clinging to his father's shirt, his other arm outstretched with his wrist clasped in his father's hand, feet on his father's feet, in a dangling pre-bed dance. Even though there is a sense of the speaker's uncertainty about the event as a boy, there is an air of nostalgia in the scene for the speaker as an adult, ultimately producing a loving re-creation of the dance with his father.

**Source:** Marissa Anne Pagnattaro, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 1998.

### **Bobby Fong**

*In the following essay, Fong argues that "My Papa's Waltz" can aptly be interpreted in a variety of ways and that interpretation of the poem is dependant upon the reader's own experiences.*

Most recent critics of Theodore Roethke's work give "My Papa's Waltz" short shrift. If mentioned at all, it is characterized as depicting the father's "mixture of tenderness and brutality" and the child's "admiration and fear." The waltz is at once a "happy and terrifying activity" that, biographically, reflects "Roethke's vacillation toward his father, registering playful but poignant tones in stanzas of iambic trimeter" [in William V. Davis's "Fishing an Old Wound: Theodore Roethke's Search for Sonship in *Antigonish Review* and Walter B. Kalaidjian's *Understanding Theodore Roethke*].

Some of my students are able to perceive the poem as thus holding fear and joy in tension, but mainly these are the ones who see the poem dispassionately, as a play of words on the page where *waltzing* and *romped* are juxtaposed with *battered* and *scraped* and *beat*, where the child is "waltzed off to bed" holding on "like death." The others, however, divide into two camps, united by their common insistence that one emotion predominates, either fear or joy.

One party's interpretation accords with that of X. J. Kennedy, who argues [in his *Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, and Drama*, 4th edition]:

Most readers find the speaker's attitude toward his father affectionate, and take this recollection of childhood to be a happy one. But at least one reader, concentrating on certain details, once wrote: "Roethke expresses his resentment for his father, a drunken brute with dirty hands and a whiskey breath who carelessly hurt the child's ear and manhandled him." Although this reader accurately noticed some of the events in the poem and perceived that in the son's

hanging on to the father "like death" there is something desperate, he missed the tone of the poem and so misunderstood it altogether. Among other things, this reader didn't notice the rollicking rhythms of the poem's playfulness of a rime like *dizzy* and *easy*; the joyful suggestions of the words *waltz*, *waltzing*, and *romped*. Probably the reader didn't stop to visualize this scene in all its comedy, with kitchen pans falling and the father happily using his son's head for a drum. Nor did he stop to feel the suggestions in the last line, with the boy *still clinging* with persistent love.

Students espousing this reading have noted that their own fathers were reserved when sober, and that some of their fondest moments were when "papa" became tipsy enough so that exuberance and love could slip through. This "papa" wasn't the man they knew, so there was some anxiety felt regarding the "stranger," but he was what these students as children wanted more often from their fathers.

By contrast, the other side's response is captured by John Ciardi [in his *How Does a Poem Mean?*], who argues:

Despite its seeming lightness, "My Papa's Waltz" is a poem of terror, all the more terrible because the boy is frightened and hurt by the father, even in play. "We romped," the poet says, but the romp is a dizzying succession of painful glimpses; the house is shaking, the mother is frowning, the father's hand is scarred by violence, every misstep in the dance scrapes the father's belt buckle painfully across the boy's ear, and the boy's head is being pounded by that huge, hard palm. It is a romp, but the boy must cling like death until he is finally dumped into bed.

For these students, alcohol is invariably associated with violence, and the mention of whiskey on the breath calls to mind incidents when their fathers came home drunk and "romped" with the family. What was "fun" for the father, however, was fearful for mother and children. These readers see the waltz image and rhythm of the poem as ironic counterpoints to the stumbling brutality of a man who hurts even when he doesn't mean to. A more extreme reading of the poem takes the waltz entirely as a euphemism for the father beating the child. The child struggles to hold the father, to make him stop, and they lurch around the kitchen to the mother's discountenance. This "waltzing was not easy," students have testified from hard experience.

The poem is like a seesaw, where the elements of joy (the figure of the waltz, the playful rhymes, the rhythm), are balances against the elements of fear (predominantly the effects of diction such as *whiskey*, *dizzy*, *death*, *unfrown*, *battered*, *knuckle*,



*In a poem like 'My Papa's Waltz,' several different readings do succeed in making their way through. At that point, the 'preferred reading' is not found in the text, but in the interaction of reader and text."*

scraped, buckle, beat, hard, dirt, clinging). The ambivalence of feeling extends to the narrative stance of the speaker. As a student recently noted, the speaker is remembering an incident of childhood, and if the child shared in the father's joy, the adult has learned to understand the mother's disapproval, for the adult stands with the mother, observing.

The "preferred reading" among these interpretations is not a simple matter of appealing to the text. The New Criticism, with its focus on ambiguity, figurative language, and irony, has not resulted in the narrowing of interpretive possibilities, but rather has provided tools to account for a poem's elements in a variety of ways and has proliferated interpretations. In the present case, those who maintain a balance between joy and fear in the poem give equal weight to both emotions. Those who see they joy in the poem downplay the diction of violence. And those who see the fear treat the figure and rhythm of the waltz ironically. A seesaw tips easily, and "My Papa's Waltz" is susceptible to the pressure of personal experience.

This is not to say that one's personal experience must always be privileged in reading a poem. Following the lead of H. R. Swardson in "The Use of the Word *Mistake* in the Teaching of Poetry," there are no hippopotamuses in "My Papa's Waltz." As Swardson puts it, "the student who sees a hippopotamus there has made a *mistake*. I will say that interpretive communities who see a hippopotamus there have, en masse, made a mistake. What I have reported of my students is recurring patterns of interpretation that, in my estimation, account for the

various elements of the poem in coherent but different ways. The words of a poem create a series of filters that eliminate possible meanings. In the universe of possible readings, comparatively few precipitate through all the filters. But in a poem like "My Papa's Waltz," several different readings do succeed in making their way through. At that point, the "preferred reading" is not found in the text, but in the interaction of reader and text. Students are not disembodied intelligences; rather, they bring to the text distinctive pasts that comprise additional filters screening out possible readings. This essay is a field report on that last set of filters.

At a recent conference, I learned that the poem is used in Jungian psychotherapy to treat alcoholics. W. D. Snodgrass writes [in his essay "That Anguish of Concreteness—Theodore Roethke's Career"] that in *The Lost Son and Other Poems*, of which "My Papa's Waltz" was one, Roethke "regressed into areas of the psyche where the powerful thoughts and feelings of the child—the raw materials and driving power of our later lives—remain under the layers of rationale and of civilized purpose." The achievement of "My Papa's Waltz" is that it permits readers to access such potent memories in their own lives in ways consistent with the words and construction of the poem.

Source: "Roethke's 'My Papa's Waltz,'" in *College Literature*, Vol. XVII, No. 1, 1990, pp. 79-82.

## Sources

Applewhite, James, "Death and Rebirth in a Modern Landscape," in *Theodore Roethke*, edited by Harold Bloom, New York: Chelsea House, 1988, pp. 195-209.

Blessing, Richard A., *Theodore Roethke's Dynamic Vision*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1974.

Bloom, Harold, editor, *Theodore Roethke*, New York: Chelsea House, 1988.

Doty, Mark, "'The Forbidden Planet' of Character: The Revolutions of the 1950s," in *A Profile of Twentieth-Century American Poetry*, edited by Jack Myers and David Wojahn, Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992, pp. 131-58.

Myers, Jack, and David Wojahn, eds., *A Profile of Twentieth-Century American Poetry*, Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992.

Parini, Jay, "Blake and Roethke: When Everything Comes to One," in *Theodore Roethke*, edited by Harold Bloom, New York: Chelsea House, 1988, pp. 195-209.

Pinsky, Robert, *The Situation of Poetry*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976, pp. 118-29.

Seager, Allan, *The Glass House: The Life of Theodore Roethke*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968.

Stauffer, Donald Barlow, *A Short History of American Poetry*, New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1974.

Wagoner, David, ed., *Straw for the Fire: From the Notebooks of Theodore Roethke, 1943-1963*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974.

Seager, Allan, *The Glass House: The Life of Theodore Roethke*, New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1968.

Biography written by Rhodes scholar and Oxford graduate Allan Seager.

Stricklett, Patrick J., *The Psychological and Spiritual Quest for Personal Identity in the Poetry of Theodore Roethke*, Thesis, University of Nebraska at Omaha, 1970.

Explores archetypal and psychological elements, and patterns of natural cycles in Roethke's principal works.

### *For Further Study*

Janssen, Ronald, "Roethke's 'My Papa's Waltz,'" *Explicator*, 44, No. 2, Winter 1986, pp. 43-4.

Illustrates the use of the waltz in the poem.

# Nothing Gold Can Stay

*Robert Frost*

1923

Published in Robert Frost's collection *New Hampshire* in 1923, "Nothing Gold Can Stay" combines Frost's attraction to details of nature with his tendency to make direct statements of theme. The poem addresses the fleeting nature of beauty and innocence. The poem seems to say not only that change is inevitable but also that all change involves degeneration. The poem does not so much present the progression of an insight as an accumulation of examples all testifying to the same point.

## *Author Biography*

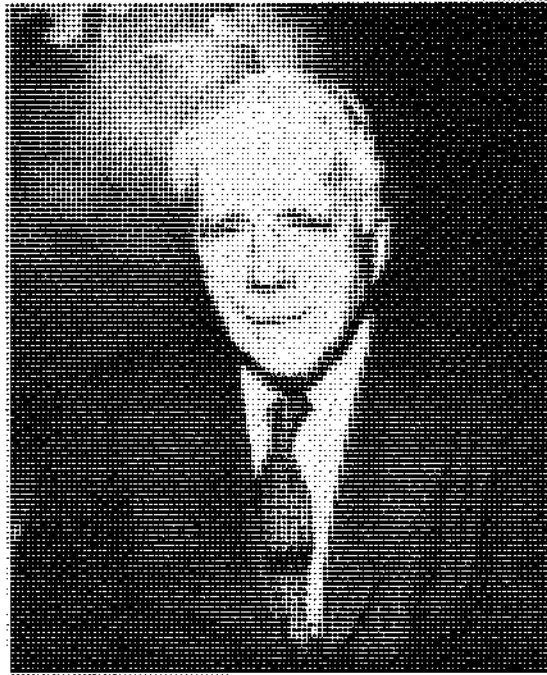
Born in San Francisco, Frost was eleven years old when his father died, and his family relocated to Lawrence, Massachusetts, where his paternal grandparents lived. In 1892, Frost graduated from Lawrence High School and shared valedictorian honors with Elinor White, whom he married three years later. After graduation, Frost briefly attended Dartmouth College, taught at grammar schools, worked at a mill, and served as a newspaper reporter. He published a chapbook of poems at his own expense, and contributed the poem "The Birds Do Thus" to the *Independent*, a New York magazine. In 1897 Frost entered Harvard University as a special student, but left before completing degree requirements because of a bout with tuberculosis and the birth of his second child. Three years later the Frosts' eldest child died, an event which





led to marital discord and which, some critics believe, Frost later addressed in his poem "Home Burial."

In 1912, having been unable to interest American publishers in his poems, Frost moved his family to a farm in Buckinghamshire, England, where he wrote prolifically, attempting to perfect his distinct poetic voice. During this time, he met such literary figures as Ezra Pound, an American expatriate poet and champion of innovative literary approaches, and Edward Thomas, a young English poet associated with the Georgian poetry movement then popular in Great Britain. Frost soon published his first book of poetry, *A Boy's Will* (1913), which received appreciative reviews. Following the success of the book, Frost relocated to Gloucestershire, England, and directed publication of a second collection, *North of Boston* (1914). This volume contains several of his most frequently anthologized pieces, including "Mending Wall," "The Death of the Hired Man," and "After Apple-Picking." Shortly after *North of Boston* was published in Great Britain, the Frost family returned to the United States, settling in Franconia, New Hampshire. The American editions of Frost's first two volumes won critical acclaim upon publication in the United States, and in 1917 Frost began his affiliations with several American universities as a professor of literature and poet-in-residence. Frost continued to write prolifically over the years and received numerous literary awards as well as honors from the United States government and American universities. He recited his work at the inauguration of President John F. Kennedy in 1961 and represented the United States on several official missions. Though he received great popular acclaim, his critical reputation waned during the latter part of his career. His final three collections received less enthusiastic reviews, yet contain several pieces acknowledged as among his greatest achievements. He died in Boston in 1963.



Robert Frost

### Poem Summary

#### Lines 1-2:

In these opening lines, Frost introduces nature as his subject, nearly personifying nature with the pronoun "her." "First green" indicates newness, the beginning of spring. Frost creates a paradox, an internal contradiction, however, because he claims that "green is gold." Gold, of course, can be simply a color, the reflection of the sun on new growth. Culturally, however, gold also indicates something of great value. Yet, nature cannot keep this gold. Of all the colors, it's the most difficult shade to hold onto. Also notice the alliteration, or repetition of initial consonant sounds, in line two, where four of the five words begin with the letter "h."

#### Lines 3-4:

Again, Frost creates a paradox. The first leaf is really a flower, although that flower is short-lived.

#### Lines 5-6:

In these lines, the poem becomes more complicated. The leaf returns to being a leaf rather than a flower, but the connotation of "subsides" is that the leaf doesn't simply change, but becomes less than it once was. A leaf is something less than

## Media Adaptations



- An audio cassette titled *The Poetry of Robert Frost* is available from Audiobooks.
- An audio record titled *Robert Frost Reads the Poems of Robert Frost* was released in 1957 by Decca.
- AIMS Media released a video cassette titled *Robert Frost* as part of its Poetry America Series.
- A video cassette of *Robert Frost*, volume three of the Voices and Visions Series, is available from Mystic Fire Video.
- A video cassette titled *Robert Frost—1958 Interview*, part of the Wisdom Series, is available from Zengar Video.

a flower. This idea is repeated in the next line, where "Eden sank." The word "sank" again indicates that the place declines. "Eden" is an allusion to the garden of Eden mentioned in the Bible, a paradise where Adam and Eve could live without work or pain. But that situation changed quickly, and Eden feels "grief." Frost introduces this emotion of loss which could characterize the emotional quality of all the examples he utilizes in this poem.

### Lines 7-8:

The concluding lines capture the point of the poem. Dawn here is similar to the "first green" of the first line because dawn indicates newness and the hope that often accompanies newness. Yet dawn doesn't remain but becomes day. Notice, though, that once again, Frost has chosen a verb with negative connotations, "goes down," to describe this change. The last line, which repeats the title, summarizes the theme of the poem. Nothing of value, the speaker seems to believe, will remain. More radically, because of the examples that are included, the poem suggests that we can determine what is valuable according to the length of its lifes-

pan. Dawn is more valuable than day, for example, because dawn is brief.

## Themes

### Change and Transformation

The transitions that things in nature undergo, their growth and mutation, can be viewed as a sign of nature's glory. For example, the theory of evolution outlined by Charles Darwin in his book *The Origin of the Species* popularized the phrase "survival of the fittest," which implies that some degree of worthiness should be attributed to anything that avoids extinction. Similarly, today we use the phrase "to evolve" with the sense that the thing in question is moving toward grandeur and purity, and to a state of being more functionally efficient. Our general assumption is that things change in order to become better. In this poem, though, Frost conveys a feeling of sorrow about the fact that things must change time. He concentrates upon the good things that are lost, rather than the terrible things that give way to a more sensible way of being. From nature, for instance, he mentions how a flower yields its beauty to become a commonplace and homely leaf. Frost, however, could just as well have taken the same plant and depicted it as a hard little seed in the dirt giving way to the flower. In the human realm, he uses for an example the Book of Genesis wherein "Eden sank to grief": his same biblical source could have provided him with countless examples in which grief gives way to triumph. Frost's examples are similar in that they are presented as original conditions. His poem seems to tell us that if original conditions are golden, and are subsequently lost, then life apparently is a bleak prospect. But it is not clear if Frost intended us to look at change as necessarily being negative. His last image, of the dawn giving way to day, seems to imply that our attraction to the superficial beauty of "gold" should be disappointed, as inevitably things take a more practical form.

### Beauty

The use of the word "gold" in this poem shows intelligent and careful choice. The word "gold" represents both the color and its namesake, the metallic ore that is valued both for its aesthetic beauty and financially for its rarity. By using this word to explain the brief state of beauty through which the things of the world pass, the poem describes the

value of the plant's first shoot, of Eden, and of the sunrise. Unlike the metal ore, though, the examples Frost gives us of golden beauty are not rare; they are fleeting. Frost's point is about the transitory nature of beauty: nothing gold can survive.

This relationship between beauty and its own demise has been consistent throughout the world's history. Some societies find sorrow in the fact that beauty fades, as can be seen in this poem. In other societies, particularly those based on Eastern philosophies, there is less emphasis on a conceptual permanence that never really existed. Therefore, there is less disappointment over the fact that permanence cannot be reached and more appreciation for the role of fleeting beauty in the larger scope of life. For example, to this way of thought the flower referred to in line 3 would not be missed when it is gone, but would rather be appreciated for what it was in the short time it existed.

### Sin

The transformations presented in "Nothing Gold Can Stay," such as the withering of flowers and the earth's rotation, are everyday processes that are a part of Earth's natural order and are independent of human will. It is hard to tell, given this context, what Frost has in mind when he says that Eden "sank to grief." According to the Book of Genesis in the Bible, Adam and Eve, the first humans, were expelled from the garden of Eden because they chose to do what God had told them not to do. The grief suffered by them, and therefore by the entire human race, was a consequence of their action: according to the Bible, Adam and Eve did not "sink" from the garden paradise into a world of misery, but rather they had jumped. In the context of the poem, though, Adam and Eve's transgression was bound to happen eventually. Following the same rhythm and syntax of its preceding and succeeding lines, the line "So Eden sank to grief" is tied into those lines' depiction of natural transformation and growth. Also, the word "sank" is similar in meaning to the words "goes down" and "subsides," which describe the sunrise and plant growth respectively; these words imply resignation to gravity and exclude any connotation of deliberate action. The poem eliminates the possibility that they might have stayed in Eden and removes the implication that Adam and Eve were ultimately responsible for their sin when they chose to disobey God's law. At first glance, Frost's version seems to be gentle to humans, portraying them as no more prone to sin than plants or the rising sun. On the other hand, the poem casts a dark

## Topics for Further Study



- In a poem of your own design, trace the fate of a color in nature. Is it permanent or temporary? Is it currently increasing or becoming more scarce? Give examples of where the color is, has been, and will be found.
- Discuss Frost's rhyme scheme in this poem. Do you think that it helps the reader understand the poem's message? In what way? Does this swaying rhythm make it hard to take the poem's message seriously?
- Do you think the statement "nothing gold can stay" accurately relates to the way we metaphorically use "gold" to symbolize all things having to do with commerce? Why or why not?

shadow over the nature of mankind, telling us that humans are not innately good but are eventually bound to sin.

### Style

Although it is printed in one stanza, "Nothing Gold Can Stay" can be discussed as a series of couplets because of its rhyme scheme, which is *aabbccdd*. This means that line one ("gold") rhymes with line two ("hold"), line three with line four, and so on. The basic meter of this poem is iambic trimeter. "Iambic" means that each metrical foot contains two syllables, an unstressed one followed by a stressed one. Trimeter means that each line contains three metrical feet. A poem written in iambic trimeter, then, would contain a total of six syllables in each line. Take another look at line six. When this line is scanned, it will look like this:

So E / den sank / to grief.

Such metrical patterns can make poetry sound more musical. When a line varies from this pattern, as the final line does, the variation will emphasize that line.

### Historical Context

From today's perspective, the year that Frost published this poem, 1923, can be seen as a time of glamour, excitement, and prosperity. America was in the middle of the socially vibrant era referred to as "The Jazz Age": the term had, in fact, just recently been popularized by the 1922 publication of *Tales of the Jazz Age* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, whose novels and short stories are considered by scholars to have captured the spirit of the twenties better than any other writer. The Jazz Age was a social epoch that took place, predominantly among young adults, after the conclusion of World War I in 1919. During this war, young Americans had encountered devastation on a scale to which no previous generation had been exposed. In addition to the sheer global magnitude of the war (32 nations were involved, resulting in the deaths of 37 million military personnel and 10 million civilians; direct costs of the war topped \$186 billion), there was the shocking brutality that modern warfare could achieve with new, sophisticated weaponry such as airplane bombs, land mines, and mustard gas. With much of the industrialized world damaged during the war, the United States quickly rose to economic prominence. The generation that became disillusioned with life by witnessing so much wanton destruction had more to spend on self-destructive living than most prosperous postwar societies. Added to this was the fact that, in 1920, the Constitution's Eighteenth Amendment, prohibited manufacture, sale, and transportation of liquor in the United States. Some say this did more to make a self-destructive generation more likely to seek liquor out than avoid it. The Jazz Age embraced flamboyant parties of dancing to "corruptive" jazz music (which, was new, allegedly wild, and associated with troublemakers) and drinking bootleg—or illegally obtained—liquor. The Jazz Age lasted throughout the 1920s, until 1929, when the stock market crash and the subsequent Great Depression made it difficult for the aging revelers to laugh at responsibility any more.

The growth of the U.S. economy during the 1920s was truly incredible, making its abrupt reversal by the crash of 1929 all that much more stunning. In retrospect, we can see Frost's phrase "Nothing gold can stay" as somewhat of a prophecy that applied directly to the rising economic cycle of the times. When the poem was published, however, too many people were busy making too much money for his abstract point to have much effect. Between 1923 and 1929, U.S. corporate

profits increased an astounding 62 percent, and dividends to shareholders grew by 65 percent (compare this to the fact that a good, stable investment today will yield eight to ten percent). Much of this huge growth represented profits from investments which were immediately re-invested: often, no real money or goods were involved, but only theoretical earnings, which was why the crash wiped away so many fortunes overnight. Pay for the workers who actually produced goods and services (and who are therefore a better indicator of the country's true prosperity) rose only 11 percent in the six years following 1923. With so much economic growth resting upon such a small amount of actual production, it was inevitable that the economic system could not handle the flow of imaginary cash: every day during the 1920s one to three banks in the United States went out of business. Many people recognized that the incredible luck of investors was bound to change at any moment, but they still invested, hoping to make a quick fortune and hoping that it would be the next investors who would suffer the consequences when the system crashed. In addition to the profit frenzy in legitimate business, confidence schemes thrived in the twenties. They offered common people the chance to realize huge earnings by investing their savings in land deals, holding companies, and foreign corporations that often did not actually exist.

Organized crime flourished in the 1920s, built mainly by the profits made by selling the illegal liquor that the public demanded. Because legitimate business could not have anything to do with liquor, the supply was low, but demand existed for any type of alcoholic beverage available. Because the demand was so high, criminals could charge an inflated price and always find someone willing to pay it. By 1926, illegal liquor trafficking was estimated to be a \$3.6 billion business. Otherwise law-abiding citizens came to associate with criminals at illegal saloons known as "speakeasies," and much of the easy money that investors were scooping up in the stock market was funneled to crime organizations, where it blended with the profits from murder, prostitution, and extortion. By the late 1920s, more and more Americans came to feel that Prohibition was a "failed experiment": this feeling became even stronger after the start of the Depression, when it was felt that Prohibition deprived people of jobs. It was repealed by the 21st Amendment of 1933. The crime organizations that had provided liquor during Prohibition already had a strong foothold in the American economy and transferred their attention into other illegal activities.

## Compare & Contrast

- **1923:** Following the Russian Revolution of 1917, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was officially established.

**1945:** At the end of World War II, the Soviet Union took control of most of the eastern European countries that Germany had overthrown. To oppose their control, the United States organized the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), solidifying cooperation with the nations of western Europe.

**1961:** To discourage emigration out of East Germany, which it controlled, the USSR built the Berlin Wall.

**1989:** The Soviet Union came apart. First, Poland held free elections—its first since Communist takeover—and elected a non-Communist government. Then the economies of Hungary, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, and Romania collapsed. In a final, symbolic move, the Berlin Wall was opened and soon after dismantled by the hands of elated citizens.

**1991:** The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics officially disbanded.

**Today:** Countries of the former Soviet Union are welcome to voluntarily belong to the Commonwealth of Independent States.

- **1923:** Volume 1, number 1 of *Time* magazine was published. This was the first of the national newsweekly magazines.

**1933:** The first issue of *News-Week* magazine was published and competed with *Time* for readers.

**1936:** *Life*, a magazine devoted mainly to photographs, was first published by the *Time* corporation and proved to be extremely successful.

**1972:** With more people turning to color television for their view of the contemporary world, *Life* magazine suspended publication.

**Today:** In order to keep up with fast-paced electronic news sources, *Time* and *Newsweek*, along with most daily papers, are available on the Internet.

- **1923:** Clarence Birdseye, who had spent six years developing a method of quick-freezing fish in order to preserve their flavor during storage, opened Birdseye Seafood in New York. Lacking financial backing, he went bankrupt.

**1929:** General Foods was created by a merger of the foundering Birdseye company with 34-year-old Postum, which owns the rights to Jell-O, Minute Tapioca, Hellmann's Mayonnaise, Log Cabin Syrup, Calumet Baking Powder, and Maxwell House Coffee, among others.

**1939:** Under the Birdseye label, General Foods introduced the first precooked frozen foods: chicken fricassee and criss-cross steak.

**1985:** General Foods was bought by tobacco giant Philip Morris Company, creating the world's largest consumer products company.

**Today:** The Birdseye name is owned by Dean Foods, a much smaller conglomerate.

### Critical Overview

Critics generally mention this poem when they are discussing Frost's lyrics in general. Louise Townsend Nicholl, writing in the *American Review*, states that "Frost's lyrics are among the most perfect being written. She cites "Nothing Gold Can Stay" as "fit to be" a classic. Later in the article,

she explains her criteria for making such a judgment: "The quality which is strong in all real poets of seeing the invisible, the telescope vision, crops out in Frost in many ways. Mysticism the quality might be called. The things he sees are various, but the way he sees them remains the same." Nicholl means here that Frost's interpretation of the world is consistent and that though he may choose

different natural elements to function as symbols, his underlying philosophy remains unaltered.

### Criticism

#### Dana Gioia

*Dana Gioia is a poet and critic. His books include The Gods of Winters and Can Poetry Matter? In the following essay, Gioia explains why it is difficult to write a short poem, and he praises Frost for the depth of meaning he was able to evoke in only eight lines.*

There is a distinctive category of short poem in English that has never been given a proper name. Usually between five and twelve lines in length, the form is briefer than a sonnet but more extensive than an epigram. The form tries for a more ambitious—and usually less satiric—turn of thought than the epigram, and it does not so neatly resolve itself in witty closure. The form, however, also differs from the sonnet because it does not strive for the complex argument of contrast and resolution so famously found in the fourteen-line paradigm. Instead, this type of short poem usually tries to describe a single scene or develop a single idea with evocative finality. These poems also often have an emblematic quality—the images acquire a symbolic resonance and suggest broader meanings.

Such evocative short poems are difficult to write. Every line, every image, must meaningfully contribute to the whole. There is no place for a weak word to hide. The poem must be tightly constructed but not so rigidly that its effect feels forced or predetermined. The balance must be perfect. A successful epigram can contentedly proceed as mere verse—memorably turned metrical language—but this slightly longer form strives for the fullness of poetry. The fact that it is small in size does not limit it to being small in ambition. A number of American poets have been distinguished masters of this concise but expressive style—most notably Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, Ezra Pound, Langston Hughes, J. V. Cunningham, Theodore Roethke, X. J. Kennedy, and Robert Frost.

“Nothing Gold Can Stay” first appeared in Frost’s 1923 volume, *New Hampshire*, his first book to win a Pulitzer Prize. (Frost would eventually garner the prize four times—still the record for any American poet.) Published when the author was forty-eight, *New Hampshire* was a diverse col-

lection of longer narratives and satires mixed with short lyric poems, including several very brief works. The most memorable of these short poems were “Nothing Gold Can Stay,” “Fire and Ice,” and “Dust of Snow,” now all classic anthology pieces. All three illustrate Frost’s mastery of the short poem, but none better exemplifies the possibilities of the form than “Nothing Gold Can Stay.”

“Nothing Gold Can Stay” is remarkably brief. Only eight lines long, it consists of just forty words. The diction is extremely simple. No word is longer than two syllables. Most are monosyllabic. The meter is slightly unusual for Frost—iambic trimeter (a line with three strong stresses usually spread across six syllables). The poet usually preferred the longer lines of iambic tetrameter (the eight-syllable line of “Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening”) or pentameter (the ten-syllable line of “Acquainted With the Night” and his other sonnets). “Nothing Gold Can Stay” is, in fact, the only poem in *New Hampshire* (out of forty-four pieces) that is written in the short trimeter line. All of these stylistic features contribute to the poem’s expressive brevity and lyric compression.

The movement of the poem is both simple and richly evocative. Viewed as a nature poem, “Nothing Gold Can Stay” presents the moment in early spring when the vegetative world is first breaking into blossom. In the first four lines, Frost’s imagery quite literally describes how new leaves emerge as yellow or golden blossom before they develop into green leaves. “Her early leaf’s a flower,” the speaker observes. This period of blossom, however, is very brief. “But only so an hour,” the speaker then immediately qualifies. If the first three lines depict a world of rich beauty, the poem pivots decisively on line four.

The second half of the poem reveals the consequences of nature’s fall from gold. After a brief hour of golden promise, the poem declares, “Then leaf subsides to leaf.” As always, Frost’s exact phrasing is significant. Notice his unusual repetition of the word “leaf” within the same short line. Taken literally, the line suggests that the leaf was always intended to be only a green leaf, not a golden flower. If the flower lasted only an hour, the leaf, the poem suggests, survives for longer. Viewed as a description of the natural world, this observation appears eminently reasonable. A branch might blossom for only a week but the resulting leaves last for months. Frost’s poem, however, is now about to move beyond seasonal observations of Nature.

## What Do I Read Next?



- F. Scott Fitzgerald is considered the one writer who best captured the heady richness of the Twenties. In his portrayals of wealthy characters in his books, he shows tremendous sympathy for the idea Frost displays in this poem regarding “gold.” Fitzgerald’s greatest work, often studied in schools, is *The Great Gatsby*. Other works by Fitzgerald of particular interest to students of the Jazz Age are *The Beautiful and the Damned* and *Tales of the Jazz Age*.
- Sidney Cox’s 1957 biography *A Swinger of Branches: A Portrait of Robert Frost* is considered to be one of the better books available about the poet. Cox knew Frost and uses the insight he gained from their relationship in examining Frost’s works.
- Frost’s friend Lawrance Thompson wrote the definitive biography of the poet, a massive three-volume work that was finished by R. H. Winnick after Thompson’s death. The three volumes were edited down to one book in a 1981 edition by Holt, Rinehart and Winston. Titled *Robert Frost, a biography*, this volume was authorized by Frost, and so it does not penetrate as deeply as a critical biography like Cox’s, but the authors had more access to details about Frost’s life.
- Students can get a good sense of the significance of Frost’s work by reading *Robert Frost: Lectures on the Centennial of His Birth*, published in 1975. Noted authors, including Helen Bacon, Peter Davison, Robert Pack, and Allen Tate all give testimony to Frost’s lasting contributions. Because these pieces were written to be heard aurally, they are they are more direct and easier to understand than many literary essays.

Suddenly the poem takes a surprising turn. After seemingly presenting only the natural world in the first five lines, “Nothing Gold Can Stay” now offers a mythic or theological simile to describe the leaf’s change from gold to green. “So Eden sank to grief,” the poem unexpectedly declares. Until now a reader might assume that the shift from gold to green was only descriptive and not evaluative, but the use of “grief” indicates that the transition is in some sense unfortunate and perhaps even painful. The poem then shifts focus again from the mythic to the temporal. “So dawn goes down to day” brings the stated subject back to the natural world, but this time the words point to the daily cycle of night and day rather than the annual cycle of the seasons.

“Nothing Gold Can Stay” explicitly describes identical moments in three temporal cycles: the daily, the yearly, and the mythic. In each case the poem depicts the moment when the promise of perfection declines into something lesser. Gold unabashedly becomes a symbol—a very traditional one—for the highest value and most radiant beauty.

Spring, dawn, and Eden are each a sort of Golden Age, an impermanent paradise. What lies ahead is never stated overtly, but it is inarguably present by implication. Day is inevitably followed by night. Summer is succeeded by fall and winter. The green leaf eventually turns brown and decays. The loss of Eden gave Adam and Eve mortality. Human youth, by implication, is followed by maturity, old age, and ultimately death. The golden moment, therefore, is all the more precious because it is transitory. By focusing on a single moment, Frost evokes an entire day, year, lifetime, and human history.

If “Nothing Gold Can Stay” can be satisfactorily interpreted on natural, mythic, and theological levels, it can also be read—in general terms at least—from a biographical perspective. Written by a middle-aged man who had already lost two children, both parents, and his closest friend (the British author Edward Thomas who is commemorated in the poem placed immediately before “Nothing Gold Can Stay” in *New Hampshire*), this short work evokes a point in life when the golden

illusions of youth have vanished. The poem is not explicitly autobiographical. Frost's poem virtually never are. It reaches for broader resonance than the merely personal. Yet anyone familiar with Frost's often difficult life can see that its hard-won wisdom was rooted in bitter experience. How characteristic of Frost that the personal origins of the poem—whatever they were—have been so magnificently transcended into a universal vision of the human condition. What the reader encounters is not a private complaint about life's injustice but a tender if heartbreaking expression of the transience of beauty and the grief of mortality.

Source: Dana Gioia, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 1998.

**William H. Pritchard**

*In the following excerpt, Pritchard examines Frost's volume *New Hampshire*, reserving special consideration and praise for the collection's short pieces, which include "Nothing Gold Can Stay."*





*It is as if in writing  
'Nothing Gold Can Stay,'  
Frost had in mind his later  
definition of poetry as a  
momentary stay against  
confusion."*

Making imagery do more than create an atmosphere has been the practice of poets through the ages, though the method of handling the material differs markedly in different periods. Twelve hundred years ago the unknown author of *Beowulf* used his best images for more than creating atmosphere or giving a description....

Hundreds of years later, Sir Philip Sidney, in the great period of the love sonnet in English, introduces images only to make them work for their place in the poem....

Still hundreds of years later, across the channel, ... [Robert Frost] is found offering 'descriptions' of nature intended to carry most of the weight of the meaning in an intensely serious poem....

Biblical precept and plenty of examples demonstrate that gold cannot stay; so a reader feels strangely at home as he reads the title of one of Frost's shortest poems, "Nothing Gold Can Stay." In fact, everything in the poem seems familiar, everything except the whole of it....

The poem opens with images offering the freshness of spring; but as in a dream, when one reaches for the object it is gone.

Nature's first green is gold,

but this first green is of a delicate and transitory quality that is already disappearing even as it is being born. Truly the golden green is

Her hardest hue to hold

When nature begins to stir,

Her early leaf's a flower;

But only so an hour.

By line four the pattern is set. These desirable things are given, but not to keep. The process goes on as

... leaf subsides to leaf.

Source: "Mountain Interval and New Hampshire" in *Frost: A Literary Life Reconsidered*, Oxford University Press, 1984, pp. 145-63.

### **John Robert Doyle, Jr.**

*In the following excerpt, Doyle points out that Frost presents a unique perspective on the age-old artistic subject of the fleetingness of youth and beauty.*

Coming at its very heart, "subsides" is the word on which the poem balances. Before it appears, "subsides" has been prepared for; afterwards, it is echoed.

So Eden sank to grief  
So dawn goes down to day.  
Nothing gold can stay.

The impact of the poem comes from the inversion of the expected order which "subsides" imposes upon the reader. He must re-examine the situation and see why "subsides" has been used instead of expands, or grows, or enlarges, or advances. These words apply to the normal growing process, the increasing size, moving towards maturity; "subsides" applies to another aspect of the situation, the one being prepared for in the first four lines. As the leaf grows, it loses its green delicateness, its youthful qualities. It is the youthful characteristics that are hardest to hold.

So Eden sank to grief,

The archetype of golden youthfulness and innocence was soon lost before the onslaught of the properties of the tree of knowledge.

So dawn goes down to day.

As Wordsworth observed in the great ode, the "vision splendid"

fade[s] into the light of common day.

No, nothing gold can stay. While the mother, oblivious of times, fondles a golden headed bundle, the bundle has decided to crawl away, and stand, and walk, and ... As the landscape painter relishes the peculiarly golden glory in the sunset, it has faded.

So cleanly and directly is "Nothing Gold Can Stay" written that one hesitates to do more than present it (as above) and linger briefly to allow the implications to begin to radiate; but the poem, despite its slightness, represents so important a part of Frost's thinking that it demands comment. For two hundred and fifty years, it has been a commonplace of English literature to bewail the fleeting moment, the shortness of youth, of love, of life. The thinking which created this trend in literature is a basic part of the modern world, and is parallel to the widespread use of clocks and watches, and the concern of the modern world for the passage of time. It is, of course, possible to be aware of the passing moment without lamenting it. Because Frost believes this, his poem ends where it began, in a repetition of the initial claim; and the center of the poem presents samples of that which did not stay. The significant thing is to accept the moment be-

fore it passes. It is the way to master the flux of life. Perfection, or the realm of pure being, for which poets like Keats and Shelley and Poe sought does not exist in Frost's poetry. Since the transitoriness of life is a fact, he says life will have to be that way. In one poem of this period, a poem called "Acceptance," he says, "Let what will be, be". This attitude of acceptance is one reason for the lyric strength of his poems: his attitude allows him to love many aspects of external nature and of human nature because he is not taken up with lamenting what he cannot change. The poem "Nothing Gold Can Stay" becomes, thus, a compliment to the gold things of the world, even if they cannot stay.

Source: "Thought in Lyric Form" in *The Poetry of Robert Frost: An Analysis*, Hafner Press, 1962, pp. 159-76.

### Sources

Fass, Paula S., *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920's*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.

Nicholl, Louise Townsend. "New Hampshire." *American Review*, Vol. 2, No. 6, November-December, 1924, pp. 679-83.

Nitchie, George W., "A Momentary Stay Against Confusion," in *Robert Frost: A Collection of Critical Essays*, James M. Cox, ed., Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962.

Perrett, Geoffrey, *America In the Twenties: A History*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983.

Wilson, Joan Hoff, *The Twenties: The Critical Issues*, Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1972.

### For Further Study

Allen, Frederick Lewis, *Only Yesterday*, New York: Harper & Row, 1931.

This little-known history of the 1920s is considered to be one of the best books ever published about the decade. Allen wrote with the benefit of recent memory to give a compelling narrative of what it was like, although he lacked the broad overview that modern historians have. Several editions have been published since the initial printing.

Berger, Charles, "Echoing Eden: Frost and Origins," *Robert Frost*, edited by Harold Bloom, New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986, pp. 147-66.

This essay focuses specifically on the way the Frost handles the subject of beginnings.

Braeman, John, Robert H. Bremner, and David Brody, eds., *Change and Continuity in Twentieth-Century America: The Twenties*, Ohio State University Press, 1968.

This collection of scholarly articles about the 1920s gives background about the less prominent elements that made up society, with essays ranging from "Oil and Politics," "The Ku Klux Klan," and "The New Psychology: From Narcissism to Social Control." Of particular interest to the student of literature would be Frederick J. Hoffman's "Fiction of the Jazz Age."

Cramer, Jeffrey S., *Robert Frost Among His Poems: A Literary Companion to the Poet's Own Biographical Contexts and Associations*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 1996.

As this book's subtitle suggests, the author has collected Frost's statements about the background of each of his poems: where the ideas for each came from, how he interprets various passages, etc. Although the poet's associations about a poem are not necessary for the reader to have appreciation of it, the ideas here give a fascinating portrait of how the creative mind works.

Stevenson, Elizabeth, *Babbitts and Bohemians: The American 1920's*, New York: Macmillan, 1967.

Stevenson gives a good overview of the politics and social movements of the decade, with much detail about the historical facts but little about the personal lives of people living in these times.

# Not Waving but Drowning

*Stevie Smith*

1957

"Not Waving but Drowning" is the title poem of Stevie Smith's 1957 collection of poetry. Written in the later part of Smith's career, the poem was cited by many critics as exemplifying in a single piece many of Smith's most notable poetic traits: reoccurring images of water and death; radical shifts in the speaker's tone and persona; and a voice that speaks as if reciting a carefree nursery rhyme, but is one that details grave news. The poem is a haunting glimpse at a swimmer's unfortunate death by drowning, the details of which are relayed by both the dead man's friends and the dead man himself. The poem is set up as a conversation between the "dead one [who] lay moaning" and his friends, who can only guess "It must have been too cold for him his heart gave way." We learn through this dialogue that the man died because he was "farther out than [he] thought" and the friends on shore could not decipher his waving as panic nor hear him yelling for help.

This poem is a significant barometer for Smith's emotional state at age 55, as she approached the later part of her career and enjoyed increasing success. She often described death as a friend we should welcome: "the only god / Who comes a servant when he is called." She uses this analogy—which considers death something we can control—as a comforting thought in other poems from the collection. Even though the drowned man's friends try to guess the reasons for his death, it is ultimately the dead man himself who demonstrates his control by revealing that this accident



was not a sudden death, but instead the end of a life of agony, during which he felt "too cold always" and "much too far out all my life." We can only guess that during this period of her writing, Smith felt the same sense of isolation, distance, and transparency as the drowned man. She attempted suicide two months after its publication.

### Author Biography

Characterized by her dry wit and elusive style, Stevie Smith's poetry was just reaching the apex of recognition in the literary world when she died at the age of sixty-eight in March of 1971. Early in her career, Smith struggled with critics who dismissed her work as childish or frivolous. The first publisher she approached with a manuscript of poems suggested she write a novel instead. Later, when her first poetry collection *A Good Time Was Had By All* appeared in 1937, the *Times Literary Supplement* classified it under the heading "humor." Throughout her career Smith tackled difficult subjects, often crafting themes of abandonment, death, and social isolation in deceptively simple, nursery rhyme-like lines. By the end of her career, it was this ability to explore the mysterious, dark and everyday world in an equally elusive and fractured voice which critics heralded as her unique style.

Although her work is marked by often by change—be it in point of view, personae, or tone—Smith led a surprisingly consistent and uneventful life compared to her contemporaries. Born in Hull, Yorkshire, England in 1902, Florence Margaret Smith was the product of a less than happy, "unsuitable" marriage. Her mother moved the family to Palmers Green in North London in 1906 to the house where she would live, unmarried, for the remainder of her life. Growing up, Smith rarely saw her father, who abandoned the family shortly after her birth to join the North Sea Patrol. She earned her nickname "Stevie" from a friend who jokingly compared Smith, who was an avid rider, to the popular jockey Steve Donoghue.

Smith's professional career turned out to be as unchanging as her personal life in the Palmers Green home. She secured a secretarial position with magazine publisher George Newnes shortly after graduating from the North London Collegiate School for Girls, and eventually was promoted to personal secretary under Sir Nevill Pearson and Sir Frank Newnes. She didn't leave that job until 1953, even as her writing career slowly began to materi-

alize; instead she was known to use office time to type out her manuscripts on yellow carbon-copy paper. She completed her first book, the autobiographical *A Novel on Yellow Paper* this way, and it was published in 1936. Her first collection of poetry, *A Good Time Was Had by All*, appeared the next year with the support of the publisher Jonathon Cape, who was perhaps the first to recognize Smith's importance in the literary community.

Smith quickly followed up her first two books with a dual release of the novel *Over the Frontier* and collection of poems *Tender Only to One* in the same year, 1938. In this second volume of poetry, Smith established her characteristic self-illustrations, simple line drawings of people and animals which often seemed to challenge any simple interpretation of the poems with which they share space. She also settled into a style which would characterize her writing for the rest of her career: a minimalist approach to line, an innovative mix and match of formalism with fairy-tale simplicity, shifting personas, and an overall use of humorous verse to resonate even the most soul-shaking themes.

Perhaps best illustrating this style is the title poem of her eighth book, *Not Waving but Drowning*, published in 1957. Marking the beginning of her belated climb toward success, the poem hauntingly reflects how even the most desperate gestures can be misunderstood if people keep enough distance between themselves. In this book Smith further developed themes which obsessed her since her abandoned childhood: water, death, and human isolation. Looking back on her own body of work, Smith told interviewer Kay Dick in 1970 that "nearly every poem's about suicide, more or less." Perhaps an overstatement, she did wrestle with this subject throughout her career, at least once attempting to end her own life. She often described death as an attractive notion, personifying it in her final poem "Come, Death II" as "the only god / Who comes as a servant when he is called, you know."

After an often sickly childhood and rather uneventful personal life (not to diminish her vibrant and ground-breaking literary life), Smith finally received official recognition for her work with the receipt of the Cholmondeley Award for Poetry in 1966 and the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry in 1969. This formal recognition came just a few years before the end of her long and prolific career spanning twelve books. Her health quickly deteriorating due to a brain tumor, Stevie Smith died in 1971, in the same house she had lived in since 1906.

Passion for Smith's work grew quickly following her death, marked by the posthumous publication of her final volume of poems in 1972, multiple collected volumes of poetry, and innumerable anthology inclusions. In the years following her death, critical focus of her work has continued to find life and playfulness in her well-crafted, deceptively simple lines. Smith once called her poems "sound vehicles," a description of her orally-driven pieces the *Times Literary Supplement* shared, calling Smith "one of the most musical poets of her generation."

### Poem Summary

#### Lines: 1-2

The poem begins in mid-conversation and action, with the scene being that of a dead man lying on the ground. In these first two lines, Smith introduces the central character, the dead man, but the reader is still unsure of who the poem's narrator actually is. What we do know is that "Nobody heard him" before he died, and that even though he is dead, "still he lay moaning." The colon at the end of line two indicates that the dead man is about to speak in a moaning voice. This establishes an eerie tone in the poem, which continues to develop a conversation between the dead and the living.

#### Lines: 3-4

In these lines, the dead man himself explains the cause of his death. Although Smith never mentions the ocean explicitly in the poem, we can guess that "too far out" literally means too far out at sea,

and we can conclude that the man swam into dangerous waters. But it is clear that distance alone did not cause the man's death. He explains that the on-shore observers mistook his thrashing for waving and were oblivious of his calls for help.

At this point in the poem, Smith begins playing with point of view, switching pronouns to cast confusion about who is actually speaking. The poem begins in third person, with an anonymous voice referring to the dead man as "him" and to the unhelpful witnesses as "nobody." But when it comes time for the dead man to tell his side of the story, the voice is in second person, offering the direct address: "I was much further out than you thought." The point of view switches just fast enough for the reader to have to guess who the man is speaking to: the witnesses, the reader, or both? This tactic draws the reader into the poem by making him a party to the confusion of the man's calls for help.

#### Line: 5

In this line the bystanders reveal that they knew the man better than we first thought. They refer to him as "poor chap," a distinctively British remark, and comment on how he "always loved larking." To "lark" or "go on a lark" means to play, dance, or frolic; it is an oddly cheery description of the man who just drowned. This flippant tone, along with the matter-of-fact emotionless remark "and now he's dead," are our first indications that, although the bystanders were familiar with the drowned man, they did not know him very well after all. Regardless, they continue to speculate about the reasons for his death.

#### Line: 7-8

In this run-on line, the bystanders hypothesize that the man may have drowned because the water was too cold; thus, the cause of death would be hypothermia, which made his heart stop, or "g[i]ve way." Smith, however, leaves room in this line for speculation. Describing the water as cold enough to stop his heart may reflect, or be a metaphor for, the swimmer's emotional state; isolated and shivering, his heart may have broken from loneliness. On both literal and metaphorical levels, this is a description of a desperate scene and a horrible way to die.

Any English teacher would point out that line 7 is technically a run-on sentence since it combines two independent ideas without proper punctuation

to separate the thoughts. It is also the longest line in the poem at twelve words, which this draws additional attention to it. When read aloud, the string of single-syllable words create the effect of a flat, droning voice. This may reflect the lack of emotion exhibited by the bystanders, who calmly postulate on the cause of the man's death.

**Lines: 9-10**

If the first stanza introduces the scene from the drowned man's perspective and the second stanza gives the bystanders a chance to guess at his demise, then the final stanza is the last opportunity for the dead man to respond. The first thing he does is disagree completely with those who simply thought that "It must have been too cold for him his heart gave way." He corrects them in a polite but scolding tone, by saying "Oh, no no no." He remarks, "it was too cold always," implying that his death may not have been as sudden as we first thought and not necessarily due to drowning. And again, by using purposefully nonspecific pronouns, Smith gives us room to ask if "it" refers to the ocean as "too cold always," or something more. "Cold" usually implies depression, dying, and isolation; we have to ask if it was his life that was "too cold always."

Line 10, which presents the final rhyme, reminds us the dead man is participating in this conversation. Even if Smith failed to mention he was "moaning," we would hear the eerie voice when reading the poem aloud: notice the repetition of long vowels in the line—especially of the "o"—which mimics the sound of someone keening or crying.

**Lines: 11-12**

In these final lines the man completes his response to those who claimed to know him when alive, stating he was "much too far out all [his] life / and not waving but drowning." Unlike the bystanders who think of his death as a sudden drowning, the man tells us this has been going on all his life. If we read these last lines literally, he is saying that he has been "too far out" at sea, waving his arms all his life. But by reading these lines on a metaphorical level and asking how his literal explanation reflects his emotional state, we can see the deeper distinction he is pointing out in these last lines.

The poem pivots around the repeated line "not waving but drowning," which illustrates central tension between appearance and reality: those who

*Media Adaptations* 

- There are several audio recordings of Smith's poetry, including *The Poet Speaks* (1965) by Arco, *Stevie Smith* (1966) by Marwell Press, and *Stevie Smith* (1967) by Listener Records.

knew him mistook his desperate flailing out at sea for simple and polite waving. We are probably accustomed to the metaphor of "drowning" in work, which usually means depression, love, or any feeling of barely breathing and not being able to keep your head above water. In these last lines the man admits that he has felt this way all his life, much too far out and much too cold, metaphorically "swimming alone" and isolated from others emotionally. The bystanders do not see a man on the verge of giving up, drowning. Oblivious to the depth of his sadness and breaking heart, they see the facade of a man who "loves larking," always smiling, waving slowly and calmly even though there is miles of dark water below him.

*Themes*

***Alienation and Loneliness***

The central image in the poem is that of a man dying at sea because bystanders mistake his flailing arms for waving. To make a mistake like this, the man must have been small on the horizon, difficult for those who knew him to see clearly. Metaphorically, this image represents a man alone and alienated from the rest of the world, terribly misunderstood by those who thought they knew him. Throughout the conversation between the dead man moaning on the ground and the ambiguous crowd of bystanders, Smith gives us several images of isolation: a single person far from solid ground, trying to keep his head above water, the crowd not hearing him, the man's heart too cold and giving way. He has spent his whole life this way, "much too far out" and "not waving but

## Topics for Further Study



- How can two people look at the same situation and have completely different interpretations of what happened? Write a short poem—less than twenty lines—that explores a single event from two distinctly different points of view.
- Do you feel the technical and industrial advances the United States has made since World War II have brought people closer together or put up more barriers between people? In an age of cell phones, chat rooms, and international teleconferences, are people “connecting” more or less on a human level? Pick some examples of recent advances and explore how they have affected the way people communicate.
- Write a poem that matches Smith’s xAxA rhyme scheme from the point of view of a person who has recently died. Although the subject is morbid, let the voice sound playful in its simple form. After finishing, illustrate the poem with your own pencil drawings.

---

drowning.” These images accumulate to reflect the emotional state of a person detached from society, unable to communicate with others, untethered and drifting toward thoughts of suicide.

### Death

In the very first line we learn a man has died, yet miraculously, “he lay moaning.” We are usually not given the luxury of speech after death, but in this poem Smith sets up a surreal environment to explore the reasons for the man’s drowning, which he may have welcomed. In this way the poem deals with the universal topic of death in a unique manner. Like most people instinctively do after a death, the bystanders try to offer a reason for the loss. At first it should seem obvious how he died: he swam too far out from shore and drowned. For the bystanders to look for further reason indicates our first answer is not that simple. The line “It must have been too cold for him his heart gave way” suggests that the man himself had somewhat

of a choice in the matter of whether or not to “give way” to death. This notion of death as something we might welcome raises the question of suicide, which the last stanza deepens through the discovery that this was not a sudden and unexpected drowning, but a slow, cold life far from land, leading finally to his decision to stop swimming.

### Public vs. Private Life

You may have noticed yourself putting on a different face with your parents than with your friends, a different mask for your classmates than for your teacher. There are parts of each of us we share with friends, family, teachers, and other parts that we hold deeply inward. When there is a balance between our “public” and “private” selves, we generally lead emotionally healthy lives. But when the distance between these two widens, or if we become stuck in one self at the expense of the other, there is a danger of becoming unmoored, as with the drowning man whose private self floated too far away from his public life for anyone to hear his voice.

The three quatrains toggle between two points of view: the bystanders, whose detached voices drone in unison “It must have been too cold for him his heart gave way,” and the drowned man, who moans “Oh, no, no, no, it was too cold always.” The man the public saw “loved larking,” dancing, and partying with friends. Their response to the “poor chap’s” drowning is fairly condescending, reading almost like a nursery rhyme: “And now he’s dead ... They said.” This superficial public image contrasts greatly with the private life he must have been leading, sunk too far inside his private troubles for anyone to recognize his depression.

The almost comic misunderstanding between public and private perceptions is illustrated best in the title and repeated line “not waving but drowning.” The public who thinks the man loved dancing and singing does not hear a single call for help; they have no reason to believe the man’s waving deserves any more of a response than a polite wave back. He had been putting on such a believable public mask all his life no one suspected he was privately cold, distant, and drowning.

### Style

“Not Waving but Drowning” is written in three rhymed quatrains, or four-line stanzas. Although the second and fourth lines of each quatrain rhyme, the varying line lengths and number of stressed



words per line throughout the poem prevent us from pigeon-holing its construction as any specific traditional form. Instead, like other styles of poetic structure invented by an author, we refer to its construction as a “Nonce Form,” which means a form written “for the one time.”

To say the poem’s construction is without formal tradition is not to imply that Stevie Smith did not carefully and subtly craft her lines. If we look closely at the relationship between the poem’s content and the way Smith shaped of the poem’s lines and sound, we can see a pattern of interaction emerging between the two. For example, the poem’s setting is most probably an ocean coastline. Like the ocean, the poem has a swaying rhythm, as each line varies slightly in stress and length: “NO-body HEARD him, the DEAD man, / But STILL he lay MOANing.” Combined with this swaying rhythm of stressed and unstressed syllables, the rhymed second and fourth lines in each quatrain—moaning/drowning, dead/said, and moaning/drowning—help to create a rocking, song-like feel to the speaker’s voice. It seems unique for Smith to choose an almost childish music for a poem about social isolation. But if we think of the sound of the words as the soundtrack for the images they project, children’s songs dubbed over footage of a drowned man washed up on the shore, the poem begins to take on an eerie and haunting tone, which keeps resonating long after we have closed the book.

This is a short poem, twelve lines in three stanzas, which means that Smith did not give herself much room to “spread out” and really build momentum in each line. The poem’s short lines, ranging from two to twelve words, instead force us to read the poem slowly, pause often, and return again and again to the beginning of the next line or stanza. In this way, the short lines generally create a sense of calm, deep thought, and silence, which helps reflect the quiet, eerie, and pensive mood of the poem.

### Historical Context

Stevie Smith is usually placed among a group of poets writing in postwar Britain simply known as “The Movement,” which included Donald Davie, Philip Larkin, Ted Hughes, Smith, and Thomas Kinsella, to name a few. All of these poets shared a common sensibility, having lived through a world

war that leveled parts of England and separated families. Smith grew up in a time when women were expected to remain at home and keep house, or to work as a secretary, taking dictation and making coffee. Resigned to her situation but not to be stifled creatively, Smith worked as a secretary during the war at the publishing offices of George Newness, where she would use office hours to type poems and stories on yellow carbon paper with a manual typewriter. One of her earliest novels, wittily named *Novel on Yellow Paper*, draws heavily from autobiographical experience. The book’s central character, Pompey Casmilus, serves as the eyes through which Smith explores the consciousness of England during World War II, balancing a mundane office job with the turmoil of private relationships and the larger, national sense of dislocation concerning the war.

The horror of World War II greatly affected its British survivors. The lists of Nazi war crimes grew as allied troops liberated German concentration camps, revealing a holocaust of millions. America had tested its newest technology in the name of stopping the war by dropping two atomic bombs on Japanese civilian populations. In the years shortly after the war it became clear that these atomic weapons would change the face of world politics, as each country raced to create their own ultimate “peace maker.” Some critics have noted how drastically the war changed the everyday interpersonal relations of British people. John Press characterized this mood as a “spiritual desolation in which men have shed the last rags of religious faith that once lent meaning to human lives.”

Stevie Smith’s work often portrays a dislocated and emotionally detached people. She published *Not Waving but Drowning* the same year Britain exploded its first megaton thermonuclear weapon at Christmas island in the Pacific. Indeed, the world had settled into the Cold War, and whole countries shrouded themselves in suspicion and self-preservation. In a time that focused so heavily on the national cause, it was perhaps easy for people to feel detached from each other, invisible and isolated, although the British social standard required a smile rather than a complaint, no matter how desperate the mood. Smith captured this mood of desolation best with her metaphor of a man having swam “too far out” from a British beach, so alone in the tide that people on the shore can neither hear nor see him clearly. An individual flailing around in the depths of his life, the people who

## Compare & Contrast

- **1937:** Stevie Smith uses yellow carbon paper to type her first novel on a borrowed typewriter.

**1957:** The IBM 752 computer becomes the world's first business computer. The young company will sell 193 of these during the following year.

**1980:** IBM introduces its first personal computer and soon has 75 percent of the market. It uses a new Microsoft operating system called MS-DOS.

**1993:** The PC market is flooded by hundreds of PC "clones" and IBM announces its worst operating loss to date. The loss, \$4.6 billion, is the largest company loss recorded in history.

- **1957:** The Soviet Union launches the *Sputnik I* and *Sputnik II* satellites, the world's first man-

made Earth satellites. *Sputnik II* carries a live dog.

**1986:** The Soviet Union launches *Mir*, the first permanent space station, which accommodates 12 people for long periods of time.

- **1957:** Britain's *Report of the Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution* recommends an end to punitive laws against homosexuality "between consenting adults in private."

**1993:** A federal district judge rules that the Pentagon's 11-year-old ban on homosexuals is unconstitutional. The military, although no longer allowed to turn away any person on the basis of sexual orientation, chooses a loosely-defined "don't ask, don't tell" enrollment policy to maintain its status quo.

thought they knew him did not realize that he was "not waving but drowning" until it was too late, his limp body lying on shore. Smith herself was not immune to depression, often suffering long bouts of sadness during the years surrounding the poem's publication. Like the man who corrects the bystanders "no, no, no, it was too cold always," Smith herself attempted suicide a few months after the book was released in 1957.

### Critical Overview

Critic Catherine Civello, writing for *The Explicator*, described Smith's "Not Waving but Drowning" as "a one-sided dialogue between a dead man and his former acquaintances," which offers "two interpretations of [a] death by drowning." She pointed out how the crowd's "metaphorical deafness" reflects the man's overall failure to communicate during his lifetime, resulting in a "spiritual alienation" from the others. Writers for *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry in Eng-*

*lish* have pointed out that the themes of alienation and death are not exclusive to "Not Waving but Drowning" but rather "preoccupied [Smith] in her later work, often seen in a whimsical and even sprightly way, as if death were almost someone to be comfortably welcomed." Civello shed further light on this statement by reminding us of some revealing biographical history on Smith: two months after the publication of "Not Waving but Drowning" in 1957, Smith attempted suicide.

Other scholars have focused their interpretations on Smith's tongue-in-cheek tone, fractured voice, and seemingly childish use of form. Critics for the *Oxford Companion* characterized her work as often having "quick changes of tone, abrupt ver-rings between comic and tragic, absurd and solemn, and a range of lyrical, satirical, discursive and flip-pant modes." Linda Hallett contended in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* that Smith combined "a deceptively simple form and mannered language with serious themes." What remains deceptive in her work for many of these critics is the childish simplicity of her style versus what Hallett called "the mysterious, rather sinister reality which lurks

behind appealing or innocent appearances." Hallett also suggested that Smith's nursery-rhyme voice for deeply introspective subjects and her ability to so subtly shift points of view "means that apparently straightforward pronouncements are constantly being reassessed, questioned, transformed by irony."

## Criticism

### Tyrus Miller

*Tyrus Miller teaches comparative literature and English at Yale University, and has written extensively on twentieth-century poetry, fiction, and visual culture. In the following essay, Miller describes how Smith, in only 12 lines, makes possible multiple interpretations and presents a surprising and unexpected level of despair.*

"Not Waving But Drowning," written in April of 1953, is Stevie Smith's most highly regarded poem. Its simple, seemingly dashed-off stanzas and spare, conversational diction lend the work its deceptive lightness. At first glance, it appears to be a poetic version of an old joke about two friends diving down deeper and deeper, one following the other, which concludes with the ironic punch line, "I'm not waving, you idiot! I'm drowning!" At the same time, however, its uncanny dead man's voice shares something of the macabre irony of the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale in which the mermaid, granted her wish for feet, appears to dance, but is really suffering excruciating pain with every step on dry land. The poem also brings to mind the disquieting twist in Franz Kafka's parable of the sirens, bird-like sea creatures who lure sailors to their death, not through malicious intent, but because their cries of lamentation sound so beautiful to human ears.

In fact, with her masterful control of tone, Smith encourages us to misrecognize at first her poem's more serious claims on us, forcing us to do an embarrassed double take, as if we ourselves—as readers—had mistaken the cries of a drowning man for mere "waving and larking" (British slang for "playing") in verse. Significantly, Smith wrote the poem when she was deeply depressed, "too low for words," she said. At the same time, with more than a little touch of grim wit, she also recognized its potential comic dimension, going so far as to claim that it might be right for the British humor magazine *Punch*. But for all her light-hearted wav-

ing, her skating on the edge of a joke grown thin, the poem is a signal to the reader not to linger too long in the error of the dead man's friends. The poet's wave should be understood for what it is: a pen-hand thrown up in a plea for help before the darkness covers her over and the chill of her life breaks her heart.

The spareness of Smith's poem—a mere twelve lines, and some of those repeated or nearly repeated—conceals the richness of meanings implied even in the simplest, most straightforward passages. The poem apparently presents two main voices, ironically juxtaposed and alternating throughout the poem: the dead man's moaning and the mistaken voices of "they," his friends and acquaintances. The interplay between these two voices dramatizes the main theme of misinterpreting signs, such as taking cries for help as playful greetings and understanding bitter expressions of despair for joking and fun. But Smith manipulates her point of view in more complicated ways, lending multiple facets to the rather obvious irony of the situation and allowing her poem to cast its reflections upon its author and not just on its characters.

Thus, for example, the first two lines—"Nobody heard him, the dead man, / But still he lay moaning"—present the reader with an immediate paradox: how could a dead man be moaning, and if nobody heard him, who is reporting this fact? What is this view from nowhere, this narration by nobody? In these lines, a third voice quietly announces its presence in the poem, but at the same time conceals its true nature from us. While the interests and emotions of the two main voices are clearly defined—the one anguished, the other oblivious and facile—we can only guess what this voice of the "nobody" who gives witness must think and feel. It appears in only two other lines, line 8 ("They said.") and line 10 in parentheses ("Still the dead one lay moaning"). This shadowy figure listens in and interprets what is there to hear, both the words that are spoken and the unexpressed ideas drawn out of the silence of death. Implicitly, the figure's few lines contrast with the short, easy words the man's acquaintances use to explain his death and turn to other things, to the painful moaning of the dead man, which forces itself on the ears of this "nobody," and which, Smith suggests, must go on and on because there are no words ever to bring his lament to an end.

Smith uses pronouns with great subtlety in the poem, again exploiting a minimum of means to a richness of effect. It is notable just how many dif-

## What Do I Read Next?



- Stevie Smith often illustrated her collections of poetry with playful and eccentric drawings, which contribute to interpretations of the poems they illustrate. A good example of this occurs in her book *A Good Time Was Had By All*, 1937.
- Smith was also a well-respected fiction writer and playwright. You can read some of her prose in the recently released *A Very Pleasant Evening with Stevie Smith: Selected Shorter Prose*, 1995.
- Smith published nine books of poetry in her lifetime, including *Not Waving but Drowning*. Two additional collections appeared after her death. Beginning with her first collection, *A Good Time Was Had By All* (1937), Smith embellished her

work with sketches, lending insight to her poems. Her three novels, like her poetry, are highly autobiographical, as well as similar in theme, language and structure. In fact, she frequently infused her novels with poetry. The poem "Over-Dew," for example, first appeared in her novel *The Holiday* (1949).

- Contemporaries of Smith include W. H. Auden and C. Day Lewis, though their works vary significantly. Smith claimed to have been influenced instead by such poets as William Blake, Alfred Tennyson, George Herbert, and John Donne. Even so, a comprehensive source on British poetry of the 1950s is *The Movement: British Poets of the 1950s* (1993).

---

ferent pronouns she employs in a mere twelve lines: "nobody," "he / him," "I / my," "you," "it," "they," and "one." Pronouns, generally speaking, mark positions in speech which different persons or things can fill as a conversation or story progresses: I am "I" when I refer to myself, but "you" when addressed by another and "he" when referred to in another's narration. By constantly shifting the pronouns in this way, Smith gives her poem a kind of multidimensional quality, as if with each change of pronoun a new, previously unseen facet of a sculpture were turned to the reader.

Smith also achieves fine effects through careful repetition and variation of her pronouns. Thus, for example, the "he" in line 2 ("But still he lay moaning") is pronounced by the unidentified third voice, while the "he" in lines 5 and 6 ("Poor chap, he always loved larking / And now he's dead") is spoke by "they." Even though the same pronoun has been repeated, the perspective has shifted, and the narrator who hears and understands the dead man's moans is differentiated from the others who hear nothing. Analogously, in the near-repetition of the first two lines in line 10, Smith introduces a slight, but significant variation: "the dead man" in

the opening lines becomes "the dead one" when the phrase returns in the last stanza. It is as if, in the time it took for "they" to pronounce their uncomprehending words, the dead man's body had already begun to decay. No longer recognizable as a man it has lost its form and figure and become an impersonal thing, a "one" or mere corpse. This variation, then, does more than add verbal texture to the poem's very minimal diction. It also implies, with great delicacy and economy, the movement of time and the all-too-rapid withdrawal of the attention of the living—including the poet and the reader—from the dead man, who will continue to suffer his death alone just as he once did his life.

To similar ends, Smith exploits the possibility of grammatical ambiguities in particular lines, allowing them to be read in more than one way, depending on what part of speech a word is taken to represent. In fact, this technique can be seen as a kind of "vertical" equivalent to the repetition of words or phrases as the poem progresses. Although the line only appears once, it is as if it were an overlay of several repeated readings, each with a different emphasis. The most striking instance of this technique is Smith's use of the word "still" in lines

2 and 10. "Still" can have a temporal sense, meaning something is continuing: The snow is *still* falling. It can also, however, mean "unmoving," an appropriate adjective to use for a dead man. It can mean "silent," as in the night was still and peaceful; this third sense heightens the paradox of the dead man's moaning and speaking. Nobody heard him speak, perhaps, because his speech was "still," or silent. Finally, "still" can indicate a concession on the part of a speaker: "He's made some mistakes, but *still*, he's a good president." Smith's syntax allows us to construe "still" not as referring to the man, but rather as qualifying the unidentified narrator's testimony: "Nobody heard him. Still (all the same), he lay moaning." Once again, this ambiguity significantly complicates the simple surface of the poem, so easy, at first glance, to understand. Smith thus dramatizes how apt we are to overlook hidden depths by taking things to be simple, unproblematic, and without need of closer attention. The ambiguities of the poem stand as a warning: a simple word may no more mean just what it says than a wave need always be a sign of friendly greeting and happy larking.

Finally, Smith uses the forms and relations of the stanzas themselves to intensify the pathetic contrast between the dead man's lament and the survivors' obliviousness to his anguish, both when he was living and after his death. The poem places the survivors' words in the second stanza, framed between two repetitions of the dead man's moaning complaint. This framing gives the dead man and his paradoxical speech-in-silence the first and last word, thus emphasizing the hasty, distracted quality of the survivors' words; they speak once and disappear, whereas the dead man keeps speaking to the end. The irregular, choppy rhythms of the second stanza further accentuate our sense that the survivors would like to finish their perfunctory show of grief and to turn to other, more pleasant tasks as soon as possible. The shortest lines of the poem—"And now he's dead," (line 6) and the abrupt "They said" (line 8)—surround the long, but breathless run-on phrase, "It must have been too cold for him his heart gave way" (line 7). The lack of punctuation emphasizes that these are ready-made phrases, thrown together haphazardly, easily rolling off the tongue, and just as readily disposed of once used.

The dead man's words, in contrast, return further enriched when they reappear in the closing stanza. When lines 3 and 4 are repeated and varied in lines 11 and 12, they take on a new, metaphor-



*The poet's wave  
should be understood for  
what it is: a pen-hand  
thrown up in a plea for  
help before the darkness  
covers her over and the chill  
of her life breaks her  
heart."*

ical sense. "I was much too far out all my life / And not waving but drowning" has become an image not only for the man's way of dying, but also for his way of living. It is a fitting close to his life that his acquaintances mistook his flailing distress for happy waves, since they always mistook his "larking," his joking and play, to imply a lack of trouble instead of his way of fighting against the dark waters closing over him. He was always "too cold" and his heart had already given way and been broken by his lonely isolation long before he literally suffered this fate. It is this metaphorical resonance in the repeated lines that gives the poem its full pathos and lends it a deep uncanniness. For not only does the dead man continue to moan and speak as if he were still alive, but he also tells us that when he was alive, and could still speak, he was in a sense already silent, "still," and dead. His ghostly life-in-death, then, is no more than a sad continuation of his solitary death-in-life.

Source: Tyrus Miller, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 1998.

### **Janice Thaddeus**

*In the following excerpt, Thaddeus points out Smith's preoccupation with death—many times for effect—and explores the reason why the poems with this focus are often "unrelentingly merry."*

Florence Margaret Smith, who retained her nickname Stevie throughout her adulthood and published under its androgynous rubric, reveled in incongruities. Her poetic speakers shift from male to female, conformist to nonconformist, simple to complex, and adult to child; at times, indeed they are both alive and dead. She frequently set her po-

ems to well-known tunes and sang them rather tonelessly to willing listeners, and she often appended sketches whose relationship to the text is problematic. Her syntax is odd, her rhymes unexpected, her numbers idiosyncratic, and as a result her work is nearly always lively and original. Her poems have an immediate appeal, and yet many of them bear considerable rereading. The frequent incongruities chiefly account of the double effect.

Smith's odd juxtapositions and her love of paradox invite comparison—not infrequently pursued by her critics—to Blake. She herself was aware of the parallel, even calling one of her poems "Little Boy Lost." Like Blake she writes parables, redefines Christianity, addresses animals, sees angels, uses simple language, and illustrates her poetry, but in all essentials she and Blake are significantly different. Blake's is a handy-dandy world where justice and thief change places, and so is Stevie Smith's; but Blake's humor is rarer and more likely to serve an ultimate if not an ulterior purpose. Smith's humor is embodied and pervasive, more like the sort of extra joy which Coleridge called the "blossom of the nettle." ...

Death, both natural and induced, was Stevie Smith's primary subject, at least partly because she knew that she could rivet and audience with it. She enjoyed invoking what I would designate as "the gleeful macabre." Kay Dick writes in *Ivy and Stevie* that in 1970, when the Queen gave Smith a medal, "the poor darling kept asking me questions about poetry. I rather got the impression it wasn't her favorite subject ... and I got rather nervous and said, 'I don't know why, but I seem to have written a lot about murder lately,' ... and the smile got rather fixed." Stevie Smith's humor often—and quite deliberately—evokes the fixed smile and nervous giggle.

Her interest in death was not a pose. Her central assumption, the core of her nature, was the recognition that death is always available, the only friend who is as close as the river, waiting in every bottle of aspirin: "'two hundred and I am free,' / He said, 'from anxiety.'" Death was "end and remedy"; "I cannot help but like Oblivion better / Than being a human heart and human creature." Even in a 1970 anthology for children [titled *The Batsford Book of Children's Verse*], Smith mentioned in her introduction the freeing knowledge that death is available; and she chose to include the "fiercer" romantic efforts, together with Blake's sick rose and Nashe's falling brightness. Predictably, her American publishers insisted on publishing the book as an adult anthology.

We are all familiar with twentieth-century poetry which exalts suicide, especially poetry by women. But the feeling in Stevie Smith is quite different from that in Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. Plath's "Lady Lazarus" is clenched in anger and pain: "I do it so it feels like hell." Sexton's death wish is egotistical, witchlike, six-fingered. Smith's suicidal speakers are more serene, severed from the poet herself by the fact that they are almost invariably male. Although they are sometimes trivial or absurd, they do not rake and claw their friends and lovers as they go, and death itself is a gentle alternative to the complexities of life—"Those sweet seas the deepen are my destiny / And must come if not soon."

Being always ready for death requires a special kind of life. Smith herself said [in *Ivy and Stevie*], "I love life. I adore it, but only because I keep myself well on the edge. I wouldn't commit myself to anything. I can always get out if I want to." Rejection and withdrawal, a diffidence in commitment—these are often the subjects of the poems. Affection is not simply spread around ... rather, there is a general hesitation. This gingerliness is the quality which perhaps most severely distinguishes Smith's content from Blake's....

Certainly uneasiness, melancholy, the closeness of death are always lurking near Stevie Smith's poems, no matter what the subject. The poems are unkind, even misanthropic at times, and God himself is not free from blame. Why then, is the effect unrelentingly merry? ...

Stevie Smith rarely holds out ... hope. She more frequently depicts the comic poignancy of the here and now. This comic poignancy is the message of what is probably her best-known poem, "Not Waving but Drowning." ...

This poem is the cry of a child, but of a child who has lived long enough to look like an adult. Most adults learn to stay near shore, but this male speaker was "much too far out all my life." He is dead, yet he still speaks. He pities himself, yet everyone else thought "he always loved larking"; they never saw through the external merriment into the sadness. Stevie Smith at times reveled in her melancholy, vied to be sadder than anyone else. "If you attempt to be more melancholy than me I shall be more than furious: I shall be *hurt*. I felt too low for words (eh?) last weekend, but worked it off for all that in a poem, and *Punch* like it, think it *funny* I suppose, it was touching, I thought—called 'Not Waving but Drowning.'" Although she twitted *Punch* for finding the poem funny, her own illus-

tration is decidedly incongruous. The speaker is a man, but here we have a girl surely standing only waist deep, neither waving nor drowning, simply peering through wet hair. Stevie Smith said she chose her illustrations arbitrarily, but seeming capriciousness is a technique in her poetry, and simply because an illustration seems incongruous is no reason to dismiss it. The illustration in this case can only pique the reader's amusement. By adding this picture, Smith further intermingled all the experiences we are busily docketing, and trounced our fears of death and other inevitabilities. Later, even at that moment when her brain tumor had weakened her beyond repair, she could laugh at her own extinction; note one final time the fact that Death is the only God who is dutiful, and demote him to a lowercase *g*: "Ah me, sweet Death, you are the only god / Who comes as a servant when he is called." Her *danse macabre* is always so vital, death and life seem to be so inextricably mixed, that we leave her feeling braver, able to laugh at whatever comes our way.

Source: "Stevie Smith and the Gleeeful Macabre" in *Contemporary Poetry*, Vol. 3, 1978, pp. 36-49.

### **Philip Larkin**

*In the following excerpt, poet Philip Larkin challenges the notion that Smith's poems are strictly lighthearted, and he praises the originality and uniqueness of her verse.*



*[S]he is always at  
her most characteristic  
when uttering the  
unexpected that once  
expressed is never  
forgotten. Her most  
celebrated poem, 'Not  
Waving but Drowning'  
does precisely this...."*

---

### Sources

- Civello, Catherine, "Smith's Not Waving But Drowning," in *The Explicator*, Heldref Publications, 1983, pp. 58-9.
- Dick, Kay, *The Poet Speaks*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966.
- Hallett, Linda Rahm, "Stevie Smith," in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 20: *British Poets* Detroit: Gale, 1983, pp 346-50.
- Hamilton, Ian, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-century Poetry in English*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 501.

### For Further Study

- Bedient, Calvin, *Eight Contemporary Poets: Charles Tomlinson, Donald Davie, R. S. Thomas, Philip Larkin, W. S. Graham*, London: Oxford University Press, 1974.
- Bedient anthologizes poems from eight post-World War II British poets, offering biographical information and criticism for each.
- Civello, Catherine, *Patterns of Ambivalence: The Fiction and Poetry of Stevie Smith*, Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1997.
- Civello draws from social history, psychoanalytic theory, feminist philosophy, and literary criticism to offer a new reading of Smith's work, particularly conflicting desires toward life, love, self, and God in her poetry.
- Day, Gary, and Brian Docherty, eds. *British Poetry from the 1950s to the 1990s: Politics and Art*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997.
- This comprehensive book draws from political and artistic criticism to offer historical context to post-World War II British poetry.
- Severin, Laura, *Stevie Smith's Resistant Antics*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997.
- Severin's extensive study challenges the popular notion of Smith as an eccentric and apolitical poet, instead portraying her as a well-connected literary insider.

**Source:** "Frivolous and Vulnerable" in *Required Writings: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983, pp. 153-58.



# Ode to a Nightingale

*John Keats*

1819

In the spring of 1819, the months during which Keats wrote four of the five great odes, Keats stayed with his friend Charles Brown in Wentworth Place, Hampstead. Brown later wrote the following account, which may offer the reader insight about the experience expressed in "Ode to a Nightingale":

... A nightingale had built her nest near my house. Keats felt a tranquil and continual joy in her song; and one morning he took his chair from the breakfast table to the grass plot under a plum tree, where he sat for two or three hours. When he came into the house, I perceived he had some scraps of paper in his hand, and these he was quietly thrusting behind the books. On inquiry, I found those scraps, four or five in number, contained his poetic feeling on the song of our nightingale.

In the ode, the speaker responds to the beauty of the nightingale's song with a both "happiness" and "ache." Though he seeks to fully identify with the bird—to "fade away into the forest dim"—he knows that his own human consciousness separates him from nature and precludes the kind of deathless happiness the nightingale enjoys. First the intoxication of wine and later the "viewless wings of Poesy" seem reliable ways of escaping the confines of the "dull brain," but finally it is death itself that seems the only possible means of overcoming the knowledge and fear of time. The nightingale, after all, is "immortal" because it "was not born for death" and cannot conceive of its own passing. Yet without consciousness, humans cannot experience beauty, and the speaker knows that if he were dead





John Keats

his perception of the nightingale's call would not exist at all. This paradox shatters his vision, the nightingale flies off, and the speaker is left to wonder whether his experience has been a truthful "vision" or a false "dream."

### Author Biography

Born in 1795, Keats, the son of a stablekeeper, was raised in Moorfields, London, and attended the Clarke School in Enfield. The death of his mother in 1810 left Keats and his three younger siblings in the care of a guardian, Richard Abbey. Although Keats was apprenticed to an apothecary, he soon realized that writing was his true talent, and he decided to become a poet. Forced to hide his ambition from Abbey, who would not have sanctioned it, Keats instead entered Guy's and St. Thomas's Hospitals in London, becoming an apothecary in 1816 and continuing his studies to become a surgeon. When he reached the age of twenty-one, Keats was free of Abbey's jurisdiction. Supported by his small inheritance, he devoted himself to writing. Keats also began associating with artists and writers, among them Leigh Hunt, who published Keats's first poems in his journal, the *Examiner*. But within a few years the poet experienced the

first symptoms of tuberculosis, the disease that had killed his mother and brother. He continued writing and reading the great works of literature. He also fell in love with Fanny Brawne, a neighbor's daughter, though his poor health and financial difficulties made marriage impossible. He published a final work, *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and Other Poems*, which included his famous odes and the unfinished narrative, *Hyperion: A Fragment*. Keats travelled to Italy in 1820 in an effort to improve his health but died in Rome the following year at the age of 26.

### Poem Text

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains  
 My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,  
 Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains  
 One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:  
 'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,  
 But being too happy in thine happiness—  
 That thou, light-wingéd Dryad of the trees,  
 In some melodious plot  
 Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,  
 Singest of summer in full-throated ease.

O, for a draught of vintage! that hath been  
 Cool'd a long age in the deep-delvéd earth,  
 Tasting of Flora and the country green,  
 Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth!  
 O for a beaker full of the warm South,  
 Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,  
 With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,  
 And purple-stainéd mouth;  
 That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,  
 And with thee fade away into the forest dim:

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget  
 What thou among the leaves hast never known,  
 The weariness, the fever, and the fret  
 Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;  
 Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,  
 Where youth grows pale, and specter-thin and  
 dies;  
 Where but to think is to be full of sorrow  
 And leaden-eyed despairs,  
 Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,  
 Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow.

Away! away! for I will fly to thee,  
 Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,  
 But on the viewless wings of Poesy,  
 Though the dull brain perplexes and retards:  
 Already with thee! tender is the night,  
 And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,  
 Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays;  
 But here there is no light,  
 Save what from heaven is with the breezes  
 blown  
 Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy  
 ways.

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,  
 Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,  
 But, in embalméd darkness, guess each sweet  
 Wherewith the seasonable month endows  
 The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;  
 White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;  
 Fast fading violets cover'd up in leaves;  
 And mid-May's eldest child,  
 The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,  
 The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.

Darkling I listen; and, for many a time  
 I have been half in love with ease! Death,  
 Call'd him soft names in many a museéd rhyme,  
 To take into the air my quiet breath;  
 Now more than ever seems it rich to die,  
 To cease upon the midnight with no pain,  
 While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad  
 In such an ecstasy!  
 Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in  
 vain—  
 To thy high requiem become a sod.

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!  
 No hungry generations tread thee down;  
 The voice I hear this passing night was heard  
 In ancient days by emperor and clown:  
 Perhaps the self-same song that found a path  
 Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for  
 home,  
 She stood in tears amid the alien corn;  
 The same that oft times hath  
 Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam  
 Of perilous seas, to faery laods forlorn.

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell  
 To toll me back from thee to my sole self!  
 Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well  
 As she is fated to do, deceiving elf.  
 Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades  
 Past the near meadows, over the still stream,  
 Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep  
 In the next valley-glades:  
 Was it a vision, or a waking dream?  
 Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?

### Poem Summary

#### Lines 1-10:

The ode opens midway through an experience that might seem typically “poetic”: the speaker is alone and undergoing an emotional response to something of extreme natural beauty—the nightingale’s song. Some readers have argued that the physical setting is actually daytime and that the nocturnal imagery predominating much of the poem is only symbolic. The woods, after all, are described as “beechen green”—a color the speaker might not detect in darkness—and as casting “shadows numberless” from, it might seem, some source of light. Yet later in the ode the speaker envisions

many objects he cannot physically “see.” Further, the sum effect of infinite shadow must be full darkness, a highly figurative description but one most readers probably comprehend without much resistance. Lastly, the nightingale, as its name suggests, is famed (especially in literature) to sing at night.

External sight, however, is important more in its absence than in its presence. At night, internal visions often replace the physical world that darkness obscures. In keeping with this, the poet describes a “numbness” of his senses comparable to that brought on by poison or by “some dull opiate.” Further, he never actually witnesses the nightingale. Instead, its presence is revealed only by sound, as later the qualities of the woods are revealed by scents. The bird’s song haunts the speaker until his “heart aches,” but the ache is not simply a form of loneliness or self-pity. Rather, it is the ache we sometimes experience in the presence of great beauty—the ache of wanting to bridge the distance between ourselves and the object of beauty, to perhaps possess the object or even to “become” it. Keats once described this impulse while criticizing a painting by the American Benjamin West, whose work Keats felt lacked the aesthetic urgency necessary to create such an ache: “There is nothing to be intense upon,” he wrote of the painting; “no woman one feels mad to kiss; no face swelling into reality.” Thus, the speaker’s pain, while genuine, is also a type of happiness—of “being too happy in thine (the nightingale’s) happiness.” This is the first of the ode’s many paradoxes—happiness in pain—but the reader also must note the ease with which one thing becomes another even in the first stanza. The nightingale already has transformed into something more than a bird. It is a wood-nymph, a “light wingéd Dryad,” which suggests the qualities of nature that are apart from man’s experience. The “ache” compels the speaker to attempt to identify with—to get closer to—these natural qualities. His own qualities—the aspects of human consciousness, which create man’s essential separation from nature—stand in the way.

#### Lines 11-20:

The speaker first considers wine as a means of overcoming the consciousness that separates him from the nightingale. Wine is obviously associated with “dance,” “song,” and “mirth”—three activities or states that temporarily make us forget ourselves. Wine has also played a role in the ceremonies of many religions, including those of the ancient Greek Dionysian cult and Christianity. The

use of wine in religious rituals hints at the connection people have made between the effects of intoxicating drugs and achieving transcendental experiences: that by quieting or changing the normal state of human consciousness, a person might enter a state of spiritual inspiration. Keats addresses this possibility in other poems. Here, he associates wine with the Provençal troubadours, whose songs attempted to identify completely with the beloved, and with the “warm South,” where life is imagined to be lived in an easier and less self-conscious manner. Similarly, the speaker considers wine to be, like the nightingale, both immune to the pressures of time (it is “cool’d a long age”) and a symbol of organic nature (the “deep-delved earth, tasting of Flora and the country green”). Finally, he compares wine with the waters of the “blushful Hippocrene,” the fountain of poetic inspiration, which the speaker considers to be “full of the true.” Drunk, the speaker hopes, he can “leave the world unseen,” fading with the nightingale away from the concerns of man and “into the forest dim,” which is the unthinking state of nature.

**Lines 21-30:**

In mythology, to drink the waters of the Lethe (the river of Hades) is to forget the sadness of life, yet to reach the Lethe one must first die. Thus, death is oblivion and vice-versa. In the third stanza, the speaker focuses on the forgetfulness of death. He wishes to enter the “immortal” world of the nightingale, to “leave the world unseen” and to “dissolve, and quite forget” the sufferings of a human world overshadowed by the knowledge of death. That world, characterized by “weariness” and “fret,” is one ravaged by the consequences of human foresight, “where but to think is to be full of sorrow.” Because consciousness brings on “leaden-eyed despairs,” youth lives under the gloom of death and beauty becomes tainted by the knowledge that it is passing. Thus, under the normal conditions of man’s existence, both beauty and the response to beauty are undermined by the limiting nature of time and death. In contrast, the nightingale does not need to “forget” or to be numbed by wine. On the contrary, it “has never known” the fear of time and death because it does not “think.” It therefore can enjoy a “happy lot” and sing “of summer in full-throated ease.”

**Lines 31-40:**

After the highly lyricized affirmation of his intent (“Away! Away! for I will fly to thee”), the speaker selects as his means of escape “the view-

less wings of Poesy” instead of wine. The choice between the two seems to acknowledge something about their relationship. In his letters Keats insists that poetry—or the intense, poetic identification with some external object—enables a person to transcend the rational “meaning” of his own existence. More than escapism, Keats considered this power a kind of “Negative Capability” inherent in man, the ability to overcome the “doubts” and “uncertainties” of life through the selfless regard for beauty. This idea calls to mind the songs of the troubadours. Intense poetic fancy, like wine, releases a person from the clarity and logic of the “dull brain.” This type of vision is “viewless” because it originates from the spirit rather than from the eyes, yet even in physical darkness the world of the nightingale is mysteriously illuminated by the “Queen-moon and her starry Fays.” This light from “heaven” is enough to produce rich, “verdurous” visions of nature. Thus, though the speaker “cannot see,” the visions produced by his imagination are among the most beautiful and sensuous in the poem.

**Lines 41-50:**

The reader should note the sonic devices that contribute to the sensuous effect of the fifth stanza. One of these is the alliteration of the “m” sound in the final three lines: “mid-May,” “coming,” “musk-rose,” “murmurous,” and “summer.” Another is the assonance, or the repetition of internal strong-vowel sounds, that occurs throughout the stanza: “flowers,” “boughs,” “child,” “wine,” “flies,” etc. These sonic devices emphasize the natural beauty of the nightingale’s world. Curiously, though the speaker “cannot see,” the woods’ beauty is conveyed through “sight” details: “white hawthorn,” “violets covered up in leaves.” Because the darkness precludes the speaker’s physical perception of these sights, we must assume they represent an ideal world conjured in the speaker’s imagination: the nightingale’s world. In such a world, death is portrayed far differently than in the human world of stanza three, where “men sit and hear each other groan.” “Embalmed darkness,” which in human terms might be associated with the grave, is here depicted as the natural aroma of “sweet” organic growth. While the violets are “fast fading,” their death is a natural consequence of the “seasonable” progression that leads to “the coming musk-rose” and “flies on summer eyes.” Thus, death has its place in the natural order of things. By yielding to new life, death is in fact part of the process of fertility and regeneration, which is a form of immortality.

**Lines 51-60:**

Having become attuned to nature's "immortal" process of death and fertility, the speaker in stanza six approaches the possibility that "it is rich to die." More than wine or even poetry, death here represents the consummate state of identification with the nightingale's world, for it is the knowledge of death that in stanza three marks the essential division between man and nature. The speaker has in mind an "easeful Death," a cessation "upon the midnight with no pain." To some readers, this might imply that the speaker would willingly die if death were not accompanied by physical suffering. But a likelier interpretation is possible. If the man's misery (the "leaden-eyed despairs" of stanza three) are brought on by consciousness ("to think is to be full of sorrow"), then to pass eternally from consciousness is to escape forever life's pain. Death, in other words, retains power only over a living man who is able to fear his own end; through death, therefore, death can be overcome. This, of course, has paradoxical implications. While the beauty of the nightingale's call reminds the speaker that consciousness is what alienates him from nature, the speaker also realizes that death would end his perception of that same immortal beauty: "Still wouldst thou (the nightingale) sing, and I have ears in vain."

**Lines 61-70:**

The speaker, the violets, and every individual thing born of nature must die. Yet the nightingale is an "immortal Bird." Since the speaker cannot reasonably believe one creature alone possesses the power to avoid physical death, other meanings for immortality must be suggested. In one sense, perhaps, it is the nightingale's call that is immortal. The same song (though sung by different individual nightingales) has been heard over time by all types of people—both "emperor and clown." Its beauty thus transcends the human boundaries of time, class, and even geography. Upon hearing the same call, the Biblical Ruth (or so the speaker imagines) felt the same sense of alienation the speaker has experienced. In this sense the call is immortal because it speaks to man in a way that does not change over time. In a second sense, the nightingale itself is immortal simply because it "was not born for death. Lacking the ability to think—and thus to foresee its own destiny—it cannot conceive of its own passing as humans can. It feels no rift between itself and the natural world whose song it sings with such "full throated ease." Free from fear, the nightingale is naturally immune

## Media Adaptations



- An audio cassette titled *John Keats: Poems*, is available from HighBridge Co.
- *Poetry of Keats* is available on audio cassette from Harper Audio.
- The Keats-Shelley Journal website can be accessed at: <http://www.luc.edu/publications/keats-shelley/ksjweb.htm>.

---

to the power death has over thinking humans and is, in a way, "immortal."

**Lines 71-80:**

The word "forlorn" has at least two meanings that may come into play in the transition between the last two stanzas. In one sense, the word means "deserted" or "abandoned," and this might apply to the "faery lands" of myth or the imagination. But in the transition the word calls to the speaker's mind a second meaning: "desperate" or "without hope." With this meaning, the word "is like a bell" that calls the speaker away from his vision and back to the objective world. Physically, we might assume the nightingale has simply flown away—"past near meadows, over the still stream" and finally into the next "valley-glades." But in fact the nightingale itself has never appeared in the poem. What departs is the sound of its song and along with it the speaker's vision. The language of departure recalls the speaker's earlier consideration of death: the song "fades" and is "buried." Yet the speaker's identification with the nightingale is already ended even as the bird flies off. He is drawn back into his "sole self"; the song has turned from "happy" to "plaintive." With the shattering of his identification, the speaker is left alone to puzzle over the experience. "Fancy," which before was a means to immortality, has become a "deceiving elf" who "cannot cheat so well." Thus, the final questions are ones of poetic consequence that the speaker cannot himself answer. Does the imaginative experience reveal truth, as in a "vision," or is it simply a pleasant but false form of escape, as a "dream"?

## Themes

### Consciousness

By the time he wrote "Ode to a Nightingale" in 1819, John Keats was familiar with the tribulations of life. He enumerates them in the third stanza of his poem: We must work and worry, grow old, become infirm, feel pain. Even "youth grows pale, spectre-thin, and dies." But far worse than the afflictions that come with being mortal, man must live with the *awareness* of age, death, and loss: "But to think is to be full of sorrow / and leaden-eyed despairs," he writes. Knowledge and reflection bring unhappiness. When we are still young we know that we will one day die; when we are in love, we know that beauty and love will one day pass. To this sorrowful self-awareness, Keats contrasts the unthinking happiness of the nightingale. "Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!" the poet says. Death cannot interfere with the nightingale's happiness because the nightingale knows nothing of death.

At the beginning of the "Ode," thought is weighing down on the poet. His "heart aches," he feels "a drowsy numbness," sensations which the unselfconscious happiness of the nightingale's song only seems to intensify. He longs to escape from consciousness. At first he speculates that wine will enable him to "fade away into the forest dim." But in the end he decides that there is only one vehicle that can transport him out of self-consciousness: Poesy, the imagination.

It works—for a while, at least. Keats is transported into a gentle bower, where the nightingale sings but is never seen. In the "Ode," vision represents conscious, reflective thought. "Here there is no light.... I cannot see," the bower is a place where self-consciousness does not exist. In the bower the poet has reached a state like unto the nightingale. He experiences pure sensation, nothing more. There is no past or future. He experiences everything as it is *now*. He is no longer aware of change. Things obviously change in the bower—"fast fading violets ... / The coming musk-rose"—but the poet no longer reflects on it.

Even death is somehow present in the little bower, indicated by the murmuring of the flies. But it is not something to be feared or lamented. Death is now "easeful" because it annihilates thought and ends the awareness of human misery forever. But as seductive as the idea of death is to Keats, the song of the nightingale makes him hesitate: If he were to die, he would be free of the cares of exis-

tence. But he would give up everything that might be precious to him, like the lovely song that has transported him to this blissful state.

Reflecting on the song, Keats is drawn back to his "forlorn" life, back into his "sole self." The song of the nightingale and its pure, unconscious happiness disappear. The poet's moment of self-forgetfulness ends. When he returns to normal awareness, he is not sure what has happened. The two modes of experience, conscious thought and unconscious perception, are so different that it is impossible to comprehend one with the other. Keats is left wondering which of the two is real: the mode of experience that has just slipped through his fingers, or the one he experiences now.

### Art vs. Experience

Keats compares the nightingale's song, which is "such an ecstasy," to everyday life, with its trials and troubles. Compared to the bird's "full-throated ease," the poet feels numb: in other words, he does not feel to the extent he should. The bird's "art" touches the poet and leads him to the same experience that will enable him to transcend normal experience. In this, imagination is the key. "The dull brain perplexes and retards," so he has to feel his way slowly toward heightened experience. It may be possible through wine, "the blushful Hippocrene." But the thought of wine draws him only more deeply into "the weariness, the fever, and the fret," and he realizes that only "Poesy," the imagination, and art can bring him to the heightened state he craves.

The change happens abruptly. And the two kinds of awareness are literally as different as night and day, for when the poet first hears the nightingale it is day, but after he is swept away "on the viewless wings of Poesy," it is suddenly night. He is in a universe where every sensation is heightened and meaningful, where "the Queen Moon is on her throne, / Cluster'd around by all her stary Fays." Even death takes on a new, artful meaning. Keats recalls the "soft names" he has called death. The nightingale's song makes death seem "rich" and inviting, until the poet realizes that to die would entail giving up the ecstatic song. He would "have ears in vain," Keats says, suggesting that the whole point of existence might be to experience art and beauty.

Besides presenting heightened, more meaningful experiences, art, embodied in the bird's song, lives forever, unlike everyday experience which passes quickly into nothingness. Through the ages,

art has been experienced by all classes, “emperor and clown”; it has consoled the sorrowful. But as important as it is to man, art cares nothing for its audience. It “oft-times hath / Charm’d magic casements ... / ... in faery lands forlorn”—it can exist just as fully realized in a land where there is no person to witness it. Suddenly a “bell” tolls. Keats is roused from the meditative trance he was in. Back in everyday consciousness, he realizes that the imagination falls far short of its reputation. The “deceiving elf” has teased him with the idea that he might be able to escape humdrum reality—that is what many consider the function of art—but the experience proved to be only temporary. Keats can only ask himself if the heightened perception achieved by Poesy was real or merely a dream.

### Style

The term ode is of Greek origin, meaning “sung.” While traditional examples of the form adhere to complex and strictly set patterns designed to be put to music, the ode by Keats’ time had undergone enough transformation that it really represented a manner—rather than a rigid method—for writing a certain type of poetry. In general, the ode of the Romantic era is a poem of 30 to 200 lines that meditates progressively upon or directly addresses a single object or condition. In addition to “Ode to a Nightingale,” Keats wrote odes about the season of autumn and a Grecian urn as well as about indolence, melancholy, and even the poet John Milton’s hair. Keats’s odes are characterized by an exalted and highly lyrical tone, and while they employ specific stanza forms and rhyme schemes, these can vary from ode to ode.

“Ode to a Nightingale” consists of eight, ten-line stanzas, each following a single rhyme scheme that combines the quatrain of a Shakespearean sonnet with the sestet of a Petrarchan sonnet. Thus, the first four lines of each stanza rhyme ABAB while the final six lines rhyme CDECDE. Generally the stanzas are thematically constructed in just the way their hybrid rhyme scheme would suggest. In a Shakespearean sonnet, the three quatrains present some problem or question to be reconciled in the final couplet. In a Petrarchan sonnet, a similar concept is reconciled in the last six lines. Thus, in “Ode to a Nightingale,” the quatrain of each stanza tends to present a problem or condition that is addressed, explained or elaborated in the sestet. In the first stanza, for instance, the quatrain describes the pain

## Topics for Further Study



- What might make the poet think his “normal,” waking life was a dream? Compile a list of images that suggest your everyday life is only a dream you are having.
- Keats writes “’Tis not through envy of thy happy lot, / but being too happy in thine happiness.” Why would sharing the nightingale’s happiness cause the poet feel unhappy?
- In “Ode to a Nightingale,” Keats uses various words to show that his ability to see is disappearing. What are some of them? Imagine you are in a familiar room or landscape. Describe it as completely as possible without describing anything you can see.

in the speaker’s heart and the numbness of his senses. The sestet reveals the cause of the pain: the nightingale’s song.

### Historical Context

#### Romanticism

The beginning of the Romantic movement in English poetry is usually identified with the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1798. Wordsworth’s “Preface” to the second edition described poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling.” This Preface crystallized the movement’s philosophy and became a Romantic manifesto.

The elder generation of Romantic poets was led by Coleridge, Wordsworth, and William Blake. This first generation of Romantic poets was profoundly revolutionary, and those beliefs became part of the Romantic worldview. Politically, they supported the ideals of the French Revolution and Napoleon. They rejected the new rational, scientific view of the world personified by Isaac Newton, and advocated replacing it with a new outlook, determined by art, nature, perception, and imagi-

## Compare & Contrast

- **1819:** Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* has been in print one year. It is the story of a scientist, Victor Frankenstein, who goes against natural and religious law and creates life in the laboratory. The creature kills everyone Frankenstein loves before destroying the doctor as well.

**Today:** Genetic engineers are able to modify the DNA in various food plants and domestic livestock to create essentially new types of living things with specific "designer" characteristics. One of the most ambitious scientific projects is the mapping of the entire human genome.

- **1819:** Hans Christian Oersted discovers that an electrical current will cause a magnetized needle to align itself along the direction of the electrical wire. This discovery shows that electricity and magnetism are different aspects of a single force.

**Today:** Spurred by the growth of the Internet and long-distance telephone companies, the United States is crisscrossed by a network of fiber optic cable, along which incredible amounts of information are transmitted via light impulses.

- **1819:** Police foil the Cato Street Conspiracy, a plot to assassinate the entire British cabinet. The plan was fomented by an disgruntled ex-soldier who believed that it was the duty of a true patriot to overthrow the government. Five conspirators are executed for high treason.

**Today:** Conspirators alleged to have blown up the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City are tried. One, a disgruntled ex-soldier who served in the 1991 Gulf War, is convicted and sentenced to death.

- **1819:** After publicity revealing the dangerous and unhealthy working conditions in cotton mills, the British Parliament passes a law prohibiting the employment of children under the age of nine in the mills. Children nine years of age and above are allowed to work no longer than twelve hours a day. This law is only sporadically enforced.

**Today:** In 1997, with 17 percent of Americans living below the poverty level, the minimum wage is increased for the first time in five years. Ten million Americans now earn the minimum wage of \$5.15 per hour. More than 36 million Americans lived below the poverty level in 1995.

---

nation. They opposed industrialization, which was quickly taking shape around them, and were highly critical of its effects on humanity and the natural world.

The younger generation of Romantics was comprised primarily of Percy Bysshe Shelley, Lord Byron, and John Keats. Their work, which represented the zenith of English Romantic poetry, reached its peak in the late 1810s. Shelley and Byron took up the activism of the earlier poets. Shelley's poem "Queen Mab," for example, was critical of the English monarchy, the church, marriage, and meat-eating. Keats and Shelley continued the earlier generation's quest for an idealized world; poetry and art were seen as privileged routes to

heightened, more genuine experience. Their search for transcendent knowledge led to their rejecting such middle-class values of family, work, and materialism which were then widespread. Lord Byron was particularly flamboyant in this respect. He flouted established ideas about marriage and respectability with a string of love affairs that stretched across the European continent. His active participation in various national liberation movements helped form the ideal of the Hero, an ideal that was important to the Romantic movement. The early success and early death of the three great later writers of Romanticism—Keats at 25, Shelley 30 and Byron 36—solidified the image of the doomed Romantic poet.



### **The Post-Napoleonic World**

By 1819 Europe was in the midst of a period of extreme conservatism, a backlash against the revolutionary upheavals prevalent at the turn of the century. The French Revolution had lasted much of the 1790s, followed by the rise of Napoleon and his wars of conquest in the first two decades of the 1800s. In 1815 the allied nations of Europe defeated Napoleon at Waterloo, ending the French emperor's quest of empire. The Congress of Vienna ushered in a "new" European order, restoring the French monarchy, all of which seemed to the Romantics and others a throwback to the previous century. The post-Napoleonic settlement at Vienna was intended to act as a guarantee against the outbreak of another continental war, like the one that had recently been fought against Napoleon, and the outbreak of lower-class revolution. It signaled—or seemed to signal—the end of any revolutionary activity that might upset the political order. To many artists who had seen true hope for mankind in revolutionary Europe, the renewed strength of reactionary forces was a cause for profound disappointment. Within four years, however, separatists in Spain and anti-Turkish revolutionaries in Greece had started uprisings which drew the support of many European artists, including poets like Lord Byron, who died while working with Greek freedom fighters.

### **The Industrial Revolution**

For the better part of fifty years, England had been undergoing a revolution of its own, one which was economic and technological, not political—though it had serious political ramifications. The Industrial Revolution, which historian Eric Hobsbawm called "probably the most important event in world history," began with the mechanization of the English cotton mills. The changes in work and production it introduced caused irreversible changes in life. The English Romantics, especially William Blake (who wrote of industrial England's "dark Satanic mills"), were among the first to understand the effects industrialization would have on individuals. The focus of life shifted from villages to cities, and from farms to factories. Skilled labor became less and less important. Unskilled women and children—the cheapest labor available—could be employed both in textile factories and mines. As the poor moved en masse into cities to be closer to the factories, they were crowded into cramped, unhealthy slums. The move from the country and the loss of age-old means of livelihood contributed at the same time to a loss of old forms of culture,

which the new mercantile society was unable and unwilling to replace.

### **Critical Overview**

Though Keats was often assailed by critics of his time, the great works of the *annus mirabilis* began receiving praise even as the poet himself was dying. In an essay dated 1820, John Scott writes particularly enthusiastically about the second-to-last stanza of "Ode to a Nightingale": "it is distinct, noble, pathetic, and true: the thoughts have all chords of direct communication with naturally constituted hearts: the echoes of the strain linger about the depths of human bosoms." Later critics, of course, came to regard "Ode to a Nightingale" as one of Keats's most important works and one of the great poems of the Romantic period. Douglas Bush writes in 1937 of the ode's weighing of the relationship between beauty and time. Though the nightingale's song is "an imperishable source of joy," Bush writes, the ode is not a "hymn of triumph" because it expresses the awareness that beauty must die: "Even when Keats proclaims the song of the bird is immortal ... his deepest emotions are fixed on the obverse side of his theme." Though Keats "tries to believe" in the eternal nature of beauty, "he is too intense a lover of the here and now ... to be satisfied with his own affirmations." Harold Bloom writes of the speaker's uncertain assessment of the experience in the final stanza, where the question is whether the poetic flight has been "fully manifest, as in a vision, or merely the latent content of a waking dream." In the end, Bloom writes, the speaker is left "pondering the contraries: Is the act and state of creation a heightening or merely an evasion of the state of experience? Once back in experience, the honest answer is in the continued question, both as to fact and to will: 'Do I wake or sleep?'"

### **Criticism**

#### **Fraser Sutherland**

*Fraser Sutherland is a writer based in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Here, Sutherland explores impersonality in "Ode to a Nightingale."*

The life and legend of John Keats sometimes gets in the way of understanding poems like "Ode to a Nightingale." Practically from the time of his

## What Do I Read Next?



- *The Letters of John Keats*. Letters are the primary source for the facts of the poet's life and offer a glimpse into his passionate personality.
- Thomas de Quincey also wrote during the Romantic period. He describes William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, two of the earliest English Romantic poets, in his *Reminiscences of the Lake Poets*.
- The Romantic movement spread throughout Europe and continues to be influential today. *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac is a novel which displays many of values that were important to the Romantic writers, notably a spirit of opposition to the effect of industrialization upon culture.

early death in 1821, Keats's literary reputation has never waned, though not everyone has liked his work. Writing not long before Keats died, Byron remarked in a letter that Keats's work was "a sort of mental masturbation.... I don't mean he is *indecent*, but viciously soliciting his ideas into a state, which is neither poetry nor any thing else but a Bedlam vision produced by raw pork and opium..." More soberly, Miriam Allott's pamphlet for the British Council (1976) speaks of "the debilitating prettinesses of his poetic language."

Nonetheless, Keats has endured, and like Shakespeare's, many of his lines and phrases have entered the common language: "half in love with easeful Death" and "To cease upon the midnight with no pain," to name two taken from "To a Nightingale" alone. F. Scott Fitzgerald took "tender is the night," another phrase from the poem, as the title for one of his best-known novels. There is even a current periodical, *The Keats-Shelley Journal*, devoted to him. There are several reasons for Keats's staying power, quite apart from the high merit of his work. First of all is the pathos of his short, afflicted life, an orphanhood that was conducted in stages. Aged nine, Keats lost his father; at ten, he lost his grandfather; at 15, his mother; at 19, his grandmother; at 23, his brother

Tom. Less than three years later he was dead himself of the tuberculosis that had killed his mother and brother.

Keats was no luckier in his love for Fanny Brawne. Toward the end of his life he was too sick to marry Fanny; earlier, he had been too poor. Born at the livery stable his father kept, Keats never had money, and his lifelong poverty was worsened by the fact that his legal guardian, Richard Abbey, was reluctant to give him any. He often relied on the generosity of several devoted friends, notably the poet, critic, and editor Leigh Hunt. The loyalty of his friends points to another element in the Keats legend; his sweetness and charm seems to have captivated everyone who knew him well. Beset by his own troubles, he never lacked sympathy for others' suffering, writing marvelously expressive and empathetic letters to Fanny and his family and friends. He was steadfastly fond of his sister and two brothers, one of whom, Tom, he nursed during the final months of his fatal illness.

Against this background, it is hardly surprising that Keats's poems, especially "To a Nightingale," often seem like elegies for himself, saved from self-pity by their sensuous qualities and sheer loveliness. Astonishingly, this large body of work was compressed into just five years, beginning at age 19. During the last year of his life, gravely sick, he wrote only letters. The fact that he died in Rome, to which he had ill-advisedly gone to recover from his tuberculosis, only added glamour to the legend.

A prime ingredient in the myth-making that surrounded Keats after his death was the supposed abuse he suffered at the hands of critics; his friend Percy Bysshe Shelley accused them of hounding him to death. "Adonais," Shelley's poem in tribute to Keats and, like "To a Nightingale" a permanent anthology piece, is at once eloquent, melodramatic, and misleading. "I weep for Adonais— he is dead!" Shelley begins, identifying Keats with Adonis, the handsome young man whom the goddess Venus loved and whom a wild boar killed. Identifying Keats's critics with a wild boar is about the kindest thing Shelley has to say about them; elsewhere in the poem he calls them reptiles, "herded wolves," "obscene ravens," "carrion kites," and vultures "whose wings rain contagion."

Shelley would not have been a Romantic poet if he had not been prone to overreaction, but what are the facts? Shelley was alluding to an anonymous negative review of Keats's *Endymion* in the *Quarterly* journal, later revealed to be by the Tory politician and critic John Wilson Croker, in any

event pale stuff compared to the editor and critic John Gibson Lockhart in *Blackwood's Magazine*. Beginning in 1817 Lockhart frequently attacked what he called the "Cockney School of Poetry," which included Keats, Leigh Hunt, and the critic William Hazlitt, all of whom were friends, Londoners, and of middle-class or working-class origins. A year later Lockhart described *Endymion* as having a "calm, settled, imperturbable drivelling idiosyncrasy."

Two points need to be made. First, people took poetry in Keats's time very seriously indeed, and critics regarded bad writing as a personal insult. A book of poems could be a bestseller, and among writers in our own century perhaps only Hemingway has had anything like the sort of immense fame Lord Byron and Sir Walter Scott enjoyed or contended with. Secondly, there is no evidence that harsh criticism daunted Keats, and may even have done him some good. He was tough-minded enough to give up pharmacy, for which he had been trained, so he could devote himself to writing poems. And, though his books sold poorly, he had fervent admirers in Hunt, Hazlitt, and Shelley, important names and active advocates. Two months after Keats's death, Byron wrote Shelley to say that the review of *Endymion* was "severe,—but surely not so severe as many reviews in that and other journals upon others." Byron was thinking of how he himself had often been savaged. In any case, Keats spat blood because of tuberculosis, not hostile commentary.

Just as we should not be blinded by the sad allure of Keats's life so we must approach "Ode to a Nightingale" in a spirit of caution. The message seems straightforward enough. Keats compares his pain-wracked and apparently doomed life to the beautiful, melodiously carefree song of a nightingale he hears one day in the forest. He longs for what the bird represents: warmth, wine, and "full-throated ease." Unlike him, it seems, "Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!" Then, like life and death, the bird vanishes, and all is silent.

"Ode to a Nightingale" is an odd poem because it both conforms to and contradicts some of the ideas he expresses elsewhere, notably the famous concept of "Negative Capability," first named in a 1817 letter to his brothers George and Tom. He considers "what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean *Negative Capability*, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, with-

out any irritable reaching after fact & reason...." This can be taken several ways, but is often linked with another famous statement, in a letter to his friend Benjamin Bailey, "If a sparrow come before my Window I take part in its existence and pick about the Gravel." Writing in 1818 to another friend, Richard Woodhouse, he says, "A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity." This total identification of the observer with the observed may be what Keats meant by the final two lines of "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (with which "Ode to a Nightingale" is often compared): "'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,' that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." As Walter Jackson Bates, perhaps the foremost Keats scholar, observed in *John Keats* (1963), the poet recommends that (like a playwright or novelist) we abandon our own egos in favor of participating in and identifying with the nature and character of another creature. Thus Shakespeare could be Hamlet, Macbeth, or Cordelia, and Keats could be a sparrow, a nightingale, or anything else he wanted. Yet this seemingly selfless objectivity works out differently in "To a Nightingale." For one thing, the "I" is very much front and center, and every carefully recorded detail of wood, stream, and bird is paralleled by the poet's understandable obsession with his own predicament. It is hard to imagine that Keats, in contrasting the nightingale's world with a world of pain and grief, was not thinking of himself when he spoke of a "youth" who "grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies." He may also have been thinking of Italy in longing for the "warm South" as a countervailing force to mortality. Italy exerted a great gravitational pull for Romantic poets: it attracted Byron in 1819, and Shelley a year later. As it happened, both Shelley and Keats died there.

The poem's texture also belies impersonality. Although not as excessively as in some other poems, Keats uses a highly artificial language, which was considered archaic even in 1819—"beechen green," "starry Fays [fairies]," "verdurous [freshly green] glooms." Nothing could be further from a transparent engagement with what is being observed. The wealth of allusions from Greek and Roman mythology (among the Romantic poets' work, only Shelley's is more saturated with classical myths) and one Biblical allusion (Ruth who, "sick for home," stands "in tears among the alien corn") also point toward art, not nature. Two phrases even unite these tendencies. The "blushful Hippocrene" alludes to the fountain of the Muses, here emblemized by a beaker of wine, and "charioted by



*Keats uses a highly artificial language, which was considered archaic even in 1819.*

---

Bacchus and his pards” refers to painters’ depiction of the god of wine in a chariot drawn by leopards. Of course, Keats is not just showing off his erudition. The timeless quality of myths is opposed to the transience of life. In “To a Nightingale” both the living and the eternal are combined. Even the transient birdsong, Keats says, “was heard / In ancient days by emperor and clown”.

All Keats’s references to nature are wonderfully exact but they too are artfully shaped by synaesthesia, the act of recording one sensation as if it were another, or mingling several together. Richard H. Fogle in *The Imagery of Keats and Shelley* (1949) has pointed out how Keats’s images are compressed, complex, yet quietly and absolutely right. The earth tastes of Flora, the goddess of flowers, and the beaker is “full of the warm South.” Moreover, the lines “With beaded bubbles winking at the brim, / And purple-stained mouth,” quickly move the reader from touching to tasting to seeing.

To these characteristic traits must be added what can only be called stylistic tics, the occasional note of uncouthness or grotesquerie mixed in with the metrical perfection. Lines like “The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves” or “To thy high requiem become a sod” were considered imagistically jarring by critics even in Keats’s day. But Keats died so young that it is impossible to know what stylistic directions he might have taken had he lived longer. Though he probably never would have become a systematic thinker, we may be sure that brilliant new insights would have matched new modes of expression.

While Keats’s begins his poem with “a drowsy numbness pains / My sense,” the poem that follows is anything but numb or drugged. But the opening ties in with the words that end the poem: “Fled is that music—Do I wake or sleep?” Life is or may be a dream—a very Shakespearean image—but, dreaming or awake, perception and empathetic participation are rooted in Keats’s own consciousness.

It is only in dreaming, Keats says, that we can become conscious of, and merged with, the life around us.

Source: Fraser Sutherland, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 1998.

### **Karl P. Wentersdorf**

*In the following essay, Wentersdorf discusses some of the history behind the imagery and symbols in “Ode to a Nightingale” as found in various works of literature since the classical era.*

It is commonplace that the greatest poems written by Keats embody the theme of love. Certainly his main preoccupation during the writing of the three long narrative poems published in the volume of 1820 was with the complexity of human love: its ambiguous nature (“Lamia”), its potential for pain and disaster (“Isabella”), and also its potential for ecstatic happiness (“The Eve of St. Agnes”). Enraptured as Keats was by his love for Fanny Brawne, he was not spared the agonies of frustration and jealousy. Since his torments were exacerbated by his weakening physical condition, there were times when he wished to banish love from his life; but it proved impossible to exclude altogether the motif of love from his work.

In the “Ode to a Nightingale,” as in the “Ode on a Grecian Urn” and “Ode on Melancholy,” Keats is concerned intellectually with the inexorable effects of the passage of time on beauty and on human love. The world of everyday realities is a place of weariness, frustration, and change, “Where beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes, / Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow.” What Keats wishes to do is to reach out to a world in which love and beauty are not subject to change. His prime symbol for the imaginative power that will take him on this journey is the nightingale, or more specifically its song.

His excursion in search of that unchanging world, made on the “the viewless wings of Poesy” carries him far away from the problems of humanity, out and up into the night sky, yet the trip does not provide him with a vision of an Elysian realm. There is nothing to be perceived, nothing to be recalled in tranquillity and set to paper, because “here there is no light.” After the “viewless” excursion is over, all that remains is the memory of the ineffable pleasure given by the nightingale’s song. That music, exquisitely melodious at the beginning of the poem and plaintive at the end, calls forth from the underground worship of the poet’s mind a series of images deriving ultimately from ancient

times, images that create an emotional sub-text for the poem. Through allusions to the experiences of those who have known the ecstasy of mortal love, Keats reveals his continuing delight at the thought of the joys of young lovers and his deep yearning for the fulfillment of his own unassuaged and incompletely suppressed desires.

The first of the images of love in "Ode to a Nightingale" is the apostrophe in stanza 1 to the nightingale as a "light-winged Dryad," pictured as being in "some melodious plot / Of beechen green." According to classical mythology, dryads were beautiful nymphs who inhabited the woods of the Mediterranean area; they were passionately pursued by satyrs or fauns with what post-classical writers have variously regarded either as carefree amorousness or as a brutish lust. Hence an allusion to dryads and satyrs (or fauns) has sufficed ever since classical times to conjure up the motif of the pursuit of love: as [English anecdotists] Joseph Spence put it [in his book *Polymetis*], "The chief passion, both of the Fauns and Satyrs, seems to have been for the nymphs," and one of their chief characteristics "is their lasciviousness." Occasionally poets are concerned only with the amorousness of the dryads: thus in the *Satires* of Propertius, Gallus is warned to protect his handsome slave-boy from the assaults of the dryads who burn to steal him; and in *Paradise Lost*, shortly before the seduction of Adam, Milton likens Eve to a "Wood-Nymph light, Oread or Dryad." Keats's awareness of the tradition is readily demonstrated: he alludes to it in *Lamia* when he states that "faery broods / Drove Nymph and Satyr from the prosperous woods" and Oberon "Frightened away the Dryads and the Fauns"; and in the poem "I stood tip-toe upon a little hill," he sympathizes with the unfulfilled love of the nymph Syrinx and the Acadian god Pan—"poor Nymph,—poor Pan." Hence when Keats writes in "Ode to a Nightingale" about the "happy lot" of the "light-winged Dryad" singing "of summer," the kind of song that he has in mind is one prompted by the natural preoccupation of the wood-nymphs in summertime—a song of love.

The nightingale was often linked with eros by classical, medieval, and Renaissance writers. It appears in *Paradise Lost* when Adam and Eve withdraw for their wedding night, and all creatures fall silent except for the nightingale singing "all night long her amorous descant"; and it reappears when Milton tells how the primal couple celebrated "the Rites / Mysterious of connubial love" and "lull'd

by Nightingales imbracing slept." To [English poet Samuel Taylor] Coleridge, the bird's delicious notes were a "love-chant" ("The Nightingale"). Keats's use of this literary tradition is exemplified in *Endymion*, where the nightingale, perched high among the leaves, "sings but to her love," and the summer melody which the bird in "Ode to a Nightingale" sings with "full-throated ease" is a symbol for the passion Keats yearned to be able to express without restraint.

The intimation in stanza 1 that the poem deals in a muted way with the theme of passionate love is supported by the implications of several images later in the poem. Thus stanza 2 contains allusions to manifestations of eros both in classical times and in the Middle Ages. The poet calls for wine, "Tasting of Flora and the country green, / Dance, and Provencal song, and sunburnt mirth!" Flora, whose festival was celebrated in Rome at the end of April and the beginning of May, was a goddess not only of flowers but also of fertility. The festivities of the *Floralia* signaled the annual renewal of life in nature, and they have been variously regarded as joyous revels or as licentious orgies. [Roman poet] Ovid, who gives a detailed account of the activities (*Fasti*), says that they are marked by wantonness greater than that manifested at other festivals, because Flora warns her devotees to use life's flower while it still blooms, and because the gifts she brings lend themselves to delights. In spite of strong opposition by the Church, the *Floralia* survived through the centuries as "the bringing in of May," and evidence for the enduring popularity of the festival in Britain is provided by the criticism of a sixteenth-century Puritan, by the poetry of [English poet Edmund] Spenser (*Shepherd's calendar*), and by the accounts of folklorists.

The traditional association of Flora with the activities of young lovers in the spring is frequently reflected in literature. According to [Guillaume de Lorris's and Jean de Meun's] *Roman de la Rose*, Flora and her husband Zephyrus each year bring forth the flowered counterpanes of the meadows for encouragement of lovers everywhere. The myth was well known to Spenser. [English poet Ben] Jonson, and Milton, and Keats himself makes frequent mention of it. Thus in the lyric "O come, dearest Emma!" the "riches of Flora" provide the romantic setting for the persona's "story of love"; in "Sleep and Poetry," the poet envisions the realm "Of Flora, and old Pan" as a place where he can pursue nymphs and "woo sweet kisses," and where one of the nymphs will entice him on "Till in the

bosom of a leafy world / We rest in silence" [in *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition*].

It is appropriate that in "Ode to a Nightingale" Flora is linked in stanza 2 with the medieval troubadours, for their songs were primarily associated with Flora and her festival. The love motif in Provençal literature proved to be more than merely a widely imitated literary convention: it helped to disseminate the idea that eros was potentially ennobling for the individual and to set in motion far-reaching changes in society. Although some critics feel skeptical about [English writer] C.S. Lewis's sweeping statement that the Renaissance itself is "a mere ripple of the surface of literature" compared with the ethical and artistic revolutions which began with the troubadours' praise of human love, it is undeniable that the modern romantic treatment of love in western literature had its origins in Provençal poetry.

The works of the troubadours were not known directly to most English writers of the Neo-classical and Romantic periods, but continental authorities persuaded them of the innovative achievements of the Provençal literary phenomenon. [English poet Alexander] Pope acknowledged that English love poetry originated in the poetry of Provence; [English literary historian and critic] Warton, after demonstrating how the "Provincial" bards had inspired medieval poets like Dante and Chaucer, noted [in his *The Four Ages of Poetry*] that the chief subject of troubadour poems was love; and [English novelist and poet] Peacock commented on "the exaggerated love that pervades the songs of the troubadours." It is to their role in the evolution of love poetry that Keats alludes in "The Eve of St. Agnes" when he says the Porphyro's love-song comes from Provence, and in stanza 2 of the Ode when he mentions "Provençal song."

In stanza 4, Keats returns to classical imagery as he enlarged on the concept of his imaginative journey through space:

Away! away! for I will fly to thee,  
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,  
But on the viewless wings of Poesy....  
Already with thee! tender is the night,  
And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,  
Cluster'd around by all her starry fays.

Here the imagery is more complex in its import. Keats's disclaimer—the statement that his flight is made not in the chariots of Bacchus but on the wings of poesy—involves the rejection of one of the most dynamic images of classical antiquity.

Bacchus is often depicted in art as a reveller accompanied by satyrs, and sometimes in a chariot drawn by pards. He was revered as the god who gave mankind the gift of wine, and who also inspired poets. In the long passage about him in *Endymion*, his chariot symbolizes the poetic means by which Keats hopes to go beyond the fascinating realm of his daydreams, inhabited by Flora and Pan (cf. "Sleep and Poetry"), and to reach in Ian Jack's words [in *Keats and the Mirror of Art*] "the more serious territory of poetry that lay beyond it." In "Ode to a Nightingale" Keats still calls for a symbolic "draft of vintage" and "a beaker full of the warm South." But Bacchus in his car is no longer a suitable image for the poet on his aesthetic journey toward a more significant realm of poetry, because more than intoxication and inspiration was involved in the god's influence. The Bacchanalia had been an uninhibited celebration of life, marked by drunkenness, debauchery, and bloodshed. Bacchus was a god not only of inspiration but also of the wildest passions. The pards drawing his car, beautiful but terrifying in their savagery, symbolized the disorderly and sometimes violent manifestations of human sexuality. Hence in turning away from the pard-drawn chariot, Keats rejects the dangerous aspects of eros.

In his visionary journey in "Ode to a Nightingale" Keats is not in search of Bacchic revelry, even with its possibility of inspiration; yet the dismissal of Bacchus does not imply a rejection of the whole classical experience. Keats seeks and achieves communion with the nightingale ("Already with thee"), and that communion yields an image for the kind of inspiration that is ardent and enthralling but without Bacchic elements of disorder and destruction. The image which comes to his mind is that of the "Queen-Moon," enthroned and surrounded by her starry attendants.

The goddess of the moon, Cynthia or Diana, was the patroness of virgins. Although, historically, she was not commonly regarded as a patron of poetry, Keats's allusion to Cynthia in the Ode is not surprising. He knew that she was Endymion's muse; and in the poem "I stood tip-toe," he apostrophized the moon as a "Maker of sweet poets." In the same poem, as examples of the romantic stories told by moon-inspired poets, Keats mentions the myths of Psyche and Cupid, Syrinx and Arcadian Pan, Narcissus and Echo, and that "sweetest of all songs," the legend of Cynthia and her Endymion. As Ian Jack points out [in *Keats and the Mirror of Art*], "each of these stories ... can be used to describe the origin of poetry."

Of course, Cynthia was more than just a "Maker of sweet poets": she was also goddess of virginity. To some readers of the classics (like Joseph Spence in *Polymetis*), this meant that the love she felt for Endymion was purely Platonic in nature. Not so to Keats: he thinks of Cynthia-Diana as the patroness of chaste but earthly love. She appears in "Sleep and Poetry" as a timorous beauty attended by nymphs, but there her brief role is enigmatic. Elsewhere, Keats clearly thinks of her as experiencing a heart-warming and ultimately consummated love: "Cynthia is from her silken curtains peeping / So scantily that it seems her bridal night" ("To my Brother George"); "Cynthia! I cannot tell the greater blisses, / That follow'd thine, and thy dear shepherd's kisses" ("I stood tip-toe"). Above all, in *Endymion*, the amorous youth exclaims that "Diana's self must feel / Sometimes these very pang [of love]"; Endymion dreams that Phoebe (Cynthia) is his "beauteous ... bed fellow"; he cannot "help but kiss her and adore"; and at the end he is triumphant, as Cynthia confesses her love for him. In Keats's view, as set forth in a letter to his sister Fanny, Endymion "was a young handsome Shepherd who ... lived solitary among the trees and Plains little thinking—that such a beautiful Creature as the Moon was growing mad in Love with him." It is this concept of the timorously yet ardently loving moon-goddess that is present in Keats's reference to the "Queen-Moon" in "Ode to a Nightingale."

The whole of stanza 5 is concerned with flowers and blossoms, unseen by Keats but nevertheless identifiable in the scented ("embalmed") darkness. Four in particular are mentioned: white hawthorn, eglantine, violets, and musk-roses. It has been said that the flowers named "are important chiefly for their pastoral associations" [according to Richard Harter Fogle in his essay "Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale*"]. More specifically, they have a long history of use as symbols of love.

The violet is the most frequently used of these images. In classical mythology the flower sprang from the blood of Attis, the youth love by Cybele. In Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*, the goddess attempts to seduce the stripling as they recline on a bed of violets; in [English poet John] Donne's lyric "The Ecstasie," the violet symbolizes the persona's passion; the lady in [English poet Robert] Herrick's "Meditation for his Mistress" is a "dainty Violet"; and according to [English poet Richard] Lovelace ("love Made in the First Age: To Chloris"), lovers at one time could enjoy each other without sinning,

on banks "Diaper'd with Violet Eyes." Keats uses the image comparably. In *Endymion*, the young lover tells of a dream in which, as he madly kissed his beloved, he became aware of "A scent of violets, and blossoming limes"; later in the poem he comes across Adonis asleep in a "chamber, myrtle wall'd" (myrtle being sacred to Venus), and there a cupid "Rain'd violets upon his sleeping eyes." The description of the violets in "Ode to a Nightingale" as "Fast fading" points, of course, to the transitory nature of human love.

On May-Day eve in earlier centuries, lovers went out into the country-side to gather branches of blossoming hawthorn and decorate their homes. Herrick's "Corina's going a Maying" celebrates this festival: "There's not a budding Boy or Girle, this day, / But is got up, and gone to bring in May," returning "with *White-thorn* laden"; "Many a green-gown has been given; / Many a kisse ..., / Many a glance too has been sent / From out the eye, Love's Firmament"; and the door of each house is now a tabernacle "Made up of white-thorn neatly enterwove: / As if here were those cooler shades of love." The festival survived in some areas of Britain until the mid-nineteenth century....

Next in literary popularity among the unseen flowers in "Ode to a Nightingale" whose fragrance Keats identifies is the eglantine of sweet-briar. Spenser is fond of the image: the *Shepherd's Calendar* for May tells how "loue lads" and "Youghthes folke now flocken in euery where," to gather "Hawthorne buds, and swete Eglantine"; and in the *Faerie Queene*, Cymochles dallies with "loose Ladies and lasciuious boyes" in an arbor "Through which the fragrant Eglantine did spred / His prickling armes." The persona in [English poet Percy Bysshe] Shelley's lyric "The Question" gathers a lover's nosegay including violets, roses, and eglantine. The same traditional significance is reflected in *Endymion*: the love-sick youth envisions a spot where he might dwell with his beloved, and there he promises to plant eglantine.

[A] remaining flower named by Keats in stanza 5 of the Ode is the musk-rose, a rambling rose with white blooms; and like the other three flowers, it is found in poetry in settings redolent of the joys or pains of eros. All roses, of course, were sacred to Venus; and her son Cupid was said by Chaucer to wear a chaplet of roses (*Romaunt*). The mention of the musk-rose in "Ode to a Nightingale" in conjunction with violets and eglantine may have been prompted by the similar linkage in Shakespeare's description of the spot where Titania will fall in



*Keats develops the concept that the idealized situations so often presented in poetry are far removed from the grim realities of life, with its weariness, disappointments, illness, and death.*

love and dally with Bottom (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*). The strains of a shepherd's love-song in *Comus* are praised as having "sweeten'd every musk-rose of the dale." And Keats's *Endymion* declares his beloved to be as "Sweet as a muskrose upon new-made hay." There, as in "Ode to a Nightingale" the flower's powerful odor is an image for the attractiveness of love.

The last element in the erotic imagery of the Ode may seem at first to be out of place. After stating in stanza 7 that the song of the nightingale was heard in ancient days by emperor and by "clown," Keats goes on to strike a Biblical note:

The voice I hear this passing night was ...  
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path  
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for  
home,  
She stood in tears amid the alien corn.

What is the pertinence to "Ode to a Nightingale" of Ruth's story, the only element in the imagery of the poem that is both specific and historical?

In this stanza, Keats adverts for the first time to the effect that the nightingale's song has on others than himself, in fact on the whole spectrum of society, from the ruler to the lowest of the ruled. By introducing a notable Old Testament figure, he expands the scope of his meditations to embrace not only the pagan world of Flora, Bacchus, and Diana but also the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Furthermore, the Biblical image serves as a link between the imaginative world of untrammelled joy conjured up by the images in stanzas 1-2 and 4-5, and the prosaic world of unceasing pain and death reflected in stanzas 3 and 6, since even Ruth was ultimately happy. Of course Keats does not think

of the emperor, the peasant, and Ruth as being moved to speculate, as he is doing, on philosophical and aesthetic matters. To rulers, ruled, and displaced persons alike, the bird's melodious song would have been a token of happiness or of consolation for unhappiness, especially in affairs of the heart.

There has been some uncertainty as to Keats's intention of introducing the un-Biblical description of Ruth as being "sick for home ... amid the alien corn." The scriptural account of Ruth the Moabite tells how, after the death of her Israelite husband, she accompanied her mother-in-law Naomi to Judah, a land alien to Ruth; and there, with Naomi's encouragement she took steps to obtain a new husband, Boaz. It is likely that for Keats, it was not only the change of domicile but also, and more importantly, the loss of the marital love she had enjoyed that made her heart sad. This interpretation aligns the reference to Ruth with the other images in the poem having as their common denominator the motif of love. It is noteworthy that [English poet] Thomas Hood's "Ruth" (1827), a poem apparently inspired by Keats's lines, takes a clearly romantic view of her. There Ruth is "Like the sweetheart of the sun, / Who many a glowing kiss had won," and Hood's farmer summons her: "Lay thy sheaf adown and come, / Share my harvest and my home."

It is evident that in "Ode to a Nightingale" Keats no longer possesses that relatively simple enthusiasm, manifested in early works like "Sleep and Poetry," that made it seem that the domain of the imagination could provide something like an antidote to the ills of the real world. His imaginative faculties can still conjure up powerful imagery to body forth the beauties of nature and the glory of humanistic achievement; but he now knows that it cannot provide a substitute for, or even a temporarily satisfactory retreat from, the pain of loving. In a sense, the excursion in "Ode to a Nightingale" record in brief the aesthetic and psychological journey that had led Keats to a more mature judgment regarding poetry and its relation to life.

At the outset of the Ode, as the poet first becomes aware of the thrilling song of the nightingale, the bird's apparent happiness makes him desire to pass once again through the charmed casements opened up by his craft, and to soar on the wings of poetry into an ideal realm free from the painful realities and bitter frustration of everyday life, a realm filled with glamorous images of the classical, medieval, and Renaissance era. But even in the course



of this magic journey, the real world intrudes; the poet realizes that the nightingale has never known, and hence its song does not reflect, the "weariness, the fever, and the fret" endured by humanity, on an earth where even "youth grows pale" and dies, and where the mere act of thinking about life is enough to plunge one into "leaden-eyed despairs," as beauty fades and love pines.

In spite of everything, the poet is determined to continue his flight (st. 4-5), but the visual element is missing. The excursion is "viewless"; nothing is visible because "here there is no light"; in fact Keats cannot see, though he can smell, the flowers at his feet. Again the muted pleasure is intruded upon (st. 6) by gloomy thoughts, this time about mortality: Keats recalls that he has often ruminated on "easeful Death" and remarks wistfully that the nightingale will pour forth its song long after he himself is dead.

In its primary metaphorical significance as the embodiment of the literary imagination, the nightingale is, unlike the poet, "Immortal." It has been pouring forth its soul ever since ancient times, imperial as well as Biblical, and it will continue to do so. But even as Keats is proclaiming the immortality of poetry, he questions the nature of its achievements. That it has often opened up "Charm'd magic casements" is undeniable; but what the magic now reveals to the poet gazing through those casements is enigmatically described as "the foam / Of perilous seas, in faery land forlorn." Even these less than comforting visions will not last: "fancy," that aptitude for imaginative invention, is a "deceiving elf"; and from the fact that the literal nightingale's song fades as the bird moves on to "the next valley-glades," the reader recognizes the poet's awareness that his inspiration will likewise cease. But this bleak conclusion is mitigated by the sub-text of "Ode to a Nightingale." John Clare [in *The Prose of John Clare*] was right when he observed that the scenery in Keats's poetry reflects "nature as she appeared to his fancies & not as he would have described her had he witnessed the things he describes." The details are more often symbolic than realistic. In this respect Keats is following in the footsteps of Chaucer, Spenser, and Milton. It is this tradition that provides the clues to the sub-textual concerns of Keats in his Ode.

At the level of conscious thought, Keats develops the concept that the idealized situations so often presented in poetry are far removed from the grim realities of life, with its weariness, disappointments, illness, and death. Yet the exemplars

evoked, rather than delineated, in the excursion stanzas (1-2, 4-5, 7) are images of love—young, passionate, and fulfilled. Even the last of these images, that of the historical Ruth standing in tears amid the alien corn, does not exemplify the extremes of despair and agony that prevail in stanzas 3 and 6, since the reader knows (or is expected to know) that Ruth, after much suffering, finally achieved her goal of remarriage, and with a kind and generous man.

Thus stanzas 1-2 and 4-5 contain images evoking the carefree, ecstatic fulfillment of love, a fulfillment not achieved by Keats. The poet offers brief glimpses of a dryad in a grove, awaiting pursuit by a satyr; of amorous Romans participating in the riotous celebrations honoring Flora; of Bacchus in his pard-drawn chariot, enamored of Ariadne; of Renaissance lover going a-Maying to bring home boughs of hawthorn, or reclining on lawns sprinkled with violets, or lingering in bowers of musk-roses and eglantine; and then of the compassionate Israelite farmer, offering love and security to the disconsolate Ruth. Love, like beauty, has endured through the ages and will continue to endure, for mankind if not for the individual.

The existence of these ideas just below the surface of the primary level of communication in "Ode to a Nightingale" indicates that there is a dichotomy between what the poet has come to recognize as the grim truth about life and, on the other hand, man's eternal hope (however irrational) that fate will bring some measure of happiness in response to the need for love. The truth that he has arrived at intellectually and experientially, that man must reconcile himself first to the physical and spiritual pains of life (st. 3) and then to the ultimate oblivion of death (st. 6), evidently does not destroy every vestige of hope before he "become[s] a sod." It is that hope which led Keats to compose the impassioned lines "To Fanny" some months after the writing of "Ode to a Nightingale." It is the same muted hope that shines through, however fitfully, in the subtext of the Ode.

Source: "The Sub-Text of Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale,'" in *Keats-Shelley Journal*, Vol. XXXIII, 1984, pp. 70-84.

## Sources

Bloom, Harold, "Introduction" and "John Keats," in his *The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry*, Faber and Faber, 1962.

Bush, Douglas, "Keats," in *Keats: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Walter Jackson Bate, Prentice-Hall, 1964, pp. 13-40.

Scott, John, in a review of "Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and Other Poems," *The London Magazine*, Vol. II, No. IX, September, 1820, pp. 315-21.

### For Further Study

Barnard, John, *John Keats*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

A strong introduction to Keats that traces some of the influences upon the "Ode."

Bate, Walter Jackson. *John Keats*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963.

The standard biography of Keats, very accessible and with a good overview of the themes in the "Ode."

Bush, Douglas, *John Keats*, New York: Macmillan Co., 1966.

An engaging critical biography.

Motion, Andrew, *Keats*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998.

Recent biography of Keats, containing informative treatment of the "Ode."

Pettet, E. C., *On the Poetry of Keats*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1957.

An interpretation of Keats's poetry that focuses upon its Romantic aspects.

Vendler, Helen, *The Odes of John Keats*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983.

Examines the "Ode to a Nightingale" for evidence of the poet's attitudes toward consciousness and in relation to his other odes.

# old age sticks

*e. e. cummings*

1958

Published in the collection *95 Poems*, “old age sticks” exemplifies many of the unique typographic “quirks” typical of cummings’s verse, including absence of capital letters, irregular use of parentheses, and the use of the ampersand sign as a contraction for “and.” While these surface qualities are characteristic, cummings’s poetry also displays more complex poetic structures and qualities. “Old age sticks,” for example, which is made up of five four-line stanzas conforming to a set syllabic pattern (3-2-1-2), speaks to cummings’s broader interest in poetic form. It also offers an example of how cummings used enjambment to focus his readers’ attention on individual words—and in some cases word fragments. The poem also showcases the poet’s skill with thematic scope and tension. Using personification to introduce the subjects of the poem, “old age” and “youth,” cummings manages in forty syllables to encapsulate the inevitable process of aging and the human response to that process. While “old age” warns youth to slow down, not to be in such a rush to become an adult, “youth” dismisses the warning and speeds on its chosen path, heading toward old age and death. Ultimately, the poem communicates very succinctly this conflict from difference in perception.

## Author Biography

Born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1894, cummings spent his childhood in that city, where his fa-





e.e. cummings

ther, Edward Cummings, was a sociology professor at Harvard and a Unitarian clergyman. From an early age cummings showed a strong interest in poetry and art, which was encouraged by his mother Rebecca. Cummings attended Harvard University from 1911 to 1915 and joined the editorial board of the *Harvard Monthly*, a college literary magazine. While in college he became fascinated by avant-garde art, modernism, and cubism, and he began incorporating elements of these styles into his own poetry and paintings. He received a bachelor's degree in 1915 and a master's the following year. His first published poems appeared in the anthology *Eight Harvard Poets* in 1917. These eight pieces feature the experimental verse forms and the lower-case personal pronoun "i" that were to become his trademark. The copyeditor of the book, however, mistook cummings's intentions as typographical errors and made "corrections." During World War I cummings volunteered for the French-based Norton-Harjes Ambulance Service. As a result of his disregard of regulations and his attempts to outwit the wartime censors in his letters home, cummings spent four months in an internment camp in Normandy on suspicion of treason. Although he found his detention amusing and even enjoyable, his father made use of his contacts in government to secure his son's release. Cummings returned to New York and pursued painting but was drafted in 1918.

He spent about a year at Camp Danvers, Massachusetts, during which time he wrote prolifically. Beginning around this time, cummings, with the knowledge and approval of his friend Schofield Thayer, had an affair with Schofield's wife Elaine. Cummings's daughter Nancy was born in 1919, but she was given Thayer's name. Cummings and Elaine Thayer married in 1924, at which time cummings legally adopted Nancy. During the 1920s and 1930s he traveled widely in Europe, alternately living in Paris and New York, and developing parallel careers as a poet and a painter. He published his first poetry collection, *Tulips and Chimneys*, in 1923. Politically liberal with leftist leanings, cummings visited the Soviet Union in 1931 to learn about that government's system of art subsidies. He was very disillusioned, however, by the regimentation and lack of personal and artistic freedom he encountered there. As a result, he abandoned his liberal views and became deeply conservative on social and political issues. Cummings continued to write steadily throughout the 1940s and 1950s, reaching his greatest popularity during this period and winning a number of honors, including the Shelley Memorial Award for poetry in 1944, the Charles Eliot Norton Professorship at Harvard for the academic year 1952-53, and the Bollingen Prize for Poetry in 1958. Despite such successes, however, he never achieved a steady income. Cummings continued to give poetry readings to college audiences across the United States until his death in 1962.

**Poem Summary****Line 1:**

This first line exemplifies cummings's use of abrupt enjambment to create fragmentary or partial thoughts that, while part of a larger phrase or idea, also stand alone. In this case, if one were reading quickly it would be easy read or hear "old age stinks" by accident. The misreading would hint at a disdain for old age. In this manner the line sets the tone of the poem. The broken line also interrupts a larger phrase, leaving the careful reader asking what "old age" sticks—or with what or how. It also obscures the grammar of the sentence, so that "sticks" might appear to be a noun rather than a verb and "old age" might appear to be an adjective rather than a noun.

**Line 2:**

This line is a bit baffling. By breaking lines this way, cummings makes his reader pay attention to the individual words he uses, inviting a consideration of their various associations. Here, through a process of random association, the words "up" and "keep" are easily contracted into "upkeep." One might also think of "keeping up," as in to "keep up" with the times, with other people, or with life. Ultimately, these associations all build toward the tension of the poem's overall theme: in some sense the poem comments on both "upkeep" (maintenance) and "keeping up" (competition).

**Lines 3-4:**

These lines bring a partial conclusion to the thought begun in line 1. All of the syntactic clues provided in the preceding lines suddenly add up to something. The reader learns that "old age sticks up 'keep off' signs." Consequently, these four lines also portray "old age" as forbidding, trying to limit individual actions and deem what is acceptable. Note that the speaker of the poem speaks of "old age" as if it were a person: through this personification the speaker makes clear that he is not simply saying that "old people" do these things, but that age does these things. Thus, the focus of the poem is the abstract idea of "age" and "aging."

**Lines 5-8:**

The focus of the poem shifts momentarily to "youth," also personified. "Youth" and "old age" are set in direct opposition to one another: "old age" plants warnings, and "youth" yanks them up. The lines imply that "youth" refuses to abide by "old age"'s edicts.

**Media Adaptations**

- A cassette titled *e. e. cummings Reads*, in which cummings reads from his dramatic and poetic works, was released by Caedmon in 1956.
- A two-cassette set titled *e. e. cummings Reads His Collected Poetry, 1943-58* is available from Caedmon.

**Line 9:**

This line finishes the thought begun in line 8. In this manner the thought is enjambed from stanza 2 to stanza 3. The reader begins to see that "old age" wants "youth" to "back off," to "not trespass" on "old age"'s territory. It's not clear, however, exactly what territory this is that "old age" is trying to protect. Note again the typographic irregularity or uniqueness of this line. Cummings uses parentheses to break up the word "trespass" into "Tres) & (pas)." He also drops the second "s" off the word "pass," effectively drawing more attention to it through these oddities. The reader is likely to realize that, had the poet left the "s" on, then the parentheses would contain the word "pass." It is possible that this actually draws attention to the word "pass," which may suggest a larger theme that the poem is developing.

**Line 10:**

In this line, the nature of the conflict between "old age" and "youth" becomes much more clear. "Youth laughs" suggests that "youth" feels in no way threatened by "old age." Rather, it would seem "old age" somehow seems threatened by "youth."

**Lines 11-12:**

Technically speaking, this is an example of a "mixed" sentence construction, which means that the subject of the sentence is not apparent. On the one hand we might read this as a quote in which "youth" commands "old age" to "sing." On the other hand, the poem makes more sense when we read this in terms of what follows and read "old age / scolds" "youth." Or we might take this to

mean that “old age” is commanding “youth” to “sing”: “‘Sing,’ old age scolds.” Such ambiguity is common to modern poetry and should be looked upon less as a problem than as an “opening” that allows many meanings to coexist.

### **Lines 13-16:**

In these lines, “old age” again tries to dictate what “youth” will do, but notice that by breaking words apart, the poem takes on an almost pathetic tone. Each break creates a pause suggestive of an inability to speak, which in its turn suggests an overwhelming emotion.

### **Lines 17-20:**

This last stanza brings the poem to its conclusion. “Old age” has been trying to keep youth from “growing old.” The reason, implicitly, is that if “youth” grows old, if “youth” trespasses into “old age”’s territory, then there is nowhere left for “old age” to go, other than death. At the same time, however, it would seem “old age” has not so much been trying to “command” or dictate what “youth” can do, but rather to warn “youth.” In a sense, “old age” appears less self-serving than helpful. The irony is that youth’s trespass and rebellion, its desire to mature and grow, are speeding it on toward the same fate as “old age.” It is this cycle of aging, as well as the social cycle of distrust between generations, that the poem gradually reveals in form as well as content.

## **Themes**

### **Cycle of Life**

One of the themes most common to the poetry of e. e. cummings is the natural process of life cycles. “Old age sticks” explores the aging process and the relationship of young and old by enacting a debate between “old age” and “youth.” We can paraphrase the debate this way: old age puts up signs that say “Keep Off,” but youth tears them down. In response, old age yells “No trespassing,” but youth just laughs. Old age shouts “Stop,” but youth continues. Reducing the poem in this way leaves out much of what makes it work as a poem, but it does help to clarify its essential debate structure.

Reduced in this fashion, old age appears as a force of restriction and repression, shouting a string of negatives: “No,” “Forbid/den,” “Stop,” “Must/n’t,” “Don’t.” Youth appears as a liberating and disruptive force, pulling down the signs, interrupting old age, and laughing. By enclosing or

“confining” in parentheses the sections relating to old age, cummings emphasizes its repressive quality. Conversely, by placing the passages about youth outside the parentheses, cummings stresses its free or expressive quality.

The poem does not simply present a battle of “good” youth versus “bad” old age, however. Cummings complicates matters by showing the interdependency of the two sides. Graphically, old age and youth are intertwined on the page. Moreover, by the end of the poem youth is “growing old,” is itself turning into old age. In addition, the breaking of the word “growing” between two lines leaves youth “owing old”—youth is indebted to old age. A cycle is established in which youth ages, owing a debt to its elders and becoming “old age” to the next generation. Cummings employs several devices to underscore this continuity. The first and last words of the poem are “old,” suggesting that it ends where it begins and begins where it ends. Also, the last thing associated with old age is the ampersand and closing parenthesis—“&”)”—in the fifth stanza. The ampersand is a symbol for “and.” And what? The business associated with old age seems unfinished, cut off. In the first stanza, however, the first thing we see associated with youth is “)&,” the mirror image of the closing of old age. Where old age ends, youth begins. Except for the ampersands and parentheses, old age dominates the first stanza and youth controls the last. Finally, the parenthesis in the fourth line of the first stanza, after “signs,” is a closing parenthesis; but we have not seen an opening one. This suggests that what is being concluded at the start of this poem began earlier, before the beginning of the poem—when the old age of this poem was youth to a previous generation.

What appears at first to be a battle between youth and old age in “old age sticks,” ends up as a dialectic, a synthesis of seeming opposites in a continuous cycle of life.

### **Language & Meaning**

Word play and unusual spatial arrangement of words and symbols are two of cummings’s most significant contributions to modern poetry. Cummings drew and painted from an early age, and his poems often reflect his interest in visual representation of the world. Like a visual artist, he bent, broke, twisted, and reshaped the material of his poetic craft—language.

In “old age sticks” cummings flouts the conventions of language in various ways. He uses en-

jambment—the spilling over of one line onto the next—to create multiple meanings, as in “youth goes / right on / gr/owing old.” He capitalizes words contrary to the standard rules, as in this poem, where he uses capitals to emphasize each word in old age’s string of negative commands: “Keep / Off,” “No / Tres ... pas/sing,” “Forbid/den Stop / Must/n’t Don’t.” Parentheses are normally used to enclose supplemental or somewhat extraneous information that is not essential to the primary meaning of the sentence; in “old age sticks,” however, cummings uses parentheses to separate the passages relating to old age from those about youth. Both sets of information are essential to the meaning of the poem. Cummings also places or spaces words in highly unconventional ways, as when youth “interrupts” old age: “No / Tres)&(pas) / youth laughs / (sing.”

The presence of all these devices might be disorienting for a reader unused to such oddities, so cummings provides some aids to understanding the poem—he creates his own “rules.” For example, each of the five stanzas contains eight syllables arranged in four lines: 3-2-1-2. This arrangement gives the poem structure and a degree of predictability. Cummings consistently uses the ampersand (&) rather than the word “and.” Also, as we have seen, he is absolutely regular in the way he uses parentheses and capitals.

All the devices cummings employs add meaning to the poem, so that it conveys more than just the dictionary definitions of its words. In “old age sticks,” the words carry their usual meanings, but they also carry additional significance. The poem is about more than simply a battle between youth and old age. The interdependence of youth and old age and the theme of the cycle of life are entirely conveyed through cummings’ poetic devices. The words themselves say nothing about these subjects. Through the skillful selection, arrangement, and application of words, symbols, and techniques, Cummings is able to make “old age sticks” *mean* more than it says.

### Style

“Old age sticks” is written in free verse, which means it follows no set pattern of rhyme or meter. The poem does have, however, a set syllabic construction. Each stanza is made up of four lines: each first line has three syllables; each second, two syllables; each third, one syllable; each fourth, two

## Topics for Further Study



- Write a simple, honest statement about the different attitudes of young and old people. Put your statement into a poetic form like cummings’s poem, breaking words onto different lines and even different stanzas. The result should be a poem that makes readers stop and wonder about your basic truth, instead of accepting it too easily without thought.
- What does the first line tell you about the theme of the poem? What does the last line tell you? Do you think word manipulation is an effective tool for getting these ideas across?

syllables. Ultimately the pattern is circular and repeating. This structure suggests a reflection of the poem’s content, which demonstrates how “old age” is replaced by a “youth” that becomes an “old age” that is replaced by a younger “youth” and so on. When form and content mirror each other in such a manner, the result is sometimes termed organic composition. Cummings also uses enjambment—sentences that run over line endings—to reinforce his meanings. For example, in the first line of the poem, cummings breaks the line mid-thought, leaving the reader in suspense for the completion of the thought. We are left with the question: “old age sticks what?” Enjambment also compels readers to try to make meaning of fragmented or disjointed thoughts, with the effect that readers try to process associative meanings—the various connotations of the individual words. When this technique is well employed, such associations contribute to the overall meaning of the poem.

Finally, another noteworthy poetic device in “old age sticks” is its use of personification. Both “old age” and “youth,” essentially abstract ideas, are personified in the poem, which is to say that they are given human qualities. In effect this allows the poem to speak not only about the abstract ideas of “youth” and “old age” but also to the particulars of human experience in response to aging.

## Historical Context

There is a common, stereotypical view of America in the 1950s as complacent, conformist, and staunchly anticommunist. The decade saw the rise of television, tract housing, and Senator Joseph McCarthy's Senate hearings on the supposed infiltration of the United States by communists. In the years following World War II, two world powers emerged as "superpowers," both possessing nuclear weapons: the United States and the Soviet Union. The Soviet domination and control of eastern European countries behind an "iron curtain" led to widespread fear among Americans. This was the birth of the Cold War, an atmosphere of hostility and aggression between the West (America and its allies) and the East (the Soviet Union and its allies), similar to that of wartime but without outright military conflict.

The two superpowers never directly confronted each other in battle, but their support of opposing sides in conflicts around the world gave a global scale to their antagonism. The decade of the 1950s opened with the Korean War—in which communist forces in the north of the country tried to overtake the republican south—and it ended with Fidel Castro's communist revolution in Cuba. The decade also witnessed the start of the "space race" when, in 1957 the Soviets launched *Sputnik*, the first satellite. The U.S. responded with its own satellite the following year. The whole world, it seemed, was too small a battlefield for the Cold War; outer space itself was disputed territory.

In the common view of the 1950s, the period is characterized by the tension and suspicion of the Cold War. In such threatening conditions, absolute obedience was required of Americans if their country were to prevail. Dissent, protest, and nonconformity seemed disloyal, "un-American." This is the stereotypical view of the 1950s. While it contains elements of truth, the reality was much more complicated. The period was one of significant political, social, and cultural change. The references we have made to the development of nuclear power, the space program, and television point to some of the technological and scientific advances of the time. In medicine, a vaccine for polio was developed, as was the model of the DNA molecule. The decade also saw the rise of the civil rights movement. In 1954, the Supreme Court ruled school segregation unconstitutional; the following year, Rosa Parks, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and others staged the Montgomery bus boycott, bring-

ing about the desegregation of the public transportation in that city. In 1956 buses throughout America were desegregated as a result of a Supreme Court ruling. In the arts, abstract expressionism rejected literal representation in painting; the be-bop style evolved in jazz, stressing spontaneity and improvisation; and the Beat writers championed freedom and the stream-of-consciousness mode of writing. Of course, rock and roll—by definition an expression of rebellion—was born in the 1950s.

It was during this time of surface conformity masking an underlying ferment that "old age sticks" was published. *95 poems*, the collection containing "old age sticks," was released in 1958, when Cummings was sixty-four. At that age, Cummings would seem a likely representative of an older, conservative generation at odds with the forces of change. And, at first glance, "old age sticks" does seem to depict an unresolved and unresolvable opposition between generations, between representatives of orderly stability and disorderly change. But on closer inspection we can see that the poem blurs the distinctions between the two groups and provides a complex view of life as a cycle in which there is continuity but also constant change. In this way "old age sticks" seems an apt expression of the times in which it was written.

## Critical Overview

"Old age sticks" displays many of the poetic innovations that distinguish Cummings's verse, including the absence of capital letters, abrupt enjambment, and irregular use of punctuation. Since so much of this defies the rules typical of poetry before the twentieth century, critics have searched for some source and meaning for Cummings's inventiveness. The relationship of Cummings's unique visual arrangements of words on the page to his work as a painter has provided scholars with a good deal of useful evidence. In his book *e. e. Cummings: An Introduction to the Poetry*, Rushworth Kidder comments, "poetry and visual art grew, in Cummings' mind, from one root; and while their outermost branches are distinct enough, there are many places closer to the trunk where it is hard to know which impulse accounts for a piece of work." Playing with spelling, grammar, line-breaks, punctuation, and rhyme allowed Cummings many levels of ambiguity, many subtleties of meaning in a seemingly simple verse. Milton Cohen writes of such



## Compare & Contrast

- **1958:** Moroccan women gain the right to choose their own husbands. The government in the capital, Rabat, restricts polygamy in the country.

**Today:** In Egypt, after a long debate between Islamic fundamentalists and human rights activists, a national ban is passed protecting women from female circumcision.

- **1958:** The first Grammy Award is given to the Italian song "Volare," but the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences is criticized for favoring older, more conservative, middle-of-the-road artists over youth-oriented performers.

**Today:** The 1997 Grammy Award for Best Album goes to Beck Hansen's *Odelay!* An eclectic blend of styles from the past and unique lyrics, Beck's distinctive sound appeals to a young audience.

- **1958:** The Earth's radiation shield of ozone is first tested in an effort to discover what effects have been caused by nuclear weapons testing

and high-altitude military and commercial flights. Ozone is an unstable form of oxygen that blocks the Earth from ultraviolet radiation, the cause of human skin cancer. By the 1970s, the ozone layer begins to shrink as a million tons of freon are released into the atmosphere, mostly from aerosol cans.

**Today:** Environmentalists suggest that the ozone layer is being depleted. Medical experts suggest that fair-skinned people wear sun-block protectants whenever they are outdoors.

- **1958:** Fidel Castro, 32, rides the wake of dictator Fulgencio Bastista's abdication of Cuba's leadership. Castro and his Marxist forces overtake the capital Havana on January 3 of the following year, beginning their regime, which he insists is not "communist."

**1997:** Castro's "humanistic revolution" is considered a failure. Freedom of religion is returned to the country that receives a visit from Pope John Paul II.

ambiguities in his article "e. e. cummings' Sleight of Hand: Perceptual Ambiguity in His Early Poetry, Painting and Career" for *University of Hartford Studies in Literature*. He suggests that, while these ambiguities are often regarded as "structural," they are actually essentially "perceptual." He explains that "they control the speed and manner in which a line is perceived." Cohen argues further that, "Typically, the reader perceives a thematic motif and expects its progression, only to have an ambiguous swing word lead to quite a different meaning. Momentarily thrown off by the unexpected turn, the reader must accommodate the new idea, either by reconciling it with the original, or by maintaining both in suspension." According to this critic, then, cummings's poetry not only ties meaning to form, but the form even compels the reader to perceive more than one potential meaning at once.

### Criticism

#### Sean Robisch

Sean Robisch holds a Ph.D. in American Literature from Purdue University and has taught composition and literature for eight years. In the following essay, Robisch explores the possible interpretations of "old age sticks," by analyzing its unconventional language and syntax.

E. E. cummings is one of the best poets by whom to decide what in the world we mean when we say, "That is a poem." He was able to alter a common notion of poetry—that its fundamental element is the word—by making poetry's fundamental element the mark. One letter may act as the keyhole through which we might see a whole Cummings poem. A semicolon no longer merely serves the grammatical function of separating independent

## What Do I Read Next?



- Two articles treat the importance of painting to cummings. First, Rushworth Kidder's "cummings and Cubism: The Influence of the Visual Arts on cummings' Early Poetry," in *Journal of Modern Literature* 7 (April 1979): 255-91, is the best treatment of the relationship between his poetry and his painting, with many illustrations. Kidder's "e. e. cummings: Painter," in the *Harvard Library Bulletin* 23 (April 1975): 117-38, is a critical study of cummings's whole career as a painter, with black-and-white illustrations.
- Also by Kidder, *e. e. cummings: An Introduction to the Poetry*, 1979, provides accessible criticism for a first-time student of cummings.

clauses or the elements of a list. It may instead be the leg of a grasshopper, a bird on a wire, or a semicolon that has chosen, as if on its own, to break its chains and show up when it is not welcome. This redefinition of the fundamental element of poetry is only part of cummings's genius, but an important part, because with it he forged the poetry by which he is widely known, though often misrepresented.

Cummings was not the first to employ letters, punctuation, and spacing to create drama in a poem—Mina Loy was a famous predecessor—but he was probably the best. Today's fashion of using punctuation marks in e-mail to horizontally indicate a smile [ :) ], or a wink [ ;) ], might be the subconscious offspring of cummings's influence. In the absence of vocal communication, the marks on the page (or screen) substitute for what we gain in the speaker's presence. This is the eternal dilemma of reading, the question of how we are to "hear" the (absent) author who wrote the words. The only way to consider many of cummings's poems is visually, because to read one of them aloud, we would have to adopt some technique of representation. The comedian Victor Borga, when reading stories aloud during his performance, would make sounds to represent the punctuation marks,

such as a "pop" noise to indicate a period. This presentation may create a funny way to hear a story, but whenever we "hear" the marks, we get the reader's idea of how they might sound, rather than using our imaginations to account for what the marks on the page do. Few if any readers, though they might hear the *words* they read, invent sounds in their minds for the punctuation marks. We simply take the instruction (a period means the sentence is over) and continue on in the conventional methods of reading, often oblivious to the effect that a pair of parentheses or an ellipsis might have on us. In this way, cummings is "fun" to read, because his poems often invite a kind of decoding different from what we do with poetry we more easily recognize.

During the era of modernism a phenomenon known as "high modernism" developed, made famous by such poems as T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," in which lines from several languages, obscure literary and artistic references, and cultural critiques of complex political issues would appear throughout a usually long poem composed of several "movements," like an orchestral arrangement. Many critics considered a poet to be growing in sophistication according to his or her command of these conventions. In other words, while the modern poets and critics from the 1910s to the 1950s often called for stylistic experimentation and challenges to the old notions of rhyme schemes and standard meters, they often wanted only a certain kind of experimentation. Cummings experimented in a manner that he had developed from earlier poets to become almost exclusively his own, and the critics of his work were sharply divided as to whether or not this was sufficient to make him a great poet.

His supporters, such as Marianne Moore and Allen Tate, saw in his work not only ingenious manipulations of sentences and words, but subtle commentary on his major subjects: love, spring, song, and childhood, which his poems celebrated; as well as war, blind loyalty, and sloganeering, which his poems regularly ridiculed. His detractors, such as R. P. Blackmur and John Crowe Ransom, saw cummings as sappy, too simplistic in his view of the complex issues of the world. To these critics, his love seemed too Pollyanna, his spring too easily victorious, and his depiction of childhood too idyllic to really address life with the complexity that great poetry demanded. As a result, cummings was considered a popular "college poet," someone enjoyed early in one's education, then disregarded after the alphabetic code had been broken like a ce-

real box toy and more sophisticated matters of literature taken up. Critics who adopted this view sometimes even poked fun of cummings, making up their own versions of oddly spaced, heavily punctuated, fragmentary poems that imitated his.

Cummings was not simply modern because he snapped some conventions, nor was he modernly simple because he missed the point that romantic love is often a painful experience. His achievements are built mostly on *which* conventions he chose to violate. His poetic style and view of the world combined in poems that were many years ahead of his critics. His lines come surprisingly, and they work language into something hard to describe. This is why one often has to approach cummings on the page rather than reading him aloud. The critic Norman Friedman has said, "Even when we know we *like* cummings, we lack the appropriate language for explaining why."

Cummings did not shy away from the tough topics of poetry. "Old age sticks" is a fine example of this fact. In keeping with his paradoxical technique of both calling attention to himself and showing humility by signing his name in the lower case, cummings often employed the lower case in his poems as well. He did so for the disconcerting effects that are produced on form and content by the omission of capital letters. This also makes us feel that we've walked into the middle of something, that beginnings and endings are arbitrary, and that punctuation and capitalization are somehow inadequate to control something so overwhelming as time. If we read "old age sticks" as a treatment of aging, then the mythic connection of life and time is the heart of the poem, and hardly a trivial topic.

When we look at the table of contents for 95 *Poems*, the book in which "old age sticks" appears, we see the first line next to a number. Cummings did not title his poems, so the first line serves as an implicit title, because we lack the means of writing a table of contents any other way. The numbers (this poem is #57) are just as arbitrary. There is an order to the poems, but the numbers merely tell us when we have a new one, so that when we turn the page we know we aren't reading the next section of the same poem. Cummings loved this kind of restriction in book reading, because it enabled him to point out to us just how linear our world of "calendars and clocks" (as he called it) really is. The first line as it appears in a table of contents, "old age sticks," implies either that we are about to read



*Critics ... sometimes  
even poked fun of  
cummings, making up their  
own versions of oddly  
spaced, heavily punctuated,  
fragmentary poems that  
imitated his."*

a poem about sticks—which is partly true if we consider the word a noun that refers to sticks that hold up signs—or that (taking "sticks" as a verb) old age "sticks to" something or someone, that it "sticks around," that it exists forever. The time paradox dissolves (temporarily) when we turn the corner to the second line. Old age, now personified, is "sticking up" some signs. And here a new theme of the poem surfaces.

Now we see a struggle between old age—which is rule-making, sign-posting, and controlling—and youth—which is destructive and obstinate. And on this field cummings employs his play with word and mark to make a more subtle point. The first stanza ends with a closed parenthesis that has no opened half. Here's a cummings puzzle. The mark could indicate that we're in the middle of a parenthetical insertion into some other discussion, maybe an argument that's been going on since before the poem began. It could be a mark designed to serve some other function than what a parenthesis normally does; if so, what? Maybe it functions, in accordance with the "old age" point of view, as a barrier of some kind, an obstacle. Or it could be simply replacing a period, since a period would indicate the end of something (i.e., the end of a "period"), and we can't have that in a poem that plays with time. We might come up with a number of ways to see the parenthesis, and just as we decide which one to choose, cummings replaces the word "and" with the ampersand, a kind of trademark of his and a reminder of what cannot be represented by sound, but only inside our heads in the translation of a visual cue. As a result, we have to find a way to accommodate the odd use of punctuation and the replacement of a word by a symbol, at the same time.

So the struggle continues with the posting of “signs,” cues we read and are allowed to re-read with different meanings, which takes away the power of a sign telling us what to do. For instance, the “No Trespassing” sign that spans the second and third stanzas has something else written into it. By dividing “Trespass” and using the ampersand to both connect and separate the two parts of the word, we find that old age is educated and is admonishing youth in French as well as in English. “No,” the signposter says, then “Tres” (very) and “pas” (the negative, or “not”). So the sign also says, “No Very Not.” But youth doesn’t pay attention; it laughs at the strictness of old age, after yanking down the “Keep Off” signs, and while old age is “singing” negatives, youth does what it wants ... or so it thinks. This is where cummings delivers to us the complex emotional substance of the poem. “Goes on” implies the passage of time, and while youth thinks it is just going on about its business, the poet tells us that in fact the business of youth is to grow old. The passage of that time, which seems slow to youth but is all too quick for old age (which might be singing all those “stop” phrases against time itself), is indicated by the line break before the last line. Space in a cummings poem has much to do with time, and the physical act of growing, which youth might think of as a matter of space and height, is also a temporal matter, so he stretches it, lets it linger momentarily at the end of “gr” until the point is brought home. The last word of the poem is also the first, implying a cycle, the youth becoming the old age that will admonish the next youth.

In this way, cummings provides us with a game of serious stakes. He wasn’t merely playing when he wrote. His education and experiences were extensive, and his process of revision painstaking. Cummings would often explore, as mathematical permutations, the possible arrangements of the letters in a poem in order to test their effects. He drew inspiration for space and division from the great Cubist painters, and took up painting in order to use the white page as a place for shapes to do new work. When he deletes something, he calls us to see what would be there. When he trades one mark for another, he invites us to consider whether the trade was worth the effort. And when he asks us if we understand what a poem *is*, cummings may be asking if we are supposed to follow the rules of poetry and spit out easy definitions, or become poets ourselves and try to learn, both because of the rules and in spite of them, what wonderful things poetry can *do*.

Source: Sean Robisch, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 1998.

### Chris Semansky

*Chris Semansky holds a Ph.D in English from Stony Brook University. His poems, stories, critical essays, and reviews appear regularly in literary journals. His collection of poetry, Death, But at a Good Price, received the Nicholas Roerich Poetry Prize for 1991 and was published by Story Line Press and the Nicholas Roerich Museum. In the following essay, Semansky explains how “old age sticks” “emphasizes the cyclical nature of time and the futility of our own attempts to stave off growing old.”*

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

Cummings’s use of typographic innovations is partially drawn from the ideas informing Cubist painting, a popular artistic movement at the beginning of the twentieth century. Artists such as Pablo Picasso and Georges Braques would analyze an image or object, break it down into its formal properties and then reconstruct it. For example, in Braques’ *Man with a Guitar* we see many straight lines, a very narrow range of color, and what looks like a figure sliced into geometric shapes. We learn nothing about the age, personality, or character of the “man” himself. Indeed, we can barely make out any such figure. Cubist poets such as cummings, Gertrude Stein, and Kenneth Rexroth tried to do in

verse what Cubist painters such as Picasso and Braques were doing on canvas. They would take the elements of an image or idea (or rather, the word or words which represented that image or idea), divide them into parts, then reorganize them. This new synthesis often claimed to represent, by enacting, the increasing fragmentation of the modern world and the alienation from it that human beings experienced.

"Old age sticks" illustrates this visual and poetic technique. Consisting of five stanzas, the poem utilizes unconventional punctuation, fractured words, and a voice that sounds closer to a child's than an adult's to emphasize the cyclical nature of time and the futility of our own attempts to stave off growing old.

The first stanza begins simply enough with a personification of old age, that is, the idea of old age is acting like a human being and putting up signs that say "Keep Off." Cummings capitalizes the two-word warning just as he capitalizes the words "Forbid," "Must," "Stop," "Don't," and "No," to emphasize the seriousness of the speaker's tone. Similarly, Cummings uses parentheses to underscore conflict between the generations. Grammatically, parentheses are a typographical device used to enclose words which add information or identification (for example, these words). The body of the sentence, so to speak, exists outside of them. Thomas Dilworth notes in an article in *Explicator* that "the activity of old age appears within the confines of parentheses, suggesting repression, [while] the activity of youth is unbounded by parentheses, suggesting refusal to accept restrictions." The subject or theme of Cummings's poem, then, is the assumptions that we as readers hold about what old age and youth truly want.

Youth's "unboundedness" erupts in the central stanza in the middle of old age's cry not to trespass. Sandwiched between "Tres)&(pas)" and "(sing," "youth laughs" underscores youth's scornful response to old age's admonition to stay away, (showing its disrespect by making old age wait to finish its warning, "No Tres/pas/sing"). By placing "sing" so close to "laughs" however, Cummings also shows how youth's energy is strong enough to appropriate old age's language. This interruption typifies (perhaps "stereotypifies") youth's impatience and rebelliousness against its elders. Breaking the word "trespassing" into three units also allows Cummings to pun, albeit in French: "tres pas" translates as "very not," a typical Cummingsism.



*What we had  
thought was old age  
standing in opposition to  
youth we now see is old  
age siding with youth."*

Old age's increasing insistence in the fourth stanza builds into an almost pathetic last attempt to warn off youth. The staccato rhythm resulting from the words, which are broken but not hyphenated, and the devolution into one-word bleats enacts old age's further deterioration, showing its fall into a kind of monosyllabic babytalk. This burst of blunt emotion occurs frequently in Cummings's poetry, as he distrusted tedious explanations, preferring instead direct and simple expression of feeling.

The final stanza asks us to reevaluate the entire poem. What we had thought was old age standing in opposition to youth we now see is old age siding with youth. "This reevaluation," says Dilworth, "makes of the restrictions and denials of youth a warning against 'gr/owing old' and suggests that old age has been on the side of youth all along." Old age, however, is not warning youth not to become like it; it is warning youth not to think old. It is a hollow warning, of course, and therefore ironic. By this I mean that old age knows that youth will become just like it, regardless of its warnings. Cummings underscores this point by beginning and ending the poem with the same word—"old," thereby drawing our attention to the cyclical nature of life itself.

The themes of aging and rebellion are common in Cummings's poetry. A romantic whose life was devoted to questioning the established typographic forms and traditions of poetry, Cummings was nevertheless conventional in his subject matter, writing about love, nature, and aging in much of his poetry. Richard Ellman and Robert O'Clair have written in *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* that Cummings was proud of his individualism. "It is in fact the badge he wears as a self-styled misfit, one still capable of feeling love and lust in an unfeeling, mechanized world," they wrote. "He is revolting against people in high places, in crowded cities, in ruts ...".

Cummings captures the futility of resisting time's onslaught by dramatizing the interaction between youth and old age. He does this in "old age sticks" by emphasizing process over product. Rather than showing us an image of an old person or a young person he concentrates on presenting the desires and behaviors of each generation (presented as abstractions) and putting them into (apparent) conflict. That we pay more attention to the way cummings presented his idea than the idea itself makes sense. "If a poet is anybody," cummings said in *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, "he is somebody to whom things made matter very little—somebody who is obsessed by Making."

As a poet of spontaneity and childlike wonder, cummings often explored optimistic themes in his poetry such as love and courtship, the processes of nature, and the celebration of simply being alive. In this way his poems are perhaps more accurately seen as belonging to the tradition of Romantic poetry, which prized the expression of an individual's intense emotion and the celebration of the natural world, its rhythms and processes. It is his use of language, however, his treatment of it as a corporeal thing, that marks cummings as an innovator, as a truly modern poet. While critics have praised modern masters such as Wallace Stevens, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and Robert Frost for their use of verbal ambiguity, myth, metaphysical wit, and a tragic vision of the modern world, they have not quite known what language to use to write about cummings, whose playfulness and often childlike vision of the world contrast the serious and solemn proclamations of his contemporaries. Cummings cannot be considered part of any school or movement. An iconoclast in poetry and in life, he opposed conformist attitudes and behavior. "Most-people," he wrote, "have less in common with ourselves than the squarerootminusone. You and I are human beings, mostpeople are snobs." Cummings echoes the apparent contradiction of this statement in "old age sticks," as he would initially have us believe that old age and youth are in opposition to each other when, in fact, their destinies are similar: both are fated to play out the desires of the generational roles assigned them. They cannot act otherwise.

**Source:** Chris Semansky, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 1998.

### **Rushworth M. Kidder**

*In the following excerpt, Kidder disproves some common fallacies about e. e. cummings,*

*revaluates some criticism of his poetry, and provides "general rules for paraphrasing" his poems.*



*Cummings wrote—it  
will not do to mince  
words—some bad poetry.  
Moreover, he occasionally  
published it.... He seemed  
unwilling to consider the  
wastebasket his ally.”*

---





Fairley, Irene R., *e. e. cummings and Ungrammar*, New York: Watermill Publishers, 1975.

Friedman, Norman, ed., *e. e. cummings: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972.

Friedman, Norman, *e. e. cummings: The Art of His Poetry*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1960.

Friedman, Norman, "e. e. cummings and His Critics," *Criticism*, Vol. 6, 1964, pp. 114-33.

Kennedy, Richard S., *e. e. cummings Revisited*, New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994.

Kidder, Rushworth, "Cummings and Cubism: The Influence of the Visual Arts on Cummings' Early Poetry," *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 7, April, 1979, pp. 255-91.

Kidder, Rushworth, *e. e. cummings: An Introduction to the Poetry*, Columbia University Press, 1979.

Lane, Gary, *I Am: A Study of e. e. cummings' Poems*, Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1976.

Norman, Charles, *e. e. cummings the Magic-Maker*, New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1958.

O'Clair, Robert, and Richard Ellmann, eds., *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, New York: Norton, 1988.

**Source:** Introduction to *e. e. cummings: An Introduction to the Poetry*, Columbia University Press, 1979, pp. 1-15.

### Sources

Cohen, Milton E., "e. e. cummings' Sleight of Hand: Perceptual Ambiguity in His Early Poetry, Painting and Career" in *University of Hartford Studies in Literature*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 1983, pp. 33-46.

cummings, e. e., *95 Poems*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, Inc., 1958.

cummings, e. e., *Poems: 1923-1954*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1968.

Dilworth, Thomas, "e. e. cummings' 'old age sticks,'" *The Explicator*, Vol. 54, No. 1, 1995, pp. 32-3.

### For Further Study

Dendinger, Lloyd N., ed., *e. e. cummings: The Critical Reception*, New York: Burt Franklin & Co., 1981.

Chronological compilation of the reviews that appeared following the publication of each of Cummings's collections.

Friedman, Norman, *(Re)Valuing Cummings: Further Essays on the Poet, 1962-93*, Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1996.

Follows themes and modes of expression as they develop chronologically in Cummings's poetry.

Kennedy, Richard S., *Dreams in the Mirror*, New York: Liveright Publishing Company, 1980.

An extensive biography of Cummings.

## [On His Blindness] Sonnet 16

*John Milton*

1673

"Sonnet 16" was printed in *Poems* (1673), but was most likely written at some earlier time, probably during a period in the early 1650s (his blindness became complete in 1652). Milton struggles in this sonnet with frustration at becoming blind and with his own sense of how important it is to use one's talents well in God's service. The sonnet records how he comes to understand a higher notion of service: real service is doing the will of God even if it means he must "stand and wait." Notice as well the use of quiet puns or words that draw on double meanings. The words with double meanings are "spent" (in line 1), "talent" (secondary meaning, coin, line 3), "useless" (secondary meaning, without usury or interest on a debt, line 4), "account" (line 6), and "exact" (line 7). The secondary meanings run in a coherent line of images: all are images of monetary exchange. Milton is a poet who is highly sensitive to the multiple senses available in language and to clusters of imagery of this sort. Another thing to understand about Milton's sonnets is their topical range. Not a writer of love sonnets in English (although the sonnets he wrote in Italian are love sonnets), Milton writes political sonnets, occasional sonnets, elegiac sonnets, and sonnets of personal meditation, like this one.



### *Author Biography*

Milton was born in Cheapside, London, in 1608, the son of John Milton, Sr., a prosperous scrivener,

notary, and composer, and Sara Jeffrey Milton. Because of the family's financial standing, Milton received an excellent education in Greek, Latin, Hebrew, French and Italian. Music and literature were particular favorites with the boy, and Milton began composing his own poetry at a young age. From 1618 to 1620 he was privately tutored at the family home. He then attended St. Paul's School before moving on to Christ's College, Cambridge, at the age of sixteen. His handsome face, delicate appearance, and lofty but unpretentious bearing earned him the nickname "The Lady of Christ's." At first unpopular, Milton eventually made a name for himself as a rhetorician and public speaker. Upon leaving the university in 1632 with a master's degree, Milton retired to Hammersmith for three years and later to Horton, Buckinghamshire, where he devoted himself to intense study and writing. In May of 1638 Milton embarked on an Italian journey which was to last nearly fifteen months. The experience, which he described in *Pro populo anglicano defensio secunda* (*Second Defence of the People of England*, 1654), brought him into contact with the leading men of letters in Florence, Rome, and Naples, including Giovanni Battista Manso, Marquis of Villa, who had been an intimate of the epic poet Torquato Tasso. Scholars view the Italian tour as seminal in Milton's literary development: a new self-confidence emerged in the letters he wrote during his travels, and it was in Italy that Milton first proposed to write a great epic.

With the coming of the English Civil War and the Commonwealth, Milton's life changed completely as his attentions shifted from private to public concerns. Abruptly he left off writing poetry for prose, pouring out pamphlets during the early 1640s in which he opposed what he considered rampant episcopal tyranny. Having, as he related, embarked from a sense of duty upon "a troubled sea of noises and hoarse disputes," he declared his Puritan allegiance in tracts in which he argued the need to purge the Church of England of all vestiges of Roman Catholicism and restore the simplicity of the apostolic church. In 1642 he married his first wife, Mary Powell, who left him shortly after the wedding (but returned to him three years later; paradoxically, though Milton was to marry two more times, he was never divorced). With the execution of Charles I in 1649, Milton entered the political fray with *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, an assertion of the right of a people to depose or execute a ruling tyrant. This view constituted a complete about-face for Milton, who had written as a good monarchist in his early works. Hence-



John Milton

forth Milton was permanently on the political left. He accepted an invitation to become Cromwell's Latin secretary for foreign affairs and issued a number of tracts on church and state issues. The restoration of the monarchy in 1660 left Milton disillusioned and hastened his departure from public life; as a former member of the Commonwealth, he lived for a time in peril of his life, but for reasons not entirely clear he was spared harsh punishment.

The remaining fourteen years of Milton's life were spent in relatively peaceful retirement in and around London. Completely blind since 1652, he increasingly devoted his time to poetry. Amanuenses, assisted sometimes by Milton's two nephews and his daughter Deborah, were employed to take dictation, correct copy, and read aloud, and Milton made rapid progress on projects he had put off many years before. During the writing of *Paradise Lost*, Milton spent mornings dictating passages he had composed in his head at night. *Paradise Lost* was published in 1667, followed in 1671 by *Paradise Regained*. *Samson Agonistes*, a verse tragedy, appeared in the same volume as *Paradise Regained*. He died in November, 1674, apparently of complications arising from gout. His funeral, wrote John Toland in 1698, was attended by "All his learned and great Friends in London, not without a friendly concourse of the Vulgar."

### Poem Text

When I consider how my light is spent  
Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,  
And that one talent which is death to hide  
Lodged with me useless, 'though my soul more  
bent  
To serve therewith my Maker, and present  
My true account, lest he returning chide:  
"Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?"  
I fondly ask. But Patience, to prevent  
That murmur, soon replies, "God doth not need  
Either man's work or his own gifts. Who best  
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His  
state  
Is kingly: thousands at his bidding speed,  
And post o'er land and ocean without rest;  
They also serve who only stand and wait."

### Poem Summary

#### Line 1:

The poet considers how his "light" is used up or wasted or put forth in the world; in a poem on blindness, "light" can most easily be interpreted as his ability to see. But for this deeply religious poet it may also mean an inner light or spiritual capacity.

#### Line 2:

The poet assumes that his life is not yet half over. The phrase "in this dark world and wide" is typical of one of the ways Milton handles adjectives, putting one in front of the noun and one behind it.

#### Line 3:

This line may refer to the Biblical parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30) which speaks of a bad servant who neglects his master's talent (a talent was a kind of coin) instead of using it; he is "cast into outer darkness." It can also mean a literal talent, in other words Milton's talent as a writer.

#### Lines 4-6:

"Lodged with me useless" means that his talent as a poet is useless now that he is losing his sight. "Though my soul more bent/ to serve therewith my Maker" can be roughly paraphrased, "although my soul is even more inclined to serve God with that talent." This is especially frustrating to want to serve God with his writing but to feel his talent will be wasted as he becomes blind. He wishes

ultimately to "present his true account," or give a good account of himself and his service to God.

#### Line 5:

Line 5 expresses the speaker's desire to serve God through his poetry, to use his talents for the glory of God.

#### Line 6:

This line may refer to the second coming of Christ or to the judgement. "Lest he returning chide" can be paraphrased "so that he won't chide or rebuke me when he returns."

#### Lines 7-8:

Milton grumblingly asks here if God just wants day-work, or smaller, lesser tasks, since Milton's blindness denies him his "light" and thus the use of his talents. Note that Milton allows his grumbling tone to show first, and then qualifies his own attitude as foolish.

#### Line 8:

Patience is not capitalized, but has often been thought of as a personification here rather than as another aspect of Milton's inner self. Either way, in the inner dialogue, patience speaks in the remaining six lines, quite effectively having the last word.

#### Line 9:

Patience speaks, to prevent that "murmur," Milton's questioning of God's will in line 7.

#### Lines 10-14:

Patience's reply explains one aspect of the nature of God and affirms a kind of service to God that is different from the service advocated in the parable of the talents. First of all God does not need man's work or God-given talents. The nature of service to God is explained next.

#### Lines 10-11:

"Who best / bear his mild yoke" means the people who are most obedient to God's will (which is mild, not difficult). These people are the ones who serve God best. The image of the yoke is also Biblical; a yoke was a kind of harness put on oxen but in Matthew 11:29-30 it is an image for God's will.

#### Lines 11-12:

"His state is kingly" explains God's greatness; patience goes on to elaborate in the next lines on that greatness.

**Lines 12-13:**

At God's bidding or will, thousands of people and by implication angelic messengers "speed and post" all over the world all the time. This line implies a sort of constant worldwide motion of service to God's commands; that allows the last line to imply by contrast a great restfulness and peace. There is more than one way to serve God, and patience is telling the poet that even his waiting or the apparent inaction caused by his blindness can be a kind of service if it meets the criterion of lines 10-11, to bear the yoke well.

**Line 14:**

This famous line is often quoted.

**Themes****Limitation**

In "Sonnet 16" Milton meditates on the devastating effect blindness has had on his life and work. He equates his lost vision with "light spent," and laments not the handicap in and of itself, but the limitations it imposes on his work as a poet. His poetic ability is so important to him that he calls it "that one talent," suggesting it is the only talent that matters. It is "Lodged with me useless"—in other words, its expression has been rendered impossible by his blindness. His limitation is particularly distressing since Milton desires more than ever to write poetry but seems to see no way to continue. Blindness imposed a double limitation on Milton's poetic activity. In the broadest sense, it made poetry an impossible activity, for there was no way for a blind man to put words to paper. In addition, Milton's conception of epic poetry presupposed a high level of education. The loss of his vision meant he could no longer read and, by extension, could no longer learn.

**Light**

The image of "light" is important to the poem. On the most superficial level it refers to physical light, which the poet can no longer experience. It calls to mind a story in the Gospel of John (John IX, 1-7) to which Milton referred in other texts. In the story, Jesus miraculously cures a beggar's blindness. The image of light resonates on many different levels in the Bible story, and most are present in Sonnet 16 as well. For instance, when Jesus tells his disciples "I must work the works of Him that sent me while it is day; the night cometh

## Media Adaptations

- The six-cassette *English Literature in the Seventeenth Century*, published by G. K. Hall Audio Books in 1986, contains readings of works by Milton, as well as Samuel Pepys, John Donne, John Bunyan, and John Dryden.
- *The Milton-L Home Page*, web-site. [www.urich.edu/~creamer/milton.html](http://www.urich.edu/~creamer/milton.html)
- Hill, John Spencer, *John Milton: Poet, Priest and Prophet*. on-line book. [www.uottowa.ca/~phoenix/mi/ton.htm](http://www.uottowa.ca/~phoenix/mi/ton.htm)

when no man can work," daylight is a metaphor for man's life. Like each day, our lives are limited and once night comes that day is gone forever. As he writes, Milton is still alive, but he believes the darkness his blindness has brought means the end of his creative life. When he writes of "talent which is death to hide," he suggests further that his blindness will prevent him from achieving another, longer life: the immortality that fame brings a poet who has written a masterpiece.

On yet another level, light signifies the inner light, the spiritual light that shines in the poet. In the gospel story, Christ called himself "the light of the world," that he was bringing God's word to man. Milton believed that poets were also bringers of light; their works brought a special kind of enlightenment to humanity. But his blindness has snuffed out his poetic light.

**Duty**

Milton refers to another gospel passage in this sonnet, the parable of the talents from the gospel of Matthew. In that story a master gives each of his three servants a sum of money, that is, some "talents," which they are to keep for him while he undertakes a journey. When he returns, he asks each servant for the money. The first two have used the money wisely and return to the master twice the sum they were entrusted with. The third servant, however, only buried his talent. The master is an-

## Topics for Further Study



- How could a person “serve” by merely waiting? What situations can you think of in which someone could perform a great service by “waiting?”
- What other physical handicap could be as damaging to a career as blindness? Describe it and its consequences without using the name of the handicap.
- Write a poem in reply to Milton that might persuade him that his talent is not useless.

gry with the servant, takes back the money, and casts him “in the outer darkness.” The moral of the story, of which Milton is well aware, is that each are given gifts by God, and that for all there will be a day of reckoning when all will have to “present [one’s] true account.” In his poem, Milton plays upon the two meanings of “talent”: a form of money in the Bible story and a God-given ability in the everyday sense. He fears that, because of his blindness, he will never be able to put his talent to the use God intends.

For fourteen years, Milton “hid his talent in the earth,” in the words of the gospel. The “wicked and slothful servant” was cast into darkness. One sense, therefore, in which “it is death to hide” one’s talent, is that one will be punished: cast out of the light, out of God’s presence. Milton, however, has not yet been called to make his “true account.” His soul burns as much as ever to put it to use, but the darkness into which he has already been cast prevents Milton from doing his duty to God and making full use of his talent. Can God expect him to do his work without his eyesight?, he is finally tempted to ask. Can God truly expect him to fulfill a duty that God himself has apparently made impossible?

### Submission

Patience, the virtue, counsels against putting that foolish question put to the Almighty. Man’s duty to God is not to give Him anything. God has no need of humans’ work; everything they have are

“his own gifts” anyway, in Milton’s eyes. In the face of a catastrophe like blindness the only course of action open to him—and the rest of mankind, as the last six lines suggest—is humble resignation to God’s will. “Who best / Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best” harkens back to the passage in John’s gospel mentioned earlier. Jesus tells his disciples that the blind man did not become blind because he had sinned, “but that the work of God should be made manifest in him.” Like Job, Milton accepts his lot in life as part of a greater plan. Some are meant for action, to “speed / And post o’er the land and ocean without rest.” But others “who only stand and wait”—whether as a servant awaiting his master’s bidding or a laborer waiting to be hired—do God’s will as well.

### Style

In “Sonnet 16” sonnet Milton takes advantage of the Italian sonnet form, in which an octave, or first eight lines, poses a problem, and the sestet, or last six lines, offers an answer or resolution. The dividing point between problem and solution is at line 9, usually called the “turn” or volta. In this sonnet Milton uses the turn cleverly to emphasize his own impatience: the turn comes a half line early, and it is his own patience he personifies as speaking out to “prevent” his own impatience. The quatrains use enclosed rhyme, sometimes notated as *abba abba*; here the sestet’s rhyme scheme is *cde cde*, one of the many accepted rhyme schemes of an Italian sestet. Milton was known for his metrical skill, and this poem’s regular iambic pentameter is typically competent, although it does not contain the amazing rhythmic and musical effects for which he is well known. It is interesting instead for its many enjambments, the running over of one line into another, which might be said to make the lines hurry along. All the impatient enjambments make the last line stand out by contrast; in some sense they help the last line perform what its theme is, to stand still and wait.

### Historical Context

At the end of the 1630s, England was in turmoil. Radical Puritan sects were demanding a complete reform of the Church of England. There was growing tension between the House of Commons, one of the branches of England’s parliament, and King Charles I over the financing of his wars. Adding to

## Compare & Contrast

- **17th Century:** The English government employed censors who reviewed all books, journals, and pamphlets before they were published. Censors were concerned with preventing the expression of heretical beliefs, antireligious sentiments, or attacks on highly placed individuals, like the king. John Milton's essay *Areopagitica* was an early plea for complete freedom of the press.

**Today:** Because of the constitutional right to free speech, censorship initiatives in the United States almost always often come from private interest groups. The focus of such attempts to control speech is rarely political. It is sometimes religious, as in the effort to prevent the teaching of scientific theories of evolution in public schools. It is sometimes ethnic or sexual, as seen in efforts to prevent expression that is seen to be sexist, racist, or somehow derogatory to one group of citizens. Most often, it is directed at material with explicit sexual content that opponents believe could be detrimental to the morals of children or adults, or which could lead to antisocial behavior such as sex crimes.

- **17th Century:** Marriage was considered a sacramental institution by the Roman Catholic Church as well as the churches in England. Despite Henry VIII's divorces one hundred years earlier, divorces were very rarely granted in Milton's time, and then only on grounds of adultery

or impotence. His advocacy of it in *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* was considered a nearly heretical suggestion.

**Today:** Divorce is easier to obtain than at practically any time in western history. According to the 1997 *Statistical Abstract*, more than one million Americans divorce every year. More than half of all U.S. marriages end in divorce.

- **17th Century:** Europe was wracked by religious intolerance and members of groups whose beliefs differed from official religions were often persecuted for their beliefs. The Protestant Huguenots were forced to leave Catholic France, Protestant sects like the Puritans and Quakers, as well as Roman Catholics, were driven underground or forced to leave England. In Italy the Waldensian (Vaudois) sect was driven into the Alps and eventually murdered.

**Today:** Religious persecution is often as bloody today as it was three hundred years ago. Christian Serbs have waged a war of extermination against Bosnian Muslims for most of the 1990s. The conflict between Hindus and Sikhs in India erupts regularly into violence. And although a settlement has been sought for nearly twenty years, the tensions between Palestinians and Israelis usually take the form of violent demonstrations, police beatings, and military action.

the conflict was that the House of Commons was largely Puritan while Charles, as England's King, was head of the Church of England. Charles's attempt to arrest five leaders of Commons in 1642 was the spark that set off the civil war. After years of indecisive battles, Oliver Cromwell's brilliant military leadership—combined with Parliament's control of most of England's financial resources—finally prevailed. In 1649, Charles I was beheaded. His son, Charles II, led a Scottish army in an attempt to win back the throne, but was routed by Cromwell and the English. After nine long years,

the civil wars were ended and England was a proclaimed a Commonwealth.

Milton cut short a trip to the continent in 1639 when he heard of the religious controversies in England. Back at home, he became an active agitator in the movement that eventually brought down Charles I. He wrote numerous pamphlets and other works on behalf of the Puritan revolutionaries and later for Cromwell's Commonwealth. He did not hesitate to attack the Church of England (in *Of Reformation*, for example), Parliament (in *Areopagitica*), or the King himself (in *Eikonoklastes*) to

enunciate principles in which he believed. He was a fierce believer in individual freedoms. Some of his most famous pieces defended freedom of press and of religious conscience. His arguments advocating divorce created a minor controversy in the midst of the rush to civil war.

From his time as a student on, Milton's great ambition was to write a magnificent epic poem for England. While in Europe in 1638, he began collecting possible subjects, both religious and secular, for this poem. But when he entered the political fray, he deliberately postponed his plan for poetry. In addition to his polemical writing, he was appointed Secretary of Foreign Tongues in 1649, a government post that took up much of his time. Between *Lycidas* in November 1637 and the full onset of his blindness in 1652, Milton had not written a single major poem, and he had done next to no work on the epic. Whenever "Sonnet 16" was written, Milton obviously regretted the time he had spent *not* making poetry. The thought that his blindness could form an insurmountable obstacle to the realization of his life's work was linked to an acute awareness of the time he had lost, not to say wasted.

### **Milton's Blindness**

Milton's blindness was not an unexpected bolt from the blue. His mother had bad vision, and his own eyesight faded slowly over nearly a decade. Trouble seemed to start in 1644, when he noticed problems reading. He once described his early symptoms as "a sort of rainbow" that obscured whatever he was looking at. That was followed by a mist in his left eye which gradually blotted out everything on that side. Objects nearby looked smaller than they should have. When he rested and closed his eyes, he experienced an explosion of colors. This description has suggested to medical specialists that he had a cyst on his pituitary gland. In 1650 his left eye became completely blind. Milton's continuous writing, reading, and correction of proofs probably hastened his complete loss of vision. For the last twenty-two years of his life he had to dictate his writings to a secretary. A more difficult adjustment for the studious Milton may have been that he needed someone to read to him.

Milton became completely blind at the age of forty-three in 1652 and "Sonnet 16" is intimately connected with the poet's loss of sight. But scholars disagree whether Milton composed the piece upon the onset of total blindness or at another date (the poem was not actually printed until the collection *Poems* in 1673). Some critics, for example, insist that the sonnets were written in chronologi-

cal order. If so, "Sonnet 16" would have been written sometime after 1655. In that year inhabitants of the Italian area of Piedmont brutally massacred members of the Waldensians (also known as the Vaudois), a group of religious dissenters who had been excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church. Milton's next sonnet is from that year and commemorates "the late massacre at Piedmont."

Others believe the despair evident in the poem could only have been so deeply felt soon after the full onset of his blindness. By 1654, when the author completed his *Second Defence of the English People*, he had regained full confidence in his ability to work despite his disability. After that work was completed, these critics contend, his blindness took on a completely different cast in his own mind: what had earlier seemed a handicap became proof that, like prophets of old, he had been marked by God for some extraordinary work. If he did postpone publishing the sonnet until later, it might have been to conceal his sightlessness from his political enemies, who would have used it as a sign of God's wrath. This accusation that was often made anyway, especially after the restoration of the Charles II to the throne of England in 1660.

Still others speculate that the poem could have been written long before the author's complete loss of vision. Milton did not seem handicapped by his blindness, even immediately after it became total. The Council of State retained him as Secretary of Foreign Tongues, a position which required him to compose and translate important diplomatic correspondence. They apparently did not view his blindness as a liability. Furthermore, Milton became progressively blind over a number of years and would have had an opportunity to adjust to it. These critics point to the line "Ere half my days in this dark world and wide" and note that Milton would have been long past the midpoint of his life in the 1650s. In the seventeenth century, a normal lifespan was considered "Threescore years and ten" (seventy years), a number mentioned in the Psalms. Milton turned thirty-six in 1644. He first noticed problems with his sight at that time, problems that often prevented him from reading. Perhaps then Milton wrote "Sonnet 16"—which was not titled "On His Blindness" until long after his death—in *anticipation* of his eventual blindness.

### **Critical Overview**

Milton is known as one of the very greatest and most influential English poets, ranking with



Chaucer and Shakespeare. He wrote both poetry and prose, and in poetry wrote pastoral, elegy, epic, drama, sonnet, and other kinds. His most famous and influential work is the epic *Paradise Lost*, which has been at the center of English literary criticism since Milton's day. His sonnets have received less critical attention. Lord Macaulay, unusual in valuing the sonnets highly, wrote in *Critical, Historical, and Miscellaneous Essays* that "traces ... of the peculiar character of Milton may be found in all his works; but it is most strongly displayed in the Sonnets. Those remarkable poems have been undervalued ..." Macaulay links the sonnets firmly to Milton's life and character, a view which would not be a distortion of this particular sonnet.

"Sonnet 16" in particular, however, has received a fair amount of critical discussion, much of it disputing the date of composition. A. S. P. Woodhouse and Douglas Bush, in *A Variorum Commentary on the Poems of John Milton* summarize several dozen essays on this poem as follows: "[I]t is evident that all interpretations recognize that the sonnet commences from a mood of depression, frustration, even impatience (since Patience has to intervene), and that the counsel of Patience is submission: the remaining lines reinforce this counsel or add an entirely new conception ... here, as in 'Sonnet 7 [On His Having Arrived at the Age of Twenty-three],' the problem posed is not so much resolved as lifted to a plane where self-regarding thoughts become irrelevant."

## Criticism

### David Kelly

*David Kelly is a freelance writer and instructor at Oakton Community College and College of Lake County, as well as the faculty advisor and co-founder of the creative writing periodical of Oakton Community College. In the following essay, Kelly provides biographical information about Milton to help modern readers approach Milton's poem from three centuries ago.*

Is "Sonnet 16" a good thing to read?

There is no question that, when literary figures are ranked in order of their all-time importance, John Milton's name always appears close to the top of the list of English poets. The question often raised by modern students is whether the standards that are used to put him in such a high ranking are relevant to today's fast-paced world. Sure, he can

## What Do I Read Next?



- Helen Keller's autobiography, *The Story of my Life* (1903) is a classic account of how an individual overcame extreme physical handicaps—blindness and deafness—to lead an inspiring, meaningful life.
- Christy Brown's *My Left Foot* (1954; made into a film in 1989) is the autobiography of a man severely crippled by cerebral palsy who manages with the use of only his left foot to become a celebrated writer and artist.
- John Milton treats blindness further in his epic poem, *Samson Agonistes* (1671). The work describes the famous hero of the Israelites who is captured by the enemies of his people, imprisoned, and blinded.
- Milton's essay *Areopagitica* (1644) is his most famous prose piece. It is a passionate defense of free speech that has influenced civil libertarians up to this day.

gracefully pull a 180-degree turn in the direction of his thought when going from the octave to the sestet of an Italian sonnet, but what does that matter in a world where a surprise gunshot in a film such as *Pulp Fiction* can alter the direction of the story in an instant, or where the quick-cutting of music videos has trained our brains to expect a new viewpoint every 3.7 seconds? Students are right to wonder whether Milton's reputation is based upon his understanding of the world around us, or if he is assigned reading because English professors had to suffer through understanding what he meant when *they* were students, and they now want to sadistically pass their suffering along. Milton is not easy to read and understand: three centuries have added the problem of outdated word usage to the twists that he intentionally gave the language to keep his readers on their toes, and his subject matter is purposely tangled, being chosen to show how reality contradicts itself. It only makes sense that we would study difficult things, since obvious



*As opposed to the universal acclaim that Milton receives as a poet, his sonnets have garnered uneven support, running from critics who say they were great or just good to those who consider them really pretty terrible.”*

---

things, by definition, do not need to be studied in order to be appreciated. With so much to study in the modern world, a person taking classes at a high school or college—who, based on averages, will be neither blind nor deeply religious—will want to know that the effort they are putting toward understanding a poem such as “On His Blindness” will end up being worth the investment.

The first way to approach such a question is to consider the reputation that the poet brings with him, looking for signs that Milton’s popularity in the field of literature is more of a matter of reputation than of relevance. After Shakespeare, there is probably no English poet who has stronger acceptance as a master of his art. It is no shame to Milton that he can only, in the best evaluations, come in second place. In fact, it is practically inevitable: Shakespeare is not really judged by literary critics so much as he is set aside and used as the standard for measuring the effectiveness of other poets; no one could ever unseat him from the number one position. Even being considered among the top few poets is an astounding feat for Milton, considering the millions of poets who have written since his death in 1674. Skeptics may see this as a plot of the literary establishment to carry on the status quo, as if generations of thinkers would fail to produce any values other than what they were taught in school. The simple law of averages tells us that if Milton’s thinking were narrow or his use of words was just showy and without substance, someone would have made an argument against him so strong that lazy-minded traditionalists would find it easier to drop him from the textbooks than defend him.

Milton’s poetic reputation is based on the strength of his longer works, the epics *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* and the poetic drama *Samson Agonistes*. If it were not for these works, we probably would not study “Sonnet 16” today, since there certainly have been better English-language sonnet poets to capture our attention. As opposed to the universal acclaim that Milton receives as a poet, his sonnets have garnered uneven support, running from critics who say they were great or just good to those who consider them really pretty terrible. Two hundred years ago, Samuel Johnson, the famed literary wit whose biography has provided the world with hundreds of well-known, erudite one-liners, explained to another writer how Milton could write so well in the larger forms and produce such poor shorter poems: “Milton, Madam, was a genius that could cut a Colossus from a rock, but he could not carve heads on cherry-stones.” Even a skeptic can recognize the skill and concentration that went into creating “Sonnet 16,” which is considered one of Milton’s best sonnets. At the same time, however, we are allowed to question whether this poem is studied today precisely because of the fast pace of modern life. If students are being given this sonnet to make up for reading works by Milton that truly deserve attention, then its place in literature texts is more of a Lifetime Achievement Award for the poet than an honor that the poem itself has earned.

In some respects, Milton’s life was indeed the sort that we think a poet ought to have, although it could be argued that, because his talent has secured his place in the textbooks, we have only kept the details of his life that befit a poetic legend. One seldom reads about his upper-class childhood and superb education without seeing a reference to the fact that at age 16, at Christ’s College, Cambridge, his nickname was “The Lady of Christ’s.” In other walks of life, a detail like this might be discreetly left out by biographers, but as a poet it is presented as testimony to Milton’s sensitivity and gentle manner. The other personal detail that biographers never leave out is his trip to Italy from 1638 to 1639, which is significant because that was when he met important thinkers and literary figures and became an international literary figure in his own right: good for Milton, but even better for his readers, because such recognition is often what is needed to give a writer confidence to explore his own thoughts and fears more deeply. He was politically active on the side of the parliamentarians against King Charles I in the Civil War of 1642 to

1648, which meant that he supported the power of elected representatives, rather than allowing the king to keep the absolute power that he traditionally had. After Charles I was executed in 1649, Milton was appointed Secretary of Foreign Languages. In 1660, when the monarchy was restored under Charles II, he was arrested, but friends managed to get him released. He was a complicated man who embraced Christianity yet fought with almost all organized Christian religions; who sometimes relished public attention but who also hated public criticism so much that he often quarreled in print with his critics, as in his "Defense of Himself" published in 1655 and his "Second Defense" incongruously published the year before.

And, of course, he was blind.

All of the details about Milton's life made him an interesting historical figure as someone centrally positioned in events in England in the seventeenth century, but they are not interesting enough to prop up a literary reputation. Even the blindness that complicated his life as a writer does not necessarily make him more interesting than, say, a blind butcher. As he said in *Second Defence*, "To be blind is not miserable; not to be able to bear blindness, that is miserable." Television constantly bombards our culture with uplifting stories of courageous individuals who manage to overcome their hardships; the extent to which these stories are successful depends, not on the hardships being overcome, but on what the struggle means to the person struggling. Milton was a voracious reader who spent whole years studying various disciplines that he previously had known nothing about, learning as much about music, geography, history and several languages as professionals in those fields. Losing his ability to read and write cut deeply—to the core of his personality. In his later years he had people to read and write for him, but that was as poor a substitute as having someone taste his food for him would have been. We only need to notice the importance that he put on light after his sight was gone to see what it meant to him. In *Samson Agonistes*, for example, he has Samson declare, "Light, the prime work of God, to me is extinct"; the Invocation to Book III of *Paradise Lost* consists of a whole section in praise of light, including the phrase "God is Light," which is a strangely self-excluding thing for a blind Christian to say. Rather than gathering up his determination to "overcome" blindness or deciding to simply accept the fate dealt to him, Milton wrote about true, complex feelings brought on by affliction. In this poem, which historians guess was written soon after he lost his

sight, Milton shows the nerve to present himself as angry, frustrated, and vulnerable, and he has the verbal grace to hold these hot emotions suspended within fourteen lines.

There is nothing simple about this poem or this poet, although people will often declare that they don't see the big deal if they are not willing to take the time to study. Some day in the future, when blindness is overcome by implants and neurosurgery, this poem will still be important to readers because it will show them how to deal with deep disappointment and how to relate to their God. Time has put a little dust on the language that Milton used, and most readers have a hard time understanding his primary meaning—much less the submeanings that he hints at—without the aid of a dictionary and poetry guide. Nonetheless, the strength of the poem makes the trip from our world to Milton's worth it.

Source: David Kelly, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 1998.

### **J.S. Smart**

*In the following excerpt, Smart explores the influence of the Italian sonnet upon the poetry of Milton.*







Source: *Introduction to The Sonnets of John Milton*, Clarendon Press, 1966, pp. 1-39.

### Sources

Macaulay, Lord, "Milton," in *Critical, Historical, and Miscellaneous Essays*, Vol. I, Sheldon and Company, 1860, pp. 202-66.

Woodhouse, A. S. P. and Douglas Bush, in *A Variorum Commentary on the Poems of John Milton*, Columbia University Press, 1970.

### For Further Study

Bush, Douglas, *John Milton*, New York: Macmillan, 1964.  
A readable biography that focuses on Milton's writings.

Check, Macon, "Of Two Sonnets of Milton," in *Milton: Modern Essays in Criticism*, edited by Arthur E. Barker, New York: Oxford University Press., 1965, pp. 125-35.

Essay analyzes the references to the gospels in "Sonnet 16."

Honigmann, E. A. J., *Milton's Sonnets*, New York: St Martin's Press, 1966.

Discusses the controversy over the date of composition of "On His Blindness" and offers evidence for various conclusions.

Nicolson, Marjorie Hope, *John Milton: A Reader's Guide to His Poetry*, New York: Octagon Books, 1971.

Discusses the religious components of "On His Blindness," including the parable of the talents and resignation to God's will.

Wilson, A. N., *The Life of John Milton*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1983.

A biography that connects the sonnet to Milton's decision to postpone his work as a poet to write his political tracts in service of the English Revolution.

Wolfe, Don M., *Milton and His England*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971.

A book that describes Milton's life in the context of the momentous times in which he lived.

# *On the Pulse of Morning*

*Maya Angelou*

1993

Poet, playwright, composer, actress, singer, and human rights activist, Maya Angelou is heralded as a “people’s poet,” her work written in a common voice which is both accessible and emotionally charged. In 1993, when Bill Clinton decided to invite a poet to read at his first presidential inauguration ceremony—for the first time since Robert Frost stood on stage with John F. Kennedy in 1961—he chose fellow Arkansas native Angelou to write a poem celebrating the new beginning of his presidency. The panoramic piece that Angelou composed, “On the Pulse of Morning,” reached millions of television viewers. Its popularity proved so great that it was published as a cassette and chapbook in 1993. The work was distributed to schools, libraries, cultural centers, and book stores nationwide.

Appropriate for what Clinton promised would be a new era in American history, “On the Pulse of Morning” is an optimistic piece that offers hope for the future by embracing positive aspects of the past. Angelou builds the poem on a simple foundation, “A Rock, A River, A Tree,” from which point she searches the distant past to provide answers for the present as well as advice for America’s future. Drawing different races, cultures, and religions together, the poem invites all of humankind to return to the foundations that made the country great, including basic values and an appreciation of nature. Angelou calls upon ancient voices in hopes that “Each new hour holds new chances / for a new beginning.”





## Author Biography

Born on April 4, 1928 in St. Louis, Missouri, Maya Angelou spent most of her childhood in the rural, segregated environment of Stamps, Arkansas, raised by her maternal grandmother after the divorce of her parents. She emerged from a disturbing and oppressive childhood to become a prominent figure in contemporary American literature, and Angelou's quest for self-identity and emotional fulfillment is recounted in several volumes of autobiography, beginning with *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, which chronicles the author's life up to age sixteen. As a black girl growing up in a world whose boundaries were set by whites, Angelou learned pride and self-confidence from her grandmother, but the author's self-image was shattered when she was raped at the age of eight by her mother's boyfriend. Angelou was so devastated by the attack that she refused to speak for approximately five years. She finally emerged from her self-imposed silence with the help of a schoolteacher who introduced her to the world's great literature. The author spent much of her troubled youth fleeing various family problems. She was homeless for a time, worked on and off as a prostitute, and held a variety of jobs in several places as a young adult, changing her name to Maya Angelou when she became a cabaret dancer in her early twenties. Eventually she became an actress, joining the European touring cast of *Porgy and Bess*, but concern for the welfare of her young son, born when Angelou was just sixteen, eventually brought her back to the United States.

By the time she was thirty, Angelou had made a commitment to becoming a writer. Inspired by her friendship with the distinguished social activist author John Killens, she moved to Brooklyn to be near him and to learn her craft. Through weekly meetings of the Harlem Writers' Guild she learned to treat her writing seriously. At the same time, Angelou made a commitment to promote black civil rights. The next four volumes of her autobiography—*Gather Together in My Name* (1974), *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* (1976), *The Heart of a Woman* (1981), and *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* (1986)—trace the author's psychological, spiritual, and political odyssey. Angelou recounts experiences such as encounters with Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., her personal involvement with the civil rights and feminist movements in the United States and in Africa, her developing relationship with her son, and her knowledge of the hardships



Maya Angelou

associated with the lower class of American society. In *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*, Angelou describes her four-year stay in Ghana where she worked as a free-lance writer and editor.

Angelou's poetry, which is collected in such volumes as *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Die* (1971) and *And Still I Rise* (1976), has also contributed to her reputation and is especially popular among young people. It is particularly noted for its use of short lyrics and jazzy rhythms. Angelou recently directed national attention to humanitarian concerns with her poem "On the Pulse of Morning," which she recited at the 1993 inauguration of President Bill Clinton.

## Poem Summary

### Lines: 1-8

In these opening lines, Angelou sets the scene and tone of the poem. She places three objects before the reader: "A Rock, A River, A Tree," but doesn't give a specific location. These three elemental pieces seem removed from any landscape, and, from the capitalization of each name, it has been speculated that Angelou intends each to stand for itself in a type of grandeur. The poem goes on

to explain that these objects are “hosts to species long since departed,” still surviving though their “tenants” are long extinct, further implying they carry a certain “historical wisdom.” From here the poet lists a few of those creatures known only from their “dried tokens” dug up and reassembled in museums. Their “sojourn,” or temporary stay here, ended in a “hastening doom,” which they had no way of predicting or preventing. “Any broad alarm” of their extinction is now dwarfed by the mountain of history between their time and the present.

If lines 7 and 8 are read aloud, it’s possible to hear the rich sounds Angelou crafts into the poem. The repetition of long vowel sounds and the internal rhyme of “Doom / is lost in the gloom” perhaps reflect the somber mood Angelou is setting while describing these extinct creatures.

### **Lines: 9-13**

Line 9 marks a shift in time, a move from looking back at history to the present. The “Rock” from the first stanza now has a voice, which it is using to cry out “clearly, forcefully.” It offers the reader an invitation to climb up and get a better perspective of where America might be heading in a journey toward a “distant destiny.” But like a teacher the Rock warns against seeking any shelter or hiding place behind it in the darkness. “Shadows” have long been the places that cause fear, where bad things lurk under beds or behind closet doors. They are also, literally, the absence of light: within shadows it is difficult to see clearly. For the religious, light is divine; for philosophers it is knowledge. Believing this, divinity and knowledge are absorbed by the stone but absent in its shadow.

### **Lines: 14-18**

In the third stanza, the Rock continues its lesson, addressing the reader directly as “You, created only a little lower than / the angels.” Here the poet seems to close the gap between man and heaven, the stone again raising the reader. This Rock has seen dinosaur come and go, and now humans, who, it notices, “have crouched too long in / the bruising darkness / ... face down in ignorance.” Angelou’s verb choice “bruising” in line 16 may describe how a shadow casts a blue-black mark across a face, reminding the reader of conflict and its dark wounds. The speaker suggests humans have been hiding, not looking up toward the light, afraid of what they might learn.

### **Lines: 19-23**

Angelou ties the third and fourth stanzas together with the line “Your mouth spilling words /

Armed for slaughter.” She may have broken the line here to force the reader to pause in the white space between, to guess “what kind of words?” before finishing the sentence. The harsh words “spilling” from humans’ mouths seem to be pouring out of our control, “armed for slaughter,” ready for a fight with anyone listening. But the Rock warns again, summarizing “stand upon me; / But do not hide your face.” People may wear many “faces”—student, laborer, wife, father—that are different, but they all provide an identity and a sense of individuality.

### **Lines: 24-26**

With the beginning of a new section, Angelou introduces a new speaker, the “River,” which, in a song, invites the reader to come closer and “rest here by [her] side.” To get to the River, the reader had to cross “the wall of the world,” which may be some real geographic feature, or just representative of a boundary or obstacle on humankind’s journey.

### **Lines: 27-34**

The River compares each person in America to “a bordered country / ... perpetually under siege,” relating the troubles of an entire nation back to its million voices. The River explains what the country has done wrong: gone to war for money, polluted waters with machines and factories, ignored the needy. Angelou describes the toxic waters as a “current of debris upon [the River’s] breast,” giving nature gender and perhaps reminding that it is “Mother Nature” who is being destroyed. There is a place for Americans to rest on her shore, but only if they “study war no more.”

### **Lines: 35-40**

If people come “clad in peace,” the River offers them a song: a gift the Creator gave before the tallest tree ever broke soil as a single shoot. “I and the / Tree and the Rock were one” once, the River explains, in a time before recorded history, in a time before man began drawing boundaries and daring others to cross these lines.

“Cynicism” is the belief that people are motivated by selfishness, and the “bloody sear” across their brows may be a reminder of the mark Cain was cursed to wear for his selfish act—the murder of his brother. “When you yet knew you still knew nothing” perhaps means a humbler or even wiser time; Plato said “True wisdom is knowing we know nothing.”

**Lines: 41-49**

Using a list—or a litany—to create a wide panoramic scene of diverse peoples, Angelou introduces the reader to a new speaker, the Tree. It seems everyone is here to listen, regardless of culture, occupation, which gender with which they fall in love, or to which God they pray. This diverse list works to welcome any and all to the foot of the Tree, much like the engraved invitation at the base of the Statue of Liberty, “Bring me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses.”

**Lines: 50-54**

In this short stanza the poet repeats again the invitation to “plant yourself beside the River,” the entire mass of humankind welcome to hear the song. The Tree has many symbolic meanings, not the least of which is the concept of extended family—or “Family Tree.” A tree also has roots that stretch into the very earth. In these symbols Angelou is reminding the reader of their place both within their family (blood relations and other) and within nature.

**Lines: 55-63**

Calling Americans “descendants of passed-/ On traveler” the River asks the reader to consider both their own past and the past of the country as a whole. There is a reminder that all Americans are immigrants, that they are “just passing through.” Angelou follows this up by directly addressing the Native Americans, those who lived in this country centuries before Europeans ever arrived: the Pawnee tribe, Apache, Seneca; the people who first named the rivers and trees and mountains. These people who once rested with the River were “forced on bloody feet” by the visitors in their land to work and mine.

**Lines: 64-69**

In these lines Angelou advances the poem through another list of diverse people, the rhythm of the names keeping beat, Arabs and Eskimos sharing company in the same breath. She begins the list with people who came to this country to escape religious persecution or find a better life for their family, and concludes with those who were forcibly uprooted and “bought / Sold, stolen, arriving on a nightmare / Praying for a dream.” This “dream” may be a reference, or allusion (a reference within a literary work to another work), to Martin Luther King’s famous “I Have a Dream” sermon, which became an anthem for the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.

**Lines: 70-79**

In the second section of the poem, the stanzas become longer, building in imagery and force. In lines 70-74 the poet returns to the comforting refrain “root yourselves beside me.” The three voices—Rock, River, Tree—may be a single “I,” the whole of nature speaking. Back in lines 55-56 Angelou writes “each of you ... / ... has been paid for,” and a similar statement is made in line 74: “your passages have been paid.” Who’s paid for these passages? What have America’s ancestors done to insure the journey? Regardless of origin, the Rock/Tree/River asks humankind to “lift up [our] faces ... / For this bright morning dawning for you.” These lines mirror the second stanza, where Angelou offers images of shadow and light. This is also the first indication to the poem’s title, perhaps working to create an overall theme or mood of dawning hope. Yet Angelou also cautions that the hardship that has led to this new day should never be forgotten: “wrenching pain, / Cannot be un-lived.” She warns that America must learn from its dark past so that when new problems arise they can be overcome; “if faced / With courage, [history] need not be lived again.”

**Lines: 80-83**

Following this revelatory stanza, where the three voices merge in a call to a bright new morning, this shorter stanza closes the entire second section on a quiet, consoling note. The lines become short—most less than four words—the poet perhaps wishing to slow the pace before the complete stop of the section break. For the third time Angelou invokes the refrain “lift up your eyes.” The dream the slaves prayed for might be alive again if a new generation “will study war no more” and instead “give birth again” to a peaceful world.

**Lines: 84-92**

Beginning the third section with a single addressing line, Angelou maintains the encouraging, powerful tone of the Rock/River/Tree, yet the speaker is not specifically identified. She asks America to “Sculpt [your private need] into / The image of your most public self.” This is an elusive line in its generalization, perhaps telling instead of showing, but if it is broken down into its parts, a central tension reveals itself. The line asks the reader to sculpt or transform their most private needs into something that can be shared with others, the personal made public. Angelou doesn’t develop further what “private needs” may be, but most critics have speculated a reference to the most

## Media Adaptations



- The 1993 inaugural ceremony at which Angelou first read the poem is documented by James Earl Jones in the video *An American Reunion: Inauguration 1993*, available from Timelink on VHS.
- A recording of Angelou reading "On the Pulse of Morning" during the inauguration is also available on audio cassette from Random House (1993).
- A selection of poems read by the author, *Still I Rise*, includes the title poem, a piece she wrote for the Negro College Fund. It is also by Random House (1996).

basic human freedoms. In this sense these lines are a call to action, an encouragement to emphasize the importance of human rights. Whereas before Americans are asked to lift up their eyes, line 87 asks the same of their hearts, the center of all life and emotion. There are "chances / For a new beginning" if people can divorce themselves from fear and unchain themselves from their violent ways. "Yoked" refers to the wooden harness which keeps an ox secured to the plow it drags, a heavy bar across the animal's shoulders and fastened with straps around its body.

### Lines: 93-101

The sections are shorter and more frequent as Angelou nears the end of the poem. In the fourth section she returns to the locale of the second stanza, perched on the back of the land looking out toward the future. "The horizon leans forward," providing room for "new steps." This metaphor of taking steps may mean literally to walk forward as well as take "steps" or actions to ensure that past mistakes are not repeated. The speaker now reveals itself as the voice of America, the "Country" and all the trees, rivers, rocks, people, and animals of which it is composed. "Midas" in line 100 refers to the fabled king who could turn any substance to

gold with his touch, including, he regretfully discovered, those he loved, leaving him with a castle filled with lifeless riches. A mendicant is a beggar; like the privileged standing next to the homeless before the Tree in line 47, all are equal in the larger "pulse of this fine day."

### Lines: 102-110

In this closing section the title of the poem reveals its meaning, the theme of a new dawn for humankind coupled with the pulse that courses through America's common veins. The lists of various peoples earlier in the poem now become the simple image of family: when people look up and out at their future, they are looking at their "sister's eyes" and their "brother's face." Whereas most of the poem asks the reader to rest and listen to the wise teacher, these last lines implore speech. A "simple" lesson, Angelou refrains certain lines as many as four times throughout the poem, the tone taking on an almost lulling, song-like effect. The first step to this new day is a simple but meaningful action. Look up and out and say "Good Morning."

## Themes

### Knowledge and Ignorance

Written in the personae of nature as teacher, "On the Pulse of Morning" offers a clear message of how America should prepare for the future. Beginning as early as the second stanza, the Rock offers an invitation to stand upon its back to face a distant destiny. This heightened perspective offers a clear vision of what is on the horizon, a theme that recurs throughout the poem in lines such as "lift your faces," "lift up your eyes," "look up and out and upon me" and "look up and out / And into your sister's eyes." The metaphor of lifting one's eyes to the light is deeply rooted in religious and philosophical literature. One of the most famous pieces is Greek philosopher Plato's theory that describes man as a being living in a cave, isolated and trapped in his ignorance. The only knowledge that reaches him is the coin of light from a distant entrance, hardly enough to illuminate any writings on the cave walls. For man to become truly "enlightened," Plato suggests, he must move toward the light and out into the brighter world of knowledge. Angelou suggests a similar metaphor when the Rock warns "But seek no haven in my shadow, / I will give you no hiding place down there." In some

cases "ignorance is bliss," a haven where it's easier to ignore actions than take the responsibility and burden that comes with knowledge. And the speaker makes the ignorance clear: America's near past plays host to such atrocities as racism, genocide, world war, slavery, environmental destruction, and prejudice. Americans have "crouched too long in / the bruising darkness / ... Facedown in ignorance." The key to "a bright new morning," Angelou proclaims, is to step out of our dark past and lift our faces, hearts and eyes toward the light.

### **Pride**

A common theme in many of Angelou's poems, prose, plays, and television documentaries is the value of pride even in the most desperate of situations. A sense of pride is what sustains people even when they are enslaved, harassed, humiliated, and degraded. Rather than show personal defeat in the face of oppression, Angelou states, people should lift their faces and walk proud, for someday they will be rewarded for their hardships. Angelou's ancestors (as well as many other Americans) were those who were "sold, stolen, arriving on a nightmare / Praying for a dream." Growing up in a segregated, racist South where whole white communities once gathered outside elementary schools to scream racial slurs at black children, Angelou learned the value of personal strength in seemingly hopeless times. "History, despite its wrenching pain," Angelou suggests, "Cannot be un-lived, but if faced / With courage, need not be lived again." This courage and pride may carry people through difficult times, but they must also "free ourselves from mental slavery" as well. As the poem comes to a close, the speaker warns "Do not be wedded forever / To fear, yoked eternally / To brutishness." By standing proud in the face of history's wrenching pain and freeing oneself from the bonds of anger and ignorance, Americans can "look up and out" toward "the pulse of this new day."

### **Violence and Cruelty**

When Angelou accepted the offer to commemorate the inauguration of Bill Clinton into the presidency, she was faced with a monumental task: write a poem that offers the American people hope while being honest about this country's violent and cruel history. Perhaps deflecting some of this burden by creating a personae speaker to convey the positive and negative messages, Angelou balances the two by using the violent past to offer a lesson for the future. Some say humans are an inherently violent creature, "mouths spilling words / Armed

## Topics for Further Study



- Write a poem using "the voice of nature." Drawing from nature, address the American people with a lesson on how to survive in the coming millennium. Give examples from the past to illuminate what we might do to better humankind and survive what some see as an impending doom.
- Some critics have accused President Clinton of insincerely "piggy-backing" on Angelou's diverse cultural views by choosing her to read at his inauguration (he chose her instead of the appointed Poet Laureate of the United States). Others aim their protest at Angelou herself, questioning the value of a poem commissioned for a politician's gain. Do you think the unique circumstances surrounding this poem's creation and publication in any way affect its "authenticity" or "value?" How so?
- Make a list of various peoples living in your neighborhood based on culture, race, and religion. How many different groups are represented? Compare your list with classmates and explore why it may or may not be different from your own. How diverse or segregated is your neighborhood?

for slaughter" from the very beginning. "Each of you" the River accuses, "[is] a bordered country, / Delicate and strangely made proud, / Yet thrusting perpetually under siege." Is America made proud by its "armed struggles for profit," claiming glorious victory after the Gulf War? The picture the poem begins with is fairly grim: America's forefathers forcing the native people from their land and families to wander on bloody feet; kidnapping cramped boatloads of Africans from across the ocean to become sub-human slaves; even today the environment is embattled, the oceans and rivers clogged with "collars of waste" and "currents of debris." The image of a person "yoked eternally / To brutishness" calls to mind an animal enslaved by a heavy harness of cruelty. These are the bonds

and “wrenching history” the speaker reminds the reader of so that they may overcome the past. Emphasizing that personal cruelty—prejudice—is the most damaging, Angelou gathers a diverse crowd to stand before the tree of wisdom, Jew next to Arab, homosexual next to Catholic priest, brother and sister, all equal in the pulse they share: “No less to Midas than the mendicant, / No less to you now than the mastodon then.”

### *Style*

“On the Pulse of Morning” is written in free verse, which means its form grows from the changing moods and urgency of its subject matter rather than from a set pattern of “traditional” poetic rules. Angelou has divided the poem into five sections, each constructed of stanzas of varying length. Few lines extend beyond ten words, which perhaps asks the reader to slow down, pausing often to digest the images before beginning the next line. Whereas long lines tend to build momentum like a train going down hill, shorter lines break up a poet’s images into smaller, digestible chunks. Although the rhythm and sound of these shorter lines are slower, they don’t feel choppy or stilted.

The word “stanza,” directly translated from Italian, means “room,” so it’s useful to think of each stanza as a place the poet collects her images, a place to explore and move through. Angelou varies her stanza length greatly in the poem, from one to ten lines, depending on the subject matter she needs to contain. The shorter the stanza, the more emphasis each line has to carry, framed by so much white space. These stanzas, grouped into distinct sections, give a larger framework to the long poem. Treating the panoramic poem perhaps like a musical piece composed from several movements, Angelou weaves these individual sections into a fluid whole. This technique lends itself to recitation; the poem gains power as it is read aloud, the rhythms and sounds conveying meaning as much as the words themselves.

### *Historical Context*

One of the distinct features of “On the Pulse of Morning” is the extent to which it is firmly rooted in its historical context. Angelou’s reading during Clinton’s 1993 inauguration reached a worldwide television audience, followed shortly after by the

poem’s individual paperback, cassette, and videotape publication. For many months “On the Pulse of Morning” seemed to be everywhere—shopping-mall bookstores, high-school classrooms, coffee tables—even in grocery-store checkout lines. The poem became inextricably bound with Clinton’s ascendancy, with a “new” era in American politics. Clinton was the first Democrat elected to the presidency in twelve years. Many saw his term in office as a chance for a fresh beginning, an opportunity to undo the snarled mess that American politics had become; these feelings and values were personified in the imagery of Angelou’s poem.

The early-1990s proved to be the beginning of the budget cutting that would whittle the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) down to a fraction of its potency. Many Republicans, responding to pressure from the Christian Coalition, argued to abolish the agency, citing its valueless “funding of pornography” (a charge that stemmed largely from a collection of photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe featuring nude men). The NEA underwrites the work of emerging artists and writers so they may pursue their craft and teach others. When Republicans learned that some of these artists were producing work that dealt with social issues in a raw and graphic manner, they attacked the endowment for funding indecency and “anti-family” values. Clinton, a Democrat, platformed his campaign on the value of education and the diverse arts, pledging to protect the NEA’s budget if he were elected. For some, his invitation to Angelou seemed exemplary of his dedication to the arts; to others, it was an associative political maneuver that stood hollow of sentiment.

“On the Pulse of Morning,” with its diverse celebratory tone and hopeful message, was written as an address to a nation living the last decade of the twentieth century. Any time an artist is invited to create an “occasion” piece, the theme of the day drives the poem’s course. Angelou knew this as she wrote the poem, and perhaps responded to current news of wars and racism in-between its lines. The world was in a violent and changing time, coalition forces having recently liberated Kuwait during the Gulf War. On television American planes were still shooting down the stray Iraqi jets that crossed into the “no fly zone.” Israeli helicopter gunships assassinated Hisballa leaders in Southern Lebanon. An April 29th acquittal of Los Angeles, California, policemen involved in the Rodney King beating triggered the worst race-driven violence and looting in U.S. urban history, killing fifty and injuring some 2,000 others. In Germany neo-Nazi skinheads



*Maya Angelou receives congratulations from President Clinton after her reading of the inaugural poem, "On the Pulse of Morning."*

attacked gypsies and Turkish working-class families.

In 1992 America's population topped 250 million. The national debt exceeded 3 trillion dollars. The country seemed to be "thrusting perpetually under siege," itself only months removed from an international war to protect the world's oil supply. Angelou had a huge task at hand. Warning against another "armed struggle for profit," she addressed the nation with the hope that the country would "study war no more," choosing instead to lift their collective faces, hearts, and eyes toward the first pulse of light breaking over the horizon.

### *Critical Overview*

Because "On the Pulse of Morning" is a poem written specifically to celebrate Bill Clinton's 1993 inauguration, it entered the public's awareness having virtually bypassed the normal gauntlet of criticism that follows most poetry publications.

Broadcast on international television shortly before chapbook copies were distributed to bookstores, not many critics have come forward to offer specific commentary. Moreover, by debuting the poem in front of an audience of millions—who embraced the poem's artistry—Angelou pre-

empted the critics' opportunity to influence potential readers before they had a chance to hear or read the work. After millions had praised the poem, many critics reasoned that it might seem petty to criticize such optimism in the face of such vast public approval.

Perhaps Angelou's reputation preceded her, guaranteeing the poem's validity: she is the author of over thirteen novels, autobiographies, and poetry collections. For many she is considered one of the most powerful voices of contemporary literature. Some critics point to her varied careers in the arts to emphasize her driving spirit. Lynn Bloom in *Dictionary of Literary Biography* noted that Angelou "is forever impelled by the restlessness for change and new realms to conquer." This hunger for change is common in much of Angelou's work, along with, as Gloria Hull stated in *Belles Lettres*, the theme of "human oneness in diversity, the strength of blacks in the face of racism and adversity."

## Criticism

### Craig Dworkin

*Craig Dworkin is a poet and an Assistant Professor of English at Princeton University. In the following essay, Dworkin explains how "On the Pulse of Morning" celebrates democracy and how a poem called "On the Pumice of Morons," in the spirit of democracy, transforms Angelou's poem.*

As President Bill Clinton's 1993 "inaugural poem," Maya Angelou's "On the Pulse of Morning" was meant to evoke an occasion exactly thirty years earlier, when Robert Frost—the United States' first Poet Laureate—read "The Gift Outright" at John F. Kennedy's presidential inauguration. Frost's famous poem is a jingoist versification of the mid-nineteenth century doctrine of "manifest destiny" that sanctioned the United States' westward expansion as an inevitable, proper, and necessary event. In the second stanza of her poem, Angelou seems to allude to Frost's poem with the phrase "face your distant destiny," and in many ways her poem appears as a corrective to Frost's oversights. For instance, rather than draw on images from conventional Eurocentric histories, with their focus on national politics, Angelou opens her poem with allusions to the popular tradition of African-American spirituals. In an introduction to a taped reading of her poem, Angelou explained that the personified (and hence

capitalized) Rock comes from the song "No Hiding Place Down Here"; the River is familiar from the song "Deep River"; and the Tree derives from her grandmother's favorite song, "I Shall Not Be Moved." Similarly, where Frost's poem offers a bellicose apology for nationalistic violence with his punning claim that the "deed" to the outright gift of American territory "was many deeds of war," Angelou urges a collective pacifism: "study war no more. Come, / Clad in peace." With an encouraging and optimistic tone, Angelou looks to the peaceful early "morning" of a new day—and a new presidential term with all of its "new chances / For new beginnings"—rather than to the "mourning" that follows those who die in "war," "slaughter," and "armed struggles."

Moreover, Frost's poem is an example of exclusionary propaganda; it justifies the European colonization of America at the expense of all those who go unmentioned in his poem, including Africans brought to this continent against their will, Asians migrating eastward, and the many indigenous peoples who were killed or displaced over the last five hundred years. In sharp contrast to these exclusions and omissions, Angelou's panegyric is ostentatiously inclusive. She is careful to specifically mention those ignored by Frost: "the Asian ... The African, the Native American." Where Frost glosses over the crimes implicated in westward expansion, Angelou explicitly recalls those "bought, / Sold, [and] stolen" in slavery or "Forced on bloody feet" in relocation. Angelou's inclusiveness is most clearly displayed in the second section of her poem with the catalogues of the eighth, tenth, and eleventh stanzas. These lists are emphasized by end-rhymes—Jew/Sioux, Greek/Sheikh, Preacher/Teacher, Scot/brought—which stand out against the otherwise unrhymed verse. Paradoxically, the very breadth of these lists also reminds the reader of all the terms which are not included. What, for example, of the Buddhists? Or the atheists? Why are some professions mentioned and not others? The point, of course, is that Angelou's catalogues could never be long enough to include every possible classification, but she makes them sufficiently long to elicit the reader's reflection on the infinite substitutability of her terms. The importance of these series is less the particular categories of people she includes than the fact that in an inclusive and truly multicultural America any category she might include, or any category that a reader might substitute, is just as good as another.



As a poetic device, lists such as these go back to ancient times; the biblical book of Genesis, for instance, catalogues genealogical histories, and the Greek epic the *Iliad* contains a famous inventory of the ships and soldiers who participated in the Trojan war. Angelou's catalogues, however, recall more recent precedents from Walt Whitman and Allen Ginsberg. As in Whitman's expansive and celebratory singing of America in *Song of Myself*, or Ginsberg's embrace of marginalized and counter-culture Americans in poems such as "Howl" and "America," the lists in "On the Pulse of Morning" demonstrate Angelou's sanguine and inclusive populism. Whitman and Ginsberg attempted to find poetic forms and themes that would be adequate to the democracy they wrote about; these writers believed that the poems themselves should genuinely live up to the ideals of the America they address. "The method," as Ginsberg wrote in one of his poems, "must be purest meat." Accordingly, like Whitman before him, Ginsberg used long-lined verses to compose a poetry expansive enough to incorporate all those who had been too often overlooked: African-Americans, anarchists, communists, laborers, homosexuals, and others. "On the Pulse of Morning," of course, is already an occasional poem composed for a celebration of American democracy, but when Angelou places her poem in the tradition of predecessors like Ginsberg and Whitman she strengthens her own praise of democracy by the association.

"On the Pulse of Morning" advertises its democratic inclusiveness at the level of its content, but what if the principal of democracy—that each member of a community should have an equal worth and voice—were applied to the language of the poem itself? Angelou's catalogues suggest that in the context of American democracy any person is just as good as any other, but what if any word were just as good as any other? What would a poem look like if the words themselves were given equal worth and voice? The poets Clark Coolidge and Larry Fagin offer one answer to these questions. Soon after the publication of Angelou's poem, Coolidge and Fagin published an "inaugural poem" entitled "On the Pumice of Morons" [Great Barrington: The Figures, 1993]. Their poem is not just a reply to Angelou's, but it actually uses her poem as a source text. Just as in the third section of her poem Angelou urges everyone to "take" the new day and "mold," "shape," and "sculpt" it for "new chances," Coolidge and Fagin "take" her poem and shape it, by chance, into a series of "new beginnings." In fact, Coolidge and Fagin even

## What Do I Read Next?



- Angelou's complete body of poems is assembled in *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou*, a 273-page softcover published in 1994.
- Another poet who is renowned for her use of everyday speech and colloquial voices is Gwendolen Brooks. Her collected poems, entitled simply *Blacks* (1994), is available from Third World Press.
- When it came time for his second term inaugural ceremony in 1997, Clinton invited relatively unknown Arkansas poet Miller Williams to compose a verse. His poem, the similarly themed *Of History and Hope*, is included in the poet's most recent collection, *The Ways We Touch* (1997).
- Much can be learned about Angelou's poetry by reading about her diverse life. The first of her five autobiographies—and best-known prose work—is *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970), a moving account of her troubled childhood.

replicate the look of Angelou's poem; they use the same kind of paper and blue card-stock covers in an identically sized and saddle-stapled booklet, mimicking the typographic layout of the original down to the placement of the price and ISBN number, the decorative headers, and the author's note; they even use the same 12-point Bembo typeface.

"On the Pumice of Morons" transforms Angelou's poem using a variation of a rule first elaborated by the French philosopher Jean Lescure. Lescure was a member of the *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle* [Workshop for Potential Literature] (or "OuLiPo" for short:), a group founded in 1960 by poets, novelists, and musicians—as well as philosophers, mathematicians, and electrical engineers. The group believes that when writers impose artificial constraints on themselves and place some aspects of the writing process beyond their control, new and creative solutions to developing other as-



*Angelou's poem ... expresses a certain populism in its advocacy of the dignity and virtues of the 'common people,' ... Perhaps the truly populist poem, however, would be the one that could be written by anyone, whoever they may be...."*

pects of writing will be discovered. At the same time, compositional devices that seem natural, such as the fact that a poem should rhyme, will again be seen as an artificial constraint in their own right. The experiments of OuLiPo members include palindrome poems that read the same forward and backward, acrostic works that encode a phrase or a person's name in the first letters of each of the words in a text, and even an entire novel that never once uses the letter "e"—a task that is even harder in French than in English! The procedure that Coolidge and Fagin adapt is known as "S+7"; Lescuré's method replaces every substantive (noun) in a source text with the seventh substantive following it in the dictionary. Coolidge and Fagin are less rigid, moving both forward and backwards on the dictionary page and using the rule as a guide rather than an unalterable imperative. So, for example, the first line of Angelou's poem, "A Rock, a River, a Tree," becomes "A Rock Crystal, A Roach, A Tree of Heaven"; or where Angelou writes "Before cynicism was a bloody sear across your brow," Fagin and Coolidge derive: "Before a cyst was a bloody seascape across your brownout."

As this example suggests, part of the effect of an S+7 poem is surrealistic; by bringing words together on the basis of their spelling rather than their meaning, the rule forges unlikely conjunctions between words from incongruous registers and associations. Even more interesting than such discrepancies, however, are the very meaningful connections that can be generated through such procedures, either by a resourceful selection from

the dictionary page or even, with the strict version of the S+7 rule, by pure chance. For instance, Coolidge and Fagin push Angelou's internally rhyming "And when you yet knew you still knew nothing" to a ridiculously repetitive extreme, "And when you yet knew you still knew nougat," so that in reading the line one has to perform a series of movements with the mouth and tongue not unlike those actually required by chewing a sticky piece of nougat. Moreover, when they replace "the Greek," the "Irish," and "the Rabbi" from Angelou's catalogue of Americans with "the Great White Way," the "Ipso Facto" and "the Quota," their choice of words comments directly on the racial politics inherent in such catalogues in the first place—even though the particular words they use were determined by their place on the dictionary page.

One of the implicit arguments of "On the Pumice of Morons" is that a truly democratic poem would be true to democratic principals at the level of language itself, as well as at the level of its themes, but Coolidge and Fagin's poem also suggests an even more radical proposition. Angelou's poem—like those by Whitman and Ginsberg—expresses a certain populism in its advocacy of the dignity and virtues of the "common people," whoever they may be. Perhaps the truly populist poem, however, would be the one that could be written by anyone, whoever they may be, and not only by special people designated "poets" and reading for special citizens designated "presidents." Not everyone can read at the presidential inauguration, but with only a dictionary anyone can create an S+7 poem or one of its variations (substituting verbs instead of nouns, for instance, or using a different number). Try it yourself with Angelou's poem. Or try it with this essay. Just as you might be an active participant in democracy, be an active participant in the poetry you read: make it your own. With "On the Pulse of Morning," Angelou teaches us that one can improve upon a famous poem like Frost's "The Gift Outright"; we should take her lesson seriously, as Coolidge and Fagin have done, and improve on her own poem as well.

Source: Craig Dworkin, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*. Gale, 1998.

### **David Streitfeld**

*In the following excerpt, Washington Post staff writer David Streitfeld presents the variety of opinions concerning the quality of "On the Pulse of Morning" and Angelou's performance of it at President Clinton's inauguration.*

The poem Maya Angelou read to the nation yesterday stressed the huge variety of voices in this country and the world, all of them worthy, all of them equal. So perhaps it's appropriate that her fellow poets had a huge range of responses to "On the Pulse of Morning," the first poem read at a presidential inauguration in 32 years.

"Eloquent and passionate" said one. "Beautiful" asserted another. But third felt it was "obvious and wearisome" while a fourth termed the work "incoherent."

Everyone, though was united on this: Having a black woman poet was a wonderful symbol, and Angelou's particular performance deserved high marks. "I felt that this woman could have read the side of a cereal box," said Louise Erdrich. "Her presence was so powerful and momentous. She made a statement that I was personally longing to see and hear."

Count the new president as another who was impressed. "I love the poem," he told Angelou, and said a copy would hang in the White House. Added Hillary Clinton: "It is as if you have been looking in our brains for the last six weeks. You said it much better than we could."

Angelou, for her part, sounded a trifle weary after it was all over. "I feel like a balloon that is deflated," she said. "I held myself up by the ideas. But now I would like to close the door and say 'Good night,' instead of 'Good morning'"—the closing words of her 106 lines of free verse....

It would have been impossible for her to write a poem that pleased everyone. She had too many goals to fulfill: She had to produce something that would affect people, that had theme they could follow, that was worthy of the occasion, and that she could deliver memorably. As she said before coming to Washington. "I am very much, very much frightened. I have a sensation that a nation is looking over my shoulder." And it was.

She compared herself to Scheherazade, who had to create stories to save her life. Said a sympathetic Rita Dove yesterday: "I'm glad I didn't have to do it. It must be one of the hardest things in the world."

It's when—or if—you forgot about the momentous occasion and considered "On the Pulse of Morning" as just another poem that the dispute began. "I was hoping it would be short, and it was long," said one prominent poet who didn't want his name used for fear he would come off as a "snot-head." He added: "Maya Angelou is to Robert Frost as Bill Clinton is to John Kennedy."



*As she said before coming to Washington, 'I am very much, very much frightened. I have a sensation that a nation is looking over my shoulder.'*

"She read the poem very well," conceded one of her sharpest critics, David Lehman. "If you define her task as a theatrical one, she did what was expected. If you define her task as a political one, she did what was expected. But if you ask me as a poet to be as ruthless on this poem as I would be on any other, I would have to say it's not very memorable."

Ntozake Shange feels rather differently. "I think ["On the Pulse of Morning"] is going to sustain me now. My father just died the other day, and I really needed some sustenance. I got it from her." In fact, says the author of "For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf," "for the first times since I was on the Mall for an anti-war rally in 1969 have I felt so moved as to actually want to be here now in this country."

That's a pretty strong statement.

"I mean it."

Part of the reason for the sharp split in responses lies in Angelou's uneasy relationship with the small, intense world of serious poetry. She's not a member of the club. She's a people's poet rather than a poet's poet, which means she has a much bigger audience but doesn't win awards.

Then, too, there's not much to compare this to. Every article about Angelou said she was the first poet to be part of an inaugural ceremony since Frost in 1961, but few noted how botched those circumstances were. The sun was so bright that the 86-year-old Frost couldn't see his text.

President Kennedy and Vice President Johnson tried to help by blocking the sun with their hats, but it didn't do much good. Frost could only make out a few lines. To keep the episode from being a complete disaster, he switched to "The Gift Outright," a poem he had written decades earlier and knew by heart.



*It would have been impossible for her to write a poem that pleased everyone."*

---

Imagine the hullabaloo if that had happened today! There would be a similar stink if a poet read something that expressed the same opinions as "The Gift Outright," which is definitely politically incorrect. As Ishmael Reed pointed out yesterday, "Frost's poem is the last gasp of the settler sensibility. It says the country was created so it could be occupied by Europeans."

"The Gift Outright" has the advantage of being short—only 16 lines. Angelou took the risk of going on more than six times that length. "I always taught my students to stick to 12 lines. You just can't win when you write a long poem," said Reed, a novelist, poet and editor of a poetry magazine.

His judgment of Angelou's work: "It seemed to meander a lot. I got lost around the second stanza—I couldn't tell whether it was the rock or the river that was talking. Her performance was great, her sincerity was great, but the poem did not seem to be well honed. It sounds as if she wrote it hastily last night in her hotel room."

Maybe it would work better on the page, he suggested.

Dove, who has won a Pulitzer for her poetry, took the position that the printed page isn't the issue in the case. "I wouldn't compare it to a poem I'll read over and over again in silence. That's not the kind of poem it was meant to be. It's a song, really."

George Garrett, who thought the poem was incoherent but well-meaning—and would play much better on the page than it did spoken—looked at the big picture. The attention given Angelou and her poem, he said, may mean we are entering an era when verse crawls out of its dark corner into the light.

This, of course, could be a mixed blessing. "If our luck continues to go this way, we'll have a poet for president, and then look out. He's going to read his own poem at his inauguration, and it'll last three hours, and we won't be able to understand anything but the first line."

Until that happens, Garrett advised, imagine this: "Think of Saddam Hussein reading a translation of Maya Angelou's poem and trying to understand what it says about American foreign policy. Dinosaurs and talking trees! It'll befuddle the heck out of him."

Source: "The Power and Puzzle of the Poem: Reading Between Maya Angelou's Inaugural Lines" in *The Washington Post*, January 21, 1993, p. D11.

### Sources

Bloom, Lynn, *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Volume 38: *Afro-American Writers after 1955*, Gale, 1985.

Hull, Gloria, "Maya Angelou" in *Belles Letters*, Spring, 1991, pp. 2-4.

### For Further Study

Cudjoe, Selwyn, "Maya Angelou and the Autobiographical Statement" in *Black Women Writers (1950-1980)*, edited by Mari Evans, Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1984.

Focusing primarily on Angelou's five autobiographies, this essay provides insight on her passion for individual identity, a theme the poem also reflects.

Hagen, Lynn, *Heart of A Woman, Mind of a Writer, and Soul of a Poet: A Critical Analysis of the Writing of Maya Angelou*, University of America Press, 1997.

One of the several books of comprehensive Angelou criticism to appear as a result of her renewed prominence following the inauguration, this critical text explores the poet's use of colloquial urban language as a source for her musical poetry and prose.

Neubauer, Carol E, "Maya Angelou: Self and a Song of Freedom in the Southern Tradition" in *Southern Women Writers: The New Generation*, edited by Tonett Bond Inge, University of Alabama Press, 1990, pp. 114-42.

In this essay Neubauer uses close readings of Angelou's poetry to illustrate the connection between individual images of Black hardship and the larger picture of an oppressed race surviving in America during the poet's lifetime.

# Sonnet 116

*William Shakespeare*

1609

An affirmation of the certitude and the enduring qualities of love, “Sonnet 116” (first published in 1609) is nevertheless remarkably negative in tone. Rather than learning what love is, the reader is taught what love is not; even when the speaker begins to use metaphors to describe the constancy and endurance of this emotion, he discusses what love does not do, what is not known about it—and prefaces these observations with a “o, no.” To add to the confusion, the poem’s simultaneous and opposing messages are conveyed in simple words, but with complicated logic. The final couplet uses a monosyllabic vocabulary in an especially difficult example of *reductio ad absurdum*. But perhaps the strangest juxtaposition regarding “Sonnet 116” is this: though the sonnet is probably one of the least understood in Shakespeare’s 154-poem sonnet sequence, it is a perennial favorite and a popular anthology poem.

## *Author Biography*

Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon on or about April 23, 1564. His father was a merchant who devoted himself to public service, attaining the highest of Stratford’s municipal positions—that of bailiff and justice of the peace—by 1568. Biographers have surmised that the elder Shakespeare’s social standing and relative prosperity at this time would have enabled his son to attend the finest local grammar school, the King’s New School, where





*William Shakespeare*

he would have received an outstanding classical education under the direction of highly regarded masters. There is no evidence that Shakespeare attended university. In 1582, at the age of eighteen, he married Ann Hathaway of Stratford, a woman eight years his senior. Their first child, Susanna, was born six months later, followed by twins, Hamnet and Judith, in 1585. These early years of Shakespeare's adult life are not well documented; some time after the birth of his twins, he joined a professional acting company and made his way to London, where his first plays, the three parts of the Henry VI history cycle, were presented in 1589-91. The first reference to Shakespeare in the London literary world dates from 1592, when dramatist Robert Greene alluded to him as "an upstart crow." Shakespeare further established himself as a professional actor and playwright when he joined the Lord Chamberlain's Men, an acting company formed in 1594 under the patronage of Henry Carey, Lord Hunsdon. The members of this company included the renowned tragedian Richard Burbage and the famous "clown" Will Kempe, who was one of the most popular actors of his time. This group began performing at the playhouse known simply as the Theatre and at the Cross Keys Inn, moving to the Swan Theatre on Bankside in 1596 when municipal authorities banned the public pre-

sentation of plays within the limits of the city of London. Three years later Shakespeare and other members of the company financed the building of the Globe Theatre, the most famous of all Elizabethan playhouses. By then the foremost London Company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men also performed at court on numerous occasions, their success largely due to the fact that Shakespeare wrote for no other company.

In 1603 King James I granted the group a royal patent, and the company's name was altered to reflect the king's direct patronage. Records indicate that the King's Men remained the most favored acting company in the Jacobean era, averaging a dozen performances at the king's court each year during the period. In addition to public performances at the Globe Theatre, the King's Men played at the private Blackfriars Theatre; many of Shakespeare's late plays were first staged at Blackfriars, where the intimate setting facilitated Shakespeare's use of increasingly sophisticated stage techniques. The playwright profited handsomely from his long career in the theater and invested in real estate, purchasing properties in both Stratford and London. As early as 1596 he had attained sufficient status to be granted a coat of arms and the accompanying right to call himself a gentleman. By 1610, with his fortune made and his reputation as the leading English dramatist unchallenged, Shakespeare appears to have retired to Stratford, though business interests brought him to London on occasion. He died on April 23, 1616, and was buried in the chancel of Trinity Church in Stratford.

### Poem Text

Let me not to the marriage of true minds  
 Admit impediments. Love is not love  
 Which alters when it alteration finds,  
 Or bends with the remover to remove:  
  
 O, no! it is an ever-fixed mark,  
 That looks on tempests and is never shaken;  
 It is the star to every wand'ring bark,  
 Whose worth's unknown, although his heighth be  
     taken.  
  
 Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and  
     cheeks  
 Within his bending sickle's compass come;  
 Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,  
 But beats it out even to the edge of doom:—  
  
 If this be error and upon me proved,  
 I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

## Poem Summary

### Lines: 1-2

The speaker seems to have in mind the marriage vow, as it appears in The Book of Common Prayer: "If either of you do know any impediment why ye may not be lawfully joined together in matrimony...." But if he is in fact responding to this question, his meaning is ambiguous. He might be saying that no one should let him acknowledge that there are obstacles to the marriage; conversely, he may be vowing that he will never recognize any problems interfering with a true union. The difficulties encountered in the meaning of the first sentence are reflected in its negative cast ("let me not") as well as its construction. Not only is it a run-on line, but it fights against being placed in the regular meter of iambic pentameter from its beginnings. The sentence does not conform to poetic conventions, much as the speaker refuses to give an easy or expected answer.

### Lines: 2-3

The last half of line 2 seems absurd, unless the reader realizes that the speaker may be addressing two different types of love. Unconditional "Love," not the "love" that changes or causes change, is the subject of this sonnet; coincidentally or not, the more desirable emotional state is distinguished by a capital "I" each time it is mentioned (line 9 and line 11).

### Line: 4

In this line, the speaker continues to stress that true love is unbendable, and cannot be transferred from one site to another. But there is clearly a deeper meaning in lines 2 through 4, suggested by the repetition or doubling of many of the words, such as "love," "alter," (repeated for a third time in line 11), "remove," even "bend," which is reused in line 10. These verbal pairings may represent the harmony of "Love"—or, on the other hand, a lesser lover's desire to imitate or become like his partner.

### Line: 5-6

In the second quatrain, the speaker begins to describe what real love actually is, after using three lines to inform the reader of what love is not. It would seem that he has at last moved to an affirmative statement about this emotion. Yet he begins with a negative exclamation, and continues to cite what love does not do: like a guiding light over rough waters, love is unvarying and unswerving.

## Media Adaptations



- There are several audio recordings of readings of Shakespeare's sonnets, including *Sonnets of Shakespeare*, by Spoken Arts, Inc.; *Living Literature: The Sonnets of Shakespeare*, by Crown Publishers, Inc.; and *Shakespeare: The Sonnets*, by Argo Records.
- Videos include *The Sonnets of William Shakespeare* (1993) by Goldcrest Films for the Humanities, in which fifteen sonnets are performed and analyzed, both individually and as a sequence; *Selected Sonnets* (1988) by Films for the Humanities, in which such notable critics as Stephen Spender and A. L. Rowse read and comment on Sonnets 65, 66, 94, and 127; and *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, a Films for the Humanities & Sciences production featuring an in-depth look at the poems and recitals of selected sonnets by such actors as Ben Kingsley and Claire Bloom.

### Lines: 7-8

The nautical metaphor used to describe true love in lines 5 and 6 is continued in the next two lines. First a lighthouse, and now a star, help travellers find their way. Because a star's altitude must be calculated in order to use it as a guide, its distance from earth is no longer a mystery; what remains unknown is its value, or its very nature. Similarly, love provides direction for those who are searching or lost, and though its status is established, its true value is limitless.

### Lines: 9-10

The first quatrain explained what love is not; the second one attempted to define what true love is; now, in the third quatrain, the speaker alternates between naming what love's characteristics are, and are not. Thus the "mirroring" noted in the language of lines 2 through 4 can also be seen in the construction of the sonnet's quatrains, and probably has similar implications. Using the figure of speech known as personification, the speaker refers

to the scythe-wielding Father Time in lines 9 and 10. Though beauty and youth are eventually the victims of his blade, true love remains unaffected by his wrath. The idea of “bending”, first used in line 4, has multiple meanings here: not only is Time’s sickle bent or curved, but it also bends or lays low the metaphorical “roses” of a young person’s complexion. The “compass” of Time’s scythe is its sweeping arc, but it is also a device used to guide ships, and thus reminds the reader of the preceding nautical metaphor.

### Lines: 11-12

The pronouns of these lines are ambiguous. “His brief hours” are probably Father Time’s, but the phrase may also be referring to Love’s ability to make time fly, or any mortal’s short life span. In line 12, “it” is part of a phrase that means to endure, but the pronoun may also refer to Time or his sickle. In any case, the eternal consistency and constancy of love is once again stressed—to the lover’s death, or even until doomsday. The accents of line 12 conjure up the sounds of a tolling funeral bell.

### Lines: 13-14

With their monosyllabic diction and seemingly straightforward reasoning, these lines are deceptively simple. But what actually is “this”; is it the preceding statement, or the entire argument? And even if the speaker was proven false, how could it be that he never wrote (when the reader knows full well that the speaker is the composer of the sonnet), and no one ever fell in love? The twisted logic of this “if-then” statement leaves no room for errors of any kind. The speaker’s difficult argument thus draws to a forced conclusion, though nothing has been affirmed or denied.

## Themes

### Time

Shakespeare struggles with time in most of his sonnets. For example, in “Sonnet 18” (Shall I compare thee to a Summer’s day?), one of Shakespeare’s best known poems, he writes about summer’s mutability and the effects of time on beauty and youth:

Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,  
And often is his gold complexion dimmed;  
And every fair from fair sometime declines,  
By chance of nature’s changing course untrimmed:

The theme of time reappears in “Sonnet 116,” yet in this poem time is so significant that it is actually given a physical presence in the third quatrain.

Love’s not Time’s fool, though rosy lips and  
cheeks  
Within his bending sickle’s compass come;  
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,  
But bears it out even to the edge of doom:

Here, the aged figure of Father Time, frequently dressed in a black cloak and carrying an hourglass and a scythe, swings his “bending,” or curved, blade, and destroys all within his “compass,” or range. Time ruins the beautiful “rosy lips and cheeks” of youth. Even so, he can not alter Love (also treated as a proper noun), which is “not Time’s fool” and “bears it out even to the edge of doom.”

Whereas Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 18” addresses the relationship between time and beauty, this sonnet appears to be concerned primarily with the relationship between time and constancy. The speaker of the poem is concerned about the fidelity of the object of his affection. This is most evident earlier in the poem, when Shakespeare questions whether love “alters when it alteration finds, / Or bends with the remover to remove.” The negative tone in this first quatrain changes dramatically at the start of the second quatrain, when the poet declares “O, no! it [love] is an ever-fixed mark.” In the third quatrain, which introduces Father Time, Shakespeare proclaims love’s sovereignty over time with “Love alters not with his [Time’s] brief hours and weeks.” The concluding couplet presents an even stronger assertion: “If this be error and upon me proved, / I never writ, nor no man ever loved.” At the sonnet’s conclusion the poet is so certain that love prevails over time that he rests his career and the entire history of love on his proclamation, in actuality proving nothing but the intensity of his own desire for it to be true.

### Truth and Falsehood

In “Sonnet 116” Shakespeare sets out to define true love. In the first two lines, he asserts, “Let me not to the marriage of true minds / Admit impediments,” implying through the word “true” in “true minds” that love can have cerebral qualities, not only emotional ones. His language further suggests that only a select few—“true minds”—are fit to comprehend and embrace true love. In fact, the poet could be implying that there are some who might better understand love, excusing him from any errors he might make elsewhere in the sonnet.



The poet continues with his definition of abiding love by differentiating between true and false love: "Love is not love / Which alters when it alteration finds, / Or bends with the remover to remove." The first form of love cited, which is treated as a proper noun throughout the remainder of the poem, is considered lasting, whereas the latter form of love is false, as it "alters" and "bends" with time. He continues to define the former, true love, but in an odd way. In an effort to determine what love is, Shakespeare concentrates on what love is not. The sonnet begins with a series of denials that—almost—deny love's existence entirely. The author appears to catch himself momentarily in the second quatrain, asserting "O, no! it [love] is an ever-fixed mark, / that looks on tempests and is never shaken." Here, love is likened to a permanent landmark. Even so, Shakespeare again presents love through negative language, by stating that enduring love "is never shaken." The third quatrain follows this pattern with "Love's *not* Time's fool" and "Love alters *not*." The themes of truth and falsehood are therefore given equal regard in "Sonnet 116."

By discussing both forms of love Shakespeare remains truthful to the human experience, noting man's greatest potential but also his failings. It is perhaps this honesty that has made this sonnet, however complex, one of the best loved and most frequently anthologized sonnets in Shakespeare's canon.

### Style

The sonnet (from the Italian "sonnetto," meaning "little song") owes much of its long-standing popularity to the Italian poet Petrarch. By the mid-sixteenth century, this fixed poetic form was adopted by the English, who borrowed the fourteen-line pattern and many of Petrarch's literary conventions. English writers did, however, alter the rhyme scheme to allow for more variety in rhyming words: while an Italian sonnet might rhyme abba, abba, cdc, dcd, an English or Shakespearean sonnet rhymes abab, cdcd, efef, gg.

In all but three of Shakespeare's 154 sonnets ("Sonnet 99," "Sonnet 126" and "Sonnet 145") the first three groups of four lines each are known as quatrains, and the last two lines are recognized as a couplet. The three breaks between the quatrains and the couplet serve as convenient places where the writer's train of thought may take a different direction. In "Sonnet 116," the second quatrain

## Topics for Further Study



- Why did Shakespeare write this poem? Explain what experiences he might have had that would make him write a statement like this.
- Rewrite this poem in modern language and in the modern poetic style of free verse, making the same points that Shakespeare makes and using his imagery.

stands apart from the first and the third because it attempts to describe what love is, instead of what it is not. The couplet continues the line of thinking of the quatrains, offering a formal logical proof of the sonnet's assertions and negations.

A few of this sonnet's lines, such as 3 and 13, are written in perfect iambic pentameter. Iambic meter, the most familiar rhythm of the English language, is the succession of alternately stressed syllables; an iamb is a group of two syllables in which the first is unstressed and the second is stressed. The use of "penta" (meaning "five") before "meter" means that there are five iambs per line.

Most of "Sonnet 116," however, fights against the establishment of any regulated rhythm. The first line begins with a hammering of stressed syllables, as if a judge were rapping a gavel; the meter is also disrupted because of the line's lack of an end-stop, and its continuation on the next line. More obstructions to the poem's rhythmic flow are presented by such heavily accented tongue twisters as "Love's not Time's fool" (line 9) and "But bears it out even to the edge" (line 12), and another run-on line between lines 9 and 10. As is often the case with Shakespeare's sonnets, the mood and meaning of the words is reinforced by their rhythm, or lack thereof.

### Historical Context

Shakespeare wrote his sonnets during the Renaissance, an exciting period of political, cultural, and social change in Europe that began in Italy in about

## Compare & Contrast

- **1590s:** In Shakespeare's time, average life expectancy was forty years. Yet many people never made it this far. War, famine, poverty, and disease—especially frequent outbreaks of the plague—claimed many lives. One out of every five children died before the age of ten. Shakespeare's only son, Hamnet, died in 1596 at age eleven. Recurring images of death, even violent death, which appear in the third quatrain of Shakespeare's "Sonnet 116," possibly reflect this time period.

**Today:** Despite violence, war, and life-threatening diseases, such as cancer and AIDS, for which there are no cures, average life expectancy for men and women in modern industrialized civilizations in 1992 was somewhere between 80 and 88 years.

- **1609:** The English East India Company ship *Hector* travels east and lands at Surat, becoming the first Company ship to reach India. Over

the seas to the west, Henry Hudson voyages to America where he explores the New England coast and the Hudson River, as far north as Albany, New York.

**Today:** The Russian Mir Space Station orbits the Earth, and the American rover Sojourner explores the surface of Mars; Tokyo and New York City are the major centers of trade.

- **1609:** By royal decree, Catholic Spain's Moriscos, converted Muslims who continue to practice their former religion, are expelled from the country. The regions of Valencia, Castile, Aragon, and Andalusia suffer from a significant decline in population.

**Today:** "Ethnic cleansing" becomes the catch phrase for mass killings in Bosnia, Kurdistan, and in many African nations. Otherwise stable regions find themselves threatened by the movement of refugee populations as a result.

1350 and spread to England in the late-sixteenth century. During the Renaissance, the influence of the Catholic Church, which had dominated all aspects of life throughout Europe during the Medieval period, gave way to more secular, less spiritual forces. In religion the Reformation challenged the absolute authority of the pope in spiritual matters and emphasized the faith and devotional practices of the individual. Along with the dispersion of spiritual authority came a redistribution of political power in Europe. Art and culture likewise experienced a reawakening (*renaissance* is French for "rebirth") as traditional sacred themes in sculpture, painting, drama, and poetry were replaced by human concerns, such as love, honor, and physical beauty. Writers and painters sought to create new standards, new definitions of what was considered true, good, or beautiful, based on direct experience rather than on received knowledge or traditions. This is clearly evident in Shakespeare's "Sonnet 116," where, rather than simply glorifying love,

Shakespeare questions love's constancy. Although, at the close of the sonnet, the speaker of the poem concludes that love, enduring love, is indeed constant, the love defined in this sonnet is somewhat compromised. It is a realistic form of love, one that is "not Time's fool," meaning that it "bears it out" even after beauty and youth have long since departed.

Petrarch (1304-1374) was the first great Renaissance poet. Best known for his *Rime*, a series of love sonnets to a woman named Laura, Petrarch developed the Italian sonnet, a 14-line poem divided into an octave (abba abba), which presented a problem, and a sestet (cdc dcd), which provided the resolution. This form reached England in the mid-sixteenth century when Sir Thomas Wyatt translated several of Petrarch's sonnets into English. Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, is credited with adjusting the rhyme scheme of the Italian sonnet to the one used by Shakespeare and other English poets (abab cdcd efef gg). The sonnet form was im-

mensely popular in the late-sixteenth century. In fact, 1,200 sonnets published in the last decade alone have survived in print. Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella*, which was published posthumously in 1591, includes some of the most famous sonnets of the period. Like Petrarch, Sidney's sonnets were passionate love poems to a single woman, in this case Penelope Devereux. Though Shakespeare borrowed from the same English sonnet tradition as Sidney, Shakespeare's sonnets are thematically quite unique. In "Sonnet 116," for example, Shakespeare breaks the traditional pattern of the English sonnet with run-on lines that follow an irregular meter. This technique serves to emphasize an emotional undercurrent in the poem. Moreover, "Sonnet 116" is not addressed to any one person. Rather, it is a deeply moral, complex, and contemplative work focusing on the constancy of love.

### Critical Overview

"Sonnet 116" is one of the most widely admired sonnets in Shakespeare's sequence. Its language is generally regarded as strongly persuasive and resonant; its style has been touted as grand, even noble. But critics cannot seem to agree on the meaning of "Sonnet 116." In *Shakespeare's Sonnets: Self, Love, and Art*, Philip Martin recognizes the negative cast of its lines but nevertheless affirms that it is a "resonantly certain statement of the certitudes of love." Stephen Booth also admires the absoluteness of "Sonnet 116," but claims in *Shakespeare's Sonnets* that the more one thinks about the poem, "the less there seems to be to it." Other critics, such as Hilton Landry, argue that the work is continually misinterpreted because it is considered independently, instead of part of its sequence; in his article in *Shakespeare Studies*, Landry argues that the sonnets preceding and following "Sonnet 116" provide revelatory insights concerning the poem.

### Criticism

#### Annemarie Muth

*Annemarie S. Muth is a freelance writer who has worked professionally as both a book editor and graphics designer. In the following essay, Muth defines "Sonnet 116" as a soliloquy sonnet, a sonnet "clearly written for the poet himself rather than*

*the public." Muth then offers an interpretation of "Sonnet 116," focusing on the contradictions within the poem.*

Scholars have long speculated on the identity of the speaker in William Shakespeare's sonnets, that is, whether the poet is baring his soul in these works or taking on another's persona. In his introduction to *The Sonnets*, poet W. H. Auden suggested that apart from the first sixteen works in which the poet urges his friend to marry, and another handful of "elegant trifles," the sonnets do represent Shakespeare's own thoughts and feelings. He believes this because of the "impression they make of naked autobiographical confession." Yet this is astonishing to him because Elizabethans "were not given to writing their autobiographies or to unlocking their hearts" for the public. However, nothing approaches the candor of Shakespeare's sonnets until the time of Rousseau when confession becomes a literary genre. Thus Auden contended that Shakespeare wrote his sonnets for himself alone, like entries in a diary, rather than for the public. Furthermore, he contended that Shakespeare never meant to publish them, and the fact that their eventual publication in 1609 was apparently unauthorized supports this. Auden's claims mirror a recent theory proposed by scholar David K. Weiser concerning Shakespeare's purpose in writing the sonnets. In his book *Mind in Character*, Weiser classifies Shakespeare's sonnets as either dialogues or soliloquies. In the dialogues, which make up the majority of his sonnets, the poet explicitly addresses another person in terms of "you" or "thou." For instance, in most of the first 126 sonnets, he addresses a young man, and in many of the remaining 28, he addresses a woman. However, "Sonnet 116" and a number of others from the first 126 are written from the perspective of Shakespeare addressing himself. These soliloquy sonnets seem clearly written for the poet himself rather than the public. They differ from the dialogues in several aspects. First, they "speak of" rather than "speak to" another person or issue. Essentially, the reader eavesdrops on the poet as he sorts out his personal concerns and alternatives. Second, they share a common theme of self-discovery that is defined at the beginning of the soliloquy sequence in terms of Shakespeare's own experience, but evolves to definitions of universal ideals by the end of the sequence. Third, in contrast to the dialogues, in which the poet employs irony to mock the shallowness of rival poets and lovers, in the soliloquies, he uses it to expose his

## What Do I Read Next?



- Shakespeare wrote 154 sonnets in all. The first 126 are addressed to a young man or "Friend" as he is called by the poet. Sonnets 127-152 are addressed to a mysterious "Dark Lady," the poet's mistress, who may have seduced the Friend. The last two do not fit into either of the two main groupings. Some of the most famous of Shakespeare's other sonnets are "Sonnet 18" (Shall I compare thee to a Summer's day?), "Sonnet 29" (When in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes), "Sonnet 30" (When to the sessions of sweet silent thought), and "Sonnet 130" (My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun).
- Though the collected sonnets are considered Shakespeare's most significant poetic achievement, he did author additional poems, the most important being *Venus and Adonis* (1593), an Ovidian mythological-erotic poem, and *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594), which exalts a chaste woman. Both works were excessively popular in Shakespeare's lifetime. In fact, they were better received than his plays.
- The sonnet has been perhaps the most popular form in English verse. Countless people have employed it. Among Shakespeare's contemporaries, Sir Philip Sidney, Michael Drayton, and Edmund Spenser composed important sonnet sequences (groups of sonnets in which the poems are thematically related) Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella* was published in 1591, Drayton's *Idea's Mirror* was published in 1594, and Spenser's *Amoretti* was published in 1595. The fourteenth-century Italian poet Petrarch was a significant innovator of the sonnet form, and his works influenced Shakespeare and other poets. His sonnets are available in a number of English translations, including *Rime Disperse* (1991), translated by Joseph A. Barber.

own flaws and contradictions. For example, in "116," one of the final soliloquies, Shakespeare attempts to define his ideal of constancy in love. Tragically, he is unable to reconcile this ideal with his own experience of inconstancy as illustrated in sonnets "110," "119," and others. Perfect constancy transcends his own experience. Nevertheless, by the end of the piece he has convinced himself to put his doubts aside and believe that such constancy in love is possible. According to Weiser, such introspection and final resolve helps Shakespeare come to terms with himself and develop personal values. If Weiser is right, then the soliloquies are Shakespeare's most intimate self-portrait, and "116" is his tragic view of love.

"Sonnet 116" is Shakespeare's profession of faith in the ideal of constancy in love. Generations have shared his sentiments, but none has expressed them so poignantly. Weiser, in fact, called "116" love's "perfect definition." This is Shakespeare at his best, invoking man's noblest aspirations in the name of love: constancy, commitment to another,

purity of heart, and perseverance that defies all of life's storms. How is it, then, that such high-mindedness vanishes in "Sonnet 119"? For "119" boasts that inconstancy actually strengthens love:

What potions have I drunk of Siren tears,  
Distill'd from limbeckes fowl as hell within,  
Applying fears to hopes and hopes to fears,  
Still losing when I saw myself to win!  
What wretched errors hath my heart committed,  
Whilst it hath thought itself so blessed never!  
How have mine eyes out of their spheres been  
fitted,  
In the distraction of this madding fever!  
O benefit of ill! now I find true  
That better is by evil still made better;  
And ruin'd love when it is built anew,  
Grows fairer than at first, more strong, far greater.  
So I return rebuked to my content,  
And gain by ill thrice more than I have spent.

"Sonnet 116" gives the impression that Shakespeare is innocent of the inconstancy he condemns. "Sonnet 119," on the other hand, clearly reveals a poet whose actions are the object of the condemnation in "116." This obvious contradiction of

philosophies points to the poet's deliberate suppression of certain undesirable aspects of his personality in "116" in order to affirm his ideal of constancy in love. Yet beyond the contradictions that exist between these two sonnets is "116"'s internal paradox. For rather than celebrate the joys of love in this piece, Shakespeare extols its steadfastness in the face of love's betrayal. Rather than show love's constancy and endurance in strictly positive terms, he defines these qualities through metaphors depicting their opposites, inconstancy and death. In short, he says as much about what love is not as what love is, as if negative definitions are more within his understanding. Such contrast of imagery marks a development in the soliloquy sequence from the self-definition of his earliest works, to facing the consequences of being what he is in his later works, namely, an inconstant lover. Drawing on his awareness of contradiction and impermanence in nature and society, he employs dramatic irony to point out his own particular flaws and contradictions. The resulting paradox reveals his recurring doubts about the subject. Nevertheless, as the sonnet progresses, Shakespeare convinces himself to believe in his ideal. The development of his conviction is worth noting.

Shakespeare begins "116" in the pensive voice of the abandoned lover. He states that he cannot object to marriage between two persons who truly love each other, who are "of true minds." Yet his use of the negative "Let me not ..." in the very first line of the sonnet gives the impression that the speaker doubts, in the case of a particular marriage, that it is of true minds. Such negativity sets the poem's ironical tone (lines 1 and 2):

Let me not to the marriage of true minds  
Admit impediments.

In lines 2 through 4, he begins to define love as a universal concept, one which transcends his personal experience, but in terms of what it is not:

Love is not love  
Which alters when it alteration finds,  
Or bends with the remover to remove ...

The impression given in these lines is of the poet reflecting on a lesson about love, made more emphatic by his defining what it is not. Yet in these lines, Shakespeare refers to it in terms of a universal concept rather than in personal terms, as was the case in lines 1 and 2 above: "Let me not ... Admit impediments." He will continue referring to love in this way until the ending couplet in which he reverts to his personal convictions. Also at this point, Shakespeare introduces metaphor. Fickle



*Rather than celebrate the joys of love in this piece, Shakespeare extols its steadfastness in the face of love's betrayal."*

love, an abstract idea, takes on the characteristics of something alive, that is, it alters and bends, but these characteristics allude to change, not constancy. As his convictions gel, his expression grows more didactic; his personification of love more vivid.

Introducing the next quatrain with a negative exclamation as if to dismiss any doubts (his own), he transforms the concept of love into something positive (lines 5 and 6):

O, no! it is an ever-fixed mark,  
That looks on tempests and is never shaken ...

Love takes on a positive identity for the first time in line 5 where before it was a mere negation of something else. Now it is a symbol of constancy and trustworthiness, a seamark that guides mariners through life's storms.

Lines 7 and 8 once again betray the poet's doubts. Despite his previous impersonal references to the universal concept of love, Shakespeare is unable to conceal his personal belief that constancy in love is not appreciated. While the "star" (the faithful lover) in line 7 protects and guides the "wand'ring bark" (the object of his love), the faithful lover's "worth's unknown" (line 8). In other words, although the one who receives love may use it to his advantage ("although his height be taken"), he may not return it in kind. I will repeat these lines in full for clarity's sake:

It is the star to every wand'ring bark,  
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be  
taken.

This revelation leads to an emotional declaration in the third quatrain, as defiant in tone as if the speaker were defending his own honor. This is because, by the third quatrain, the poet takes to heart the standards of his ideal. Strengthened by his new-found convictions, his statements become his *credo*. Love now appears as a sage, not taken in by

youthful beauty. Love perseveres long after youth's beauty fades:

Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and  
cheeks  
Within his bending sickle's compass come ...

For the sake of emphasis, Shakespeare repeats as if a vow, in line 11, the same sentiment of lines 2 and 3, that love "alters not," throughout life, but endures even until death (line 12):

Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,  
But bears it out even to the edge of doom ...

By the ending couplet, Shakespeare has lost all memory of past inconstancy in love and makes his profession of faith:

If this be error and upon me proved,  
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

His qualification "If this be error ..." in line 13, implies that if this idea of love is wrong, then no other can exist. At this point, Shakespeare so wants to show that he believes in the value of constancy in love that he is willing to stake his career and all his past experience on this belief. Yet this is only because no other satisfactory idea of love is imaginable to him.

Thanks to the publication of his sonnets, generations of readers have gained insight into the mind and soul of perhaps the world's greatest poet. His sentiments concerning affairs of the heart are beautifully expressed, his failings, touching. Beyond this, the soliloquies tell an extraordinary story of Shakespeare's personal struggle for self-knowledge and personal values. Especially striking in "Sonnet 116" is the poet's discovery of lost ideals. By measuring the distance between his ideal and his reality, he has come to realize the extent to which perfect constancy in love surpasses his own experience. Reflection shows him what perfect love should be, although it has so far tragically eluded him. Yet he must believe that it exists somewhere, if not for him, because without this conviction, he sees only despair. His profession of faith in his ideal is truly an expression of hope against all reason, but it is, in the final analysis, what gives him a sense of purpose. His profession of faith gives him his future.

**Source:** Annemarie Muth, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*. Gale, 1998.

### Stephen Booth

In the following essay, Booth explains how, in "Sonnet 116," Shakespeare successfully makes

general but substantial statements about love that defy challenges to their truth.

"Sonnet 116" is the most universally admired of Shakespeare's sonnets. Its virtues, however, are more than usually susceptible to dehydration in critical comment. The more one thinks about this grand, noble, absolute, convincing, and moving gesture, the less there seems to be to it. One could demonstrate that it is just so much bombast, but, having done so, one would have only to reread the poem to be again moved by it and convinced of its greatness.

A major problem about literary art is that abstract general assertions do not feel any truer than their readers already believe them to be; they carry no evidence of their truth and very little of the life (and thus very little of the undeniability) of the physically extant particulars from which they derive. Descriptions of those particulars, or exempla, or metaphoric allusions can bring life and conviction to a generalization, but they also limit its range and its value to the reader. The attraction of abstract generalization is the capacity they offer us to be "certain o'er uncertainty," to fix on a truth that allows for and cannot be modified by further consideration of experience or change in our angle of vision. One means of achieving universality and vividness at once is bombast: high-sounding, energetic nonsense that addresses its topic but does not indicate what is being said about it, and thus rises free of human intellectual limitations like a hot-air balloon. Bombast, however, is rarely satisfying for long or to any listener who pays attention to the signification of the words he hears strung together. Bombast overcomes the difficulties of language by abandoning its purpose; a general, noble, vibrant utterance that conveys no meaning operates like a bureaucracy that functions perfectly so long as it ignores the purpose for which it was established.

"Sonnet 116" has simple clear content; indeed, its first clause aside, it is one of the few Shakespeare sonnets that can be paraphrased without brutality. That alone excludes it from classification as bombast, but much of its strength and value is of the same sort that bombast has. "Sonnet 116" achieves effective definition unlimited by any sense of effective limitation. One obvious source of that success is that its positiveness is achieved in negative assertions (a definition by negatives is minimally restrictive because the thing so defined may be thought to possess all qualities but those specifically denied). Some of the means by which nega-

tive definition is made efficient, convincing, and satisfying in this sonnet are those that can be used to give grandeur to nonsense.

The sonnet combines extreme generality—even vagueness—with locutions that imply some degree of personification and thus invest abstract statements with the urgency, vividness, and apprehensibility of concrete particulars. That occurs in obvious fashion in the straightforward navigation metaphors of quatrain 2, but the equation of *love* with a seamark or a star only *explains* the speaker's meaning, is a chosen substitute for the speaker's topic, a substitute that acknowledges by the necessity of its use that the actual topic remains a distant impalpable essence, sensorily apprehensible by imperfect proxy. Other, less openly supportive effects do more toward achieving the special grandeur of this poem than the navigation metaphors. Consider the effects of *the remover*, *looks*, and *bears it out*; each operates differently, but they have a common denominator in giving effective concreteness to the identity of ideal love, in at the same time reasserting that that essence is indeed disembodied and incapable of comprehension in images, and in insisting that what is here encompassed and made apprehensible is nonetheless too big, too grand, to spiritual to be grasped. In line 4, *the remover* presents an embodied characteristic left free of any specific body or kind of body; it suggests all—but specifies none—of “people who are inconstant,” “time (which is the remover of beauty, the alterer)” and “a departed love (one who has ceased to requite the love given him, or one who has literally gone to another place, or one who is dead).” The shadowy personification of *the remover* lets us do something like visualize an actor and action without knowing at all what they are.

Similarly, *bears it out* in line 12 means only “persists,” “endures,” but suggests positive particular action, allowing a reader to visualize action, motion, and power, without visualizing any actor, mover, or wielder of power; it suggests specific objectivity, but has no antecedents and therefore no more particularity than in the modern phrase “stick it out,” meaning “endure.” *Bears it out* suggest an heroic striding forth, but no visualizable strider; it is not limited or diminished, and, not being ostentatiously figurative, does not advertise its identity as mere translation of the unknowable into knowable terms.

Lines 5-7 present another instance of abstract statement that has the vividness of sensually perceived action. The assertion that *love is an every-*

*fixed mark* is simple metaphor; it explains. The statement that a seamark *looks on* is another matter. The sense is clear enough; the focus of concern dictated by *ever-fixed* makes *looks on* an effective synonym for “endures,” “persists in the face of.” That a seamark should be said to “look” also makes sense (as does the same action by a *star* in line 7); the most effective seamark is a beacon; a Renaissance reader would recognize the aptness of the image both from the way a beacon looks at night and because Shakespeare's contemporaries were used to speaking of eyes as if they emitted the light they reflect and see by. The statement that a seamark *looks on tempests and is never shaken* is also apt; a tiny distant flame that withstands the wind and water of a tempest is as fitting an emblem of steadfastness as the ever-fixed North Star in the next line. None of that is poetically remarkable. What is remarkable is that the logic in which *looks on* indicates “persists,” the logic in which a seamark is eye-like and can be considered capable of looking, and the logic in which a feeble but constant flame is emblematic of steadfastness are independent of one another; each supports the assertion without reference to its relation to the other two. As a result the statement gets all the validity of the seamark's concreteness but remains mystic and wonderful, made as resistant to comprehension as available to it—and by the same locution. Moreover, whatever else it does, *looks on* personifies the insensate seamark as a beholder, although the function of seamarks is exactly opposite. On the other hand, the beholders, the sensate mariners who are guided by seamarks and stars, are presented (by metonymy) as *every wand'ring bark*, i.e. as boats.

None of that is at all complicated until it is explained. The lines do not demand any explanation; they are immediately clear, but they derive much of their power from being both simple and straightforward and simultaneously so complexly wondrous that beholder and beheld are indistinguishable from one another in a statement that makes their ordinary relationship perfectly clear.

A similar blend of substantial and insubstantial fabric occurs on a larger scale in *Love is not love* (line 2) and in *I never writ nor no man ever loved* (line 14). In those two cases the speaker's meaning is clear and immediate, uncolored by the incidental supernaturalness inherent in metaphoric perception; at the same time, both assert absolute nonsense. *Love is not love* is a traditional (and traditionally pleasing) kind of incidental paradox in which a straightforward response is phrased so as to be meaningless if taken literally. Similarly, the

hyperbole of the couplet is so extreme that it merely vouches for the speaker's intensity of feeling; it gives no evidence to support the validity of his statement because on a literal level it is ridiculous (we cannot doubt that what we read was written). Moreover, though the special meaning "truly loved" is obvious in *no man ever loved*, that assertion, like *Love is not love*, gets its rhetorical power from the ostentatious falsehood of its unmodified literal sense.

The discussion of Shakespeare's devices for simultaneously emphasizing particularity and vagueness, substance and emptiness, brings us to a related technique in "Sonnet 116" that has related effects: the poem is both singleminded, presenting constancy as the only matter worth considering, and heterogeneous in ways that do nothing to diminish or intrude upon its singlemindedness. In examining the special appeal of "Sonnet 116," it may be well to remember that in saying anything—no matter how general—one advertises the fact that one has *not* said everything else—everything else pertinent to one's topic and everything else impertinent to one's topic. That may sound less simpleminded and more worth saying if one considers the related proposition that the literary creations we value most are works like *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Paradise Lost*, and *Ulysses*, works so full—so full of matter, so full of different kinds of matter, and so open to being viewed from so many angles of vision—that their particulars seem to include all particulars, and the experience of them seems to take in all experience and all attitudes toward it. "Sonnet 116" is overlaid with relationships established in patterning factors that do not pertain to or impinge upon the logic and syntax of the particular authoritative statement it makes. The most obvious of them, of course, are the formal iambic pentameter rhythmic pattern and the sonnet rhyme scheme. This sonnet, however, also contains patterns of a kind that falls between the ideational structure (what the poem says) and the substantively irrelevant phonetic patterns of the sonnet form: patterns established by the relationship of the meanings of its words—in this case meanings that are irrelevant to, and do not color, the particular sentences in which they appear here but which do pertain generally to the topic about which the sentences isolate particular frames of reference.

*Let* in line 1 and *Admit* in line 2 both have the general sense "allow," but *Let* can mean "stop," "prevent," [or] "impede".... Similarly, "to admit," meaning "to allow to enter," and *impediments*, as things that prevent entrance, also have an extra-

syntactic relationship. (Also note *O no* in line 5: the exclamation not only contains the sound of the casually auxiliary imperative "O know [that]" but also presents a logically incidental example of a suitable prefatory exclamation introducing an *impediment* volunteered by a parishioner responding to the injunction in the marriage service that "if any man can show any cause, why they may not lawfully be joined together, let him now speak....")

The meanings of *true* in line 1 are "faithful" ("constant to one another") and "steadfast" ("constant in intent," "unwavering"), but, since *marriage of true minds* has overtones of the Christian and Platonic ideals of purely spiritual love, *of true minds* can also suggest "which is truly of minds (or souls) rather than merely of bodies"; *true* meaning "not a lie" pertains generally to truth-telling, the topic of this sentence, even though that sense of *true* is not evoked by the syntax or admissible in it; *true* meaning "straight," "not bent," implies the rightness, the spiritual health, of constant minds and is balanced by the ideas of "becoming bent" inherent in *bends* in line 4.

*Bends*, which is used to mean "turns aside," "changes its direction," contains untapped potential for nearly contrary meanings irrelevant to its use in line 4 but relevant to the general topic of constancy: "to bend to" means "to apply all one's energy, attention, and concern on one object"; the "to bend to" construction here adds the idea of fixed intent on removing to the contrary idea of turning aside...; *bends* also suggests stooping (as opposed to the staunch uprightness of the seaman in the following line) and submission (as opposed to the steadfastness required to withstand time's *bending sickle* in line 10—a line in which *bending* echoes *bends* but describes the curving blade of a sickle, the curving stroke with which a sickle is wielded, the binding of the grass before it, and the submission of grass to blade). In line 11, *alters* echoes *alters* and *alteration* in line 3 where they follow immediately upon a precise echo of a church service performed at an altar....

In line 10, the reference of *his* is specified by *sickle* (because Father Time has traditional association with a sickle, and the other available antecedents do not). In line 11, the same reference of *his* is dictated by the model of the previous *his*, by the obvious substantive link between *time* and *hours and weeks*, and—most importantly—by the context of the poem's general argument that love is permanent. However, the line includes—and thus acknowledges within the poem's triumphant



sweep—the altogether arguable proposition which the whole poem denies, the proposition that love is fleeting, the proposition which *Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks* would imply if those words stood alone as a paradox in which the syntactic norm prevailed, *Love* were the antecedent for *his*, and the line presented this paradox: “Love, with its brief hours and weeks (love, which is characterized by its brevity), alters not.” As read in context the line says, “Love alters not with *time’s* brief hours and weeks,” and that straightforward and single-minded sense is absolute—is absolutely undiminished, is absolutely unmodified, and is, in fact, absolutely strengthened by the self-contradiction engulfed within it.

*Compass* means “encircling reach” and “sphere of influence” in line 10, but appears in context of a quatrain-long metaphor of navigation to which “mariner’s compass” pertains.

One sense of *error* in line 13 is a synonym for one sense of *wand’ring* in line 7. As one comes upon the word, *error* suggests “that which is erroneous,” “not true,” and thus recurs to the specific concern of the portion of the marriage service echoed in lines 1 and 2: telling the truth; *upon me proved* is an obvious legal metaphor, and its juxtaposition with *error* narrows the meaning of that word to “heresy,” “a false creed,” and makes the whole line a specific metaphoric allusion to formal accusations of false belief (see “Sonnet 105”) and inconstancy in religion. The completed line, however, still refers back to the marriage service echo but takes another ideational route to get there: the passage echoed in lines 1 and 2 comes from the general section of the service where the congregation is asked to present evidence that the marriage cannot morally or legally go forward. The idea of doomsday (introduced by *to the edge of doom* in line 12) is also abstrusely relevant to matrimonial impediments; the priest asks the bride and groom if they know any impediment why they may not be lawfully joined together and charges them to answer as they “will answer at the dreadful day of judgment.”

That tangle of incidental relationships surely never enters into a reader’s understanding of the lines; presumably it never touches his consciousness even to the extent that rhythm, rhyme, and alliteration do; every habit of purposefully used and purposefully comprehended language leads a reader to ignore the ideational static in what he hears. In this sonnet, however, the denseness of incidental meaning patterns and their close ideational relevance to what the speaker is saying are suffi-



*That is not to say that ‘Sonnet 116’ is an elaborate dirty joke masquerading as a grand statement of grand principle....”*

cient to make the poem’s assertions sound as if they took cognizance of all viewpoints on all things related to love and were derived from and informative about every aspect of love.

The best example of effective expansion of the scope of a narrowly based generalization is the undercurrent of frivolous sexual suggestiveness in the poem. High-principled definitions of true love are ordinarily inefficient because they exclude not only sexuality but the human habit of taking the topic of sexuality lightly, joking about it. Many of the metaphors and ideas of this sonnet seem just on the point of veering off toward puerile joking about temporary male impotence—loss of tumescence—after sexual climax and about temporary abatement of female sexual desire; quatrain 2, for instance, is always ready to turn into a grotesquely abstruse pun on “polestar.” Most of the sexually suggestive elements in the poem are obvious and in more danger of being exaggerated than missed.... That is not to say that “Sonnet 116” is an elaborate dirty joke masquerading as a grand statement of grand principle (any more than “Sonnet 115,” which in technique and effect in the mirror image of this one, ins a solemn philosophic statement masquerading as a toy): here one cannot find a coherent sexual undermeaning as one can in schoolboy jokes like “My dame hath a lame tame crane” or even [in English poet Michael] Drayton’s “Since there’s no help,” but the poem does offer a substratum of random bisexual references that suggest preposterous teasing based on the ridiculously logical argument that a male lover is inconstant, not faithful, untrue in love, if his sexual potency is not constant, and a female is likewise inconstant if she is temporarily sated.

“Sonnet 116” is probably valued not because it asserts the value of absolute fidelity, but because

it is itself so absolute, so "certain o'er uncertainty," that it can both recommend and successfully demonstrate singleminded allegiance to one governing principle. The poem testifies by example that singlemindedness, authority, and certainty can exist—or seem to exist—without a fanatic narrowness of reference.

The triviality, irrelevancy, and baseness of the sexual innuendo in "Sonnet 116," its indecorum, is a source of the poem's value, its success, and its grandeur. As with the incidental complexities, contradictions, and by-meanings discussed previously, the very pettiness of the sexual overtones contributes to the impression the poem gives that its general, all-inclusive, absolute, grandly simplistic moral imperative is genuinely general, that it presents a genuinely definitive definition, one that excludes no particulars or attitudes that might modify or challenge it, one that has been tested by all exceptions that might prove its rule wanting, one that is both absolute and absolutely true.

**Source:** "Sonnet 116" in *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, edited by Stephen Booth, Yale University Press, 1977, pp. 387-92.

### Sources

Auden, W. H., introduction to *The Sonnets*, edited by William Burto, New American Library, 1964.

Booth, Stephen, "Sonnet 116" in *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, Yale University Press, 1977, pp. 384-92.

Landry, Hilton, "The Marriage of True Minds: Truth and Error in Sonnet 116" in *Shakespeare Studies*, Vol. III, 1968, pp. 98-110.

Marin, Philip, *Shakespeare's Sonnets: Self, Love, and Art*, Cambridge University Press, 1972, pp. 88-96.

Weiser, David K., *Mind in Character*, Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1987.

### For Further Study

Baldwin, T. W., *On the Literary Genetics of Shakespeare's Poems and Sonnets*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1950.

Part III, which pertains to the sonnets, includes both a sequencing approach to the sonnets, as well as a series on themes.

Evans, G. Blakemore, ed., *The Riverside Shakespeare*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974.

A complete anthology of Shakespeare's works.

Stirling, Brent, *The Shakespearean Sonnet Order: Poems and Groups*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968.

Asserts that the 1609 text implies coherence among the sonnets. The author presents them in groupings that he sees emerging from the text.

# The Unknown Citizen

*W. H. Auden*

1940

"The Unknown Citizen" appeared in the collection, *Another Time*, in 1940. The poem is intensely ironic and reflects Auden's earlier work in which social, political and economic concerns dominated his texts. It reveals a satirical portrait of a unknown citizen, a citizen who represents the average man and his lack of personal identity within modern society. Dehumanizing institutions as well as complacency on the part of the citizenry are to blame for the lack of individuality. The poem appears to protest against a world in which systems interested in scientific data fail to capture the human quality of life, and mass organizations and commercial exploitation attempt to obliterate originality within humankind. Within such a system, questions that demand a subjective response, for instance, Was he happy?, become irrelevant. Happiness, here, is naturally assumed, for, as a citizen, the individual has achieved complete and utter "normalcy," and in this society, being "average" is equated with being happy. The greatest irony of the poem is that in many ways the audience is the unknown citizen, for whether we realize it or not, our lives are largely shaped and dictated by the great social, political, and economic forces that seek to establish conformity to the attitudes and beliefs that they produce. One of Auden's most famous lines, from the poem "In Memory of W. B. Yeats", states: "Poetry makes nothing happen." This sentiment rejects romantic tenets and the notion that poetry can change events; however, it does hint at Auden's belief that poetry can influence how we see and understand the world





W. H. Auden

around us, and by extension, ourselves. Such reflection appears to be at the center of "The Unknown Citizen."

### Author Biography

Auden was born in 1907 and was raised in northern England, the son of a doctor and a nurse. He received his primary education at St. Edmund's School in Surrey and Gresham's School in Kent. Auden's early interest in science and engineering earned him a scholarship to Oxford University; however, his interest in poetry led him to switch his field of study to English. While at Oxford, Auden became familiar with modernist poetry, particularly that of T. S. Eliot, and he became a central member of a group of writers that included Stephen Spender, C. Day Lewis, and Louis MacNeice, a collective variously labeled the "Oxford Group" or the "Auden Generation." In 1928 Auden's first book, *Poems*, was privately printed by Spender. During the same year, Eliot accepted Auden's verse play *Paid on Both Sides: A Charade* for publication in his magazine *Criterion*. After graduating from Oxford, Auden lived for more than a year in Berlin before returning to England

to become a teacher. During the 1930s Auden traveled to Spain and China, became involved in political causes, and wrote prolifically. In this period he composed *The Orators: An English Study* (1932), an experimental satire that mixes poetry and prose; three plays in collaboration with Christopher Isherwood; two travel books—one of which was written with Louis MacNeice; and the poetry collection *Look, Stranger!* (1936; published in the United States as *On This Island*). Auden left England in 1939 and became a citizen of the United States. His first book as an emigrant, *Another Time* (1940), contains some of his best-known poems, among them "September 1, 1939," and "Musée des Beaux Arts." His 1945 volume *The Collected Poetry*, in which he revised, retitled, or excluded many of his earlier poems, helped solidify his reputation as a major poet. Throughout his career Auden won numerous honors and awards, including the Pulitzer Prize for *The Age of Anxiety: A Baroque Eclogue* (1947) and the National Book Award for *The Shield of Achilles* (1955). In his later years, Auden continued to teach, to deliver lectures, and to edit and review books. He wrote several more volumes of poetry, including *City without Walls and Many Other Poems* (1969), *Epistle to a Godson and Other Poems* (1972), and the posthumously published *Thank You, Fog: Last Poems* (1974). He died while on a trip to Vienna in 1973. He is buried in Poet's Corner of Westminster Abbey.

### Poem Summary

#### Lines 1-3:

The opening lines of the poem establish an ironic tone as the speaker of the poem begins to construct a satiric portrait of the average citizen. In the first line of the poem the speaker turns to the "Bureau of Statistics," and in line 3 to "reports," as a source for information regarding the "unknown" citizen. This is intensely ironic, for while the Bureau does not identify the citizen by name, such a Bureau does contain detailed data regarding every citizen. The data the Bureau collects identifies an individual in terms of detailed facts and figures; however, it fails to truly identify those qualities which distinguish him/her from all others. For instance, such data gives no information regarding a person's hopes, dreams, or desires, or those personal or idiosyncratic qualities that distinguish each individual. Although certain "details" regarding a person are contained in such reports, the individual remains truly unknown, and this is the central irony the poem plays upon.

#### Lines 4-5:

The irony continues to build in these two lines of the poem. In line 4, the unknown citizen is referred to as a "saint" in the "modern sense" of the word. In the old-fashioned sense of the word, a

saint is someone who overcomes great challenges, maintains their personal convictions in the face of intense adversity, usually stands alone and often perishes while maintaining and defending their beliefs. Such a life, in other words, is an extraordinary one. The poem, however, suggests that in the modern sense of the word, a saint is one whose life in anything but extraordinary.

What distinguishes sainthood in this poem is a life of complete and utter ordinariness. For instance, the unknown citizen always acts in the accepted or expected way. As noted later in the poem, when there was war, he was for war; when there was peace, he was for peace. This suggests that his convictions and beliefs are formed not through individual reflection and personal conviction, but rather by the greater political, social, moral, and economic institutions that seek and dictate conformity to a standard thought and way of life. Thus, the unknown citizen ends up serving the "Greater Community" by perpetuating the ideologies that the modern institutions define, by fitting into the mold instead of breaking it.

#### Lines 6-8:

These lines begin to detail the unknown citizen's life of "sainthood." The flat, matter-of-fact tone is suggestive of a report, the very kind of reports referred to in line 3. Such a compilation of data underscores the citizen's lack of individuality.

The reference to Fudge Motor as being incorporated (Inc.) suggests that this is a large and powerful company, an institution which can dictate social norms in a significant way, much like the automobile industry does today. This company, like all the other institutions noted in the poem, wields a great deal of power and therefore contributes to the shaping of society and by extension the individual's life.

#### Lines 9-11:

This section of the poem underscores how average the unknown citizen is, for as line 9 notes, he conforms completely to the given, not questioning or challenging it in any way. These lines also stress the scientific approach to understanding a man, an approach that is deeply layered as the Union's report is further investigated so that another report examining the Union's report is generated (line 10). Such a detail is highly ironic for it deliberately exaggerates, while at the same time undercuts, the validity of the "scientific" model and moves it into the realm of ridiculousness.

## Media Adaptations



- *The Caedman Treasury of Modern Poets Reading Their Own Poetry* is available on audio cassette from Audiobooks.
- *Tell Me The Truth About Love* is available on audio cassette from Audiobooks.

### Lines 12-15:

In these four lines the speaker continues to document the “normalcy” of the citizen and compile a list of the organizations that influence his life, often in very subtle ways. The Social Psychology worker’s role is to immediately identify any deviation from the accepted standard and, by implication, correct such behavior. Auden’s poem attacks such organizations and the society that encourages individuals to become mere products of such forces rather than individuals in the true sense. In line 15 the poet touches on the persuasive and insidious manners in which many modern organizations work. The advertising industry is built upon the subtle persuasion that as a citizen one needs whatever product they are selling. However, it is often the case that one does not require that product in any real sense at all. By calling such commonplace institutions into question, the poet encourages the reader to question his/her own role in society and ask if he/she is not unlike the unknown citizen in some ways.

### Lines 16-21:

Here the poet continues to tabulate the characteristics of the “Modern Man.” The language employed in these lines and throughout the poem is colloquial, and the allusions to common possessions such as a radio and a car, and devices such as installment plans, allow the reader to easily engage in and identify with the poetic statement.

### Lines 22-27:

In this section the “normalcy” of the unknown citizen is perhaps most clearly stated as the poem explicitly notes how average the citizen is, meet-

ing all the standards of norms expected of a person of his generation. Such complete conformity is suggestive of the power that mass organizations possess in the modern industrial world. The poem addresses the desirability of the citizen’s acceptance of this normalcy.

The reference to eugenics in line 26 is particularly striking, for eugenics is a branch of science concerned with improving the human race through the control of hereditary factors. This single reference touches upon two aspects central to the poem’s theme: the cold and detached “scientific” approach organizations employ to collect “information” on individuals, and the controlled conformity such groups desire.

### Lines 28-29:

The poem reaches its climax within the closing two lines of the poem. After outlining the standards of normalcy dictated by society, questions regarding freedom and happiness are absurd. They are ridiculous because the modern society defined in the lines above is not concerned with individual notions of freedom and happiness. What it seeks, the poem suggests, is quite the opposite: it encourages citizens to identify happiness and freedom by its own terms. In other words, if one possesses the car, the radio, the frigidaire, and reflects the desires of the all-powerful institutions, accepting peace when peace comes, supporting war when war comes, then one would naturally be happy and free. The poem ends on an ironic note, for if anything had been wrong, the system and society the poem delineates would certainly have not heard.

## Themes

### Patriotism

At the beginning of the poem we are told that “the State” so enthusiastically approves of the behaviors described here that it has erected a marble monument to the Unknown Citizen, making him a lasting example to all other citizens. Ordinarily, we think of a hero as someone who has actively done something that will make life better for his fellow citizens. Auden’s point here is that modern government seems to consider the best service that a citizen can perform to be keeping quiet and doing nothing to disrupt the bureaucracy’s smooth functioning. In a sense, he is right: the nature of bureaucracy is that all people are treated equally (in respect to all other people of their classification),

so the best imaginable citizen for a bureaucratic system would be one who has so few distinguishing traits that he ends his life without even a name. The irony is that we know a hero to be someone who has distinguished him- or herself and has drawn our attention and admiration by doing something beyond what could rightly be expected. If it comes down to a choice, this poem tells us, the bureaucratic government would much favor the obscure person over the distinct, because that person fits the design of bureaucracy better. Auden may seem cynical in this poem, except for the fact that his inspiration is not a wildly imagined futuristic scenario, but is in fact based in reality: in the tombs of Unknown Soldiers that several nations have erected since World War I, the states are honoring random corpses for their indistinct service and anonymous deaths. Even if we consider the fact that soldiers are specifically and painstakingly taught to surrender their individuality, so that in combat no one will endanger those around him with an unanticipated act, it does not take much imagination to leap from the battlefield to the overpopulated chaos of modern life that makes the heroic treatment of "JS/07/M/378" seem almost reasonable.

### Science and Technology

Writers often portray science and technology as threats to human individuality. The reason for this is that these fields' central interests actually do oppose uniqueness. Science can observe the world with curiosity, but for the interest of the scientific community a phenomenon that cannot be reproduced, even if only in theory, is not worth talking about. Mixing two chemicals in a flask, for example, will create a reaction, but it is not considered science unless all of the different aspects are described in a way that lets someone somewhere else reproduce the reaction. This is why scientists use their own special scientific notation to transcend the languages of the world. It also has to do with why the poem refers to the Unknown Citizen as "JS/07/M/378." All of these letters and numbers undoubtedly mean something to the bureaucrats in the government, telling them more than a name such as "Smith" or "Auden" would, just as "NaCl" signifies more to the scientist than the common term "salt."

Standardization has created the great technological boom of the twentieth century. By making devices with standard parts, a malfunction can be fixed by replacing the broken part; this saves the expense of scrapping all of the connected parts that are still in good shape. In modern times people of-

## Topics for Further Study



- Write a letter from an unknown citizen to the Bureau of Statistics, objecting to the boring impression this poem gives of him and explaining what he thinks his life is really like.
- Explain how the style of writing in this poem is similar to something that "the State" would publish. What phrases does it use that sound like bureaucratic language? What about the rhyme scheme?
- What techniques does Auden use in this poem to show what he really thinks is absurd?

ten express regret that products are not handmade by craftspeople like they once were, but if every product were uniquely constructed, it would be economically impossible for most of us to own consumer products like the phonograph, radio, car and refrigerator mentioned in line 21. It should come as no surprise that the theory of standardization which has served the natural sciences and technology so well would be applied to the field of human behavior in the social sciences. In this poem, Auden uses capitalization of their formal (and formidable) titles to draw attention to the institutions that found it to be in their interests to consider this man as only a replaceable part and not as an independent whole: "Bureau of Statistics," "Greater Community," "War," "Fudge Motors," "Union," "Social Psychology," "Producers Research," "High Grade Living," "Installment Plan," "Modern Man," "Public Opinion," and "Eugenist."

### Alienation

Is it absurd to ask if the Unknown Citizen was happy? Yes, in the sense that absurdity indicates an absence of meaning, and the measured, quantified world of the State has no place for the meaning of happiness. Unfortunately, individual humans do care if they are happy: by definition, it is what humans seek, even those humans who find their happiness through suffering. But the society that surrounds "JS/07/M/378" has no more interest in

his happiness than an automobile manual would have in examining the "moral worth" of a grade of gasoline: it is as if the man's society and his happiness existed in two separate universes. It is easy to see why the citizen would feel unconnected to his surroundings or feel alienated. We could almost say that the bureaucracy is a hostile environment for modern man to live in, even though a bureaucrat—such as the speaker of this poem—would not see it that way.

In a larger sense, the individual is part of his environment and cannot really be considered to be something different than it, but the literature of this century, starting with Freudian psychology, has concerned itself with how people become emotionally alienated from the world that they see and touch every day. The paradox of modern life is that social bureaucracy could not possibly concern itself with something so unmeasurable as the "happiness" of each individual, especially as the population continues to grow, but by avoiding happiness, society becomes more and more irrelevant to the individual.

### Style

"The Unknown Citizen" is an occasional poem. That is to say, it is a poem written to mark a specific occasion or event. The occasion is indicated in the lines contained in parenthesis that precede the body of the poem. As these lines indicate, the poem is a written monument that functions as a cenotaph: it commemorates a fallen man whose identity is unknown. However, unlike the soldier who falls in a battle of war, the battle this individual appears to be unwittingly a part of is a social battle, since he is labelled an unknown citizen and not soldier.

Despite being unknown by name, the citizen is identified by his social identification, the number, "JS/07/M/378." This number is much like a social security number. It leads investigators to various data banks that provide details regarding the citizen's life, and this is the irony upon which the poem turns. Although many facts about the citizen are known, he remains unknown because details highlighting his individuality are ignored. He is simply representative of all the citizenry who conform to set standards and practices, standards which are dictated by the mass organizations and institutions that shape society. The lines preceding the body of the text underscore this irony and, together with the poem, satirically suggest that the "monu-

ment" is not a celebration of such an existence, but rather a condemnation of the system and the complacent individuals who support it.

"The Unknown Citizen" follows a somewhat erratic rhyme scheme: *ababaccdeeffdgghhijjikknnnoo*. The poem concludes with a closed couplet—two successive lines that contain a grammatically complete statement. The final word of each of these lines rhymes with one another. The statement is considered "closed" in that it does not depend on what precedes it to complete its grammatical structure or thought. In other words, its meaning is contained within the two lines, and it is within these two lines that the climax of the poem is reached.

### Historical Context

In 1940, the year that this poem was published in Auden's book *Another Time*, the attention of the entire world was focused on the war in Europe, which we eventually came to refer to as World War II. The poet was living in America then, comfortable in a teaching position, but he had spent most of his life in England and had traveled extensively throughout the world before settling here. He became an American citizen in 1939, the year that Britain declared war against Germany.

Adolf Hitler became chancellor of Germany in 1933, and almost immediately he began rebuilding the German military, which had been dismantled by international demand at the end of World War I. In 1938, the German Army attacked Austria and took control; the other nations of the world disapproved, but did nothing to intervene. Germany then claimed rights to the region along its border with Czechoslovakia, known as the Sudetenland. In September of 1938, with the encouragement of Britain and France, Czechoslovakia signed the Warsaw Pact, giving the Sudetenland to Germany in exchange for a promise of no further aggression. The nations of Europe thought they had avoided a war, but the pact was broken six months later, in March of 1939, when German troops attacked and defeated the remaining Czech nation.

Having learned that Hitler would not stop and could not be trusted, the nations of the world prepared for the inevitable war. When German troops invaded Poland in September of 1939, France and Britain declared war on Germany. Soon most of the countries of Europe were pulled into war. In accordance with a secret pact between Berlin and Moscow, Russia, which previously had been Ger-



## Compare & Contrast

- **1940:** The first color television was developed by Hungarian-American inventor Peter Goldmark, who also introduced the 33-1/3 r.p.m. record player in 1948.

**1951:** CBS began broadcasting with the Goldmark system, but it failed to catch on because most people would not buy the special television sets required to receive the signal.

**1954:** RCA introduced color television sets that could also read the same signal as those regularly broadcast by the networks in black and white.

**Today:** Television stations are ready to start broadcasting in HDTV, which stands for High Definition Television, a system with twice the number of scanning lines per page. It is estimated that by 2110 standard television sets will be obsolete, since the only broadcasts will be in the HDTV format.

- **1940:** Germany took control of Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Denmark, Norway, and Romania. The United States provided England with weapons, but was not yet officially in

the war against Germany. Italy and Japan were united with Germany in the "Axis".

**1945:** After being defeated in World War II, Germany was divided into four sections by the conquering powers, England, Russia, and the United States.

**1949:** Two separate countries were formed out of Germany: one Communist and the other democratic.

**1989:** So many people were leaving Communist East Germany that the government tore down the stone wall that split the city of Berlin into east and west parts.

**Today:** Germany is reunited and is a strong force in the European Economic Community.

- **1940:** The first commercial airline flight using pressurized cabins flew from New York to Burbank, California, with a stop in Kansas City. The flight took fourteen hours and had seats that could convert into sleeping berths.

**Today:** A non-stop commercial flight from New York to Los Angeles takes approximately six hours.

---

many's enemy, joined the attack against Poland, and when Poland was fell the two countries divided its land among them (in June of 1941, Russia was attacked by Germany, and joined the Allied Forces in opposition). Throughout late 1939 and early 1940, smaller countries either were invaded or were coerced into peaceful surrender by aggressive nations: Russia failed to conquer Finland but took 16,000 square miles of its land, along with the Baltic nations of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania; Germany took Norway, Denmark, Belgium and Holland; Italy tried unsuccessfully to take Greece and Egypt; Japan took control of China, Indochina and Thailand. After France was defeated by German troops in 1940, Britain was the only European country to stand in opposition to the Axis (an al-

liance between Germany, Italy, and Japan). British citizens had been preparing for a German attack since 1938, and in 1940 bombing raids began pummeling the country almost daily.

During this time, the United States government was following a policy of isolation and was staying away from the affairs of the rest of the world. The supporters of isolationism were a strange, unlikely bunch: conservative bankers who hated the New Deal policies of President Franklin Roosevelt, farmers who had been saved by Roosevelt's policies, Irish-Americans who opposed alliance with Britain, German-Americans who feared being forced to fight against their homeland, and more. They were also an especially vocal group, sending a million letters to Congress within three days of

Britain and France's declarations of war, telling their representatives to stay out of the problems in Europe. Isolationists kept the United States from providing weapons for fighting against Germany until March of 1941, when the president signed the Lend-Lease Act, which authorized \$7 billion in military credits for Britain. America did not enter the war until December of 1941, when Japan, an ally of Germany, attacked Pearl Harbor, Hawaii.

This poem's negative view of passivity and compliance reflects the general disappointment, after the fact, that citizens felt for their governments who had tried to accommodate Hitler with the idealistic Warsaw Pact. It might also reflect the isolationism of America, which tried to go about its daily business as if the rest of the world were not in turmoil. Another possibility is that Auden was influenced by Nazi Germany's systematic, mechanical destruction of certain people as if they were not human or were worthless, while the rest of the world claimed to be unable to help. Jews, blacks, homosexuals, gypsies, and others were rounded up by the German military and murdered in the Holocaust. Many American citizens who lived then said later that they were not aware of the murders until 1945, when the death camps at Belsen and Buchenwald were liberated by Allied troops as the Nazi Army collapsed. Others, however, have said that the news was repeated regularly, even though it was not given front-page treatment in the newspapers. Well before the invasion of Poland, the Nazis openly attacked and tortured those who Hitler had announced were "inferior." They were sent to labor camps or made to wear arm bands to set them apart from the rest of the population. After Poland fell, Jews from Austria, Germany, and Czechoslovakia were transported to Warsaw, where they were herded into overpopulated ghettos, and later many were taken to death camps, where they were killed by the hundreds in gas chambers and ovens. A man of Auden's intelligence and worldliness would most likely have been aware of the Nazi Holocaust and the way that humans were stripped of their lives and possessions by a social machine. After the war, many came to explain their willing participation in the horror by saying that they were "just following orders."

### Critical Overview

"The Unknown Citizen" articulates a social, ethical and political awareness that Auden refined over a period of years. Critic Arnold Kettle, writing in

*Culture and Crisis in Britain in the Thirties*, believes that Auden's participation in the political realm during the 1930s positively influenced his development as a writer. Kettle states that Auden's involvement encouraged him to explore the relationship between personal or private experiences and public or social development, and led him "to see himself as part of a social situation, not merely as one lonely man...." It also assisted him, according to Kettle, in developing a poetic text that was socially orientated, turning outward toward common experiences rather than inward toward situations which are solely personal and individual. "The Unknown Citizen" reflects the qualities Kettle outlines as the poem explores the structures of contemporary society through the individual, an individual who stands as a representation of the greater social fabric of which he is a product. Thus, the individual is not simply one man but every man. Political poetry, Kettle states, makes the reader conscious of power, thereby "opening up the world rather than attempting to enclose a part of it in some sort of mystic purity." With its ironic condemnation of modern life, "The Unknown Citizen" rejects romantic or mystic notions and confronts the reader with a construction of the world many fail to recognize.

However, in *W. H. Auden*, Dennis Davison criticizes Auden's portrait of modern society as "too superficial." He notes that in Auden's attempt to portray the sense of conformity social forces press upon the individual, he overlooks the conflicts that exist between social institutions. For instance, tensions between trade unions and big business are common. The balance between the supply of manufactured goods and consumer demand is delicate; capitalistic society often wavers between economic booms and periods of sluggish growth. The tensions that arise from these situations are, according to Davison, "equally characteristic of modern mass-society as are the conformist influences." By failing to recognize them, Auden's assessment of society falls short and leads the reader to consider only part of the complex issues that shape who we are.

### Criticism

#### Bruce Meyer

Bruce Meyer is Director of the Creative Writing program at the University of Toronto. He has taught at several Canadian universities and is the author of three collections of poetry. *The Open*

## What Do I Read Next?



- George Orwell's classic novel *1984*, written in 1948, shares this poem's suspicions about how society pressures an individual to abandon his own personality, but turns it into a life-threatening, science-fiction political adventure.
- *The Organization Man* by William Hollingsworth Whyte was a sociological study that made the best-seller lists in 1956. It describes a condition that Auden anticipated in this poem: how workers in bureaucratic situations became inclined to stop thinking of themselves and instead became obsessed with "belongingness," or the need to be part of a group.
- Ordinary people told their stories about World War II and what they remember about the times surrounding it to interviewer Studs Turkel, whose 1985 book *The Good War* is a record of his conversations. This is an excellent way to eavesdrop on anonymous, unimportant people like the one described in this poem and to see what they thought of themselves.
- Of the hundreds of biographies and memoirs about Auden that are available, one of the most pleasant is *The Poet Auden*, written by his personal friend and famed literary scholar A. L. Rowse and published in 1987. This is not a book to look to for information about the poet, but it gives readers a good sense of the man.
- Another source for finding out what Auden was like is Dorothy J. Farnan's *Auden In Love*, about the poet's affair from 1939 to his death in 1973 with fellow poet Chester Kallman. This book gives details skipped in other books about Auden's private life, leading to a more rounded picture of him.

Room (1989), Radio Silence (1991), and The Presence (1998). In the following essay, Meyer argues that the Unknown Citizen "is both heroic and bathetic, a figure who is ennobled by his life (in the eyes of the state) and lowered by his participation in a world that ignores the true values of who and what he is."

When the world was on the verge of World War II, W. H. Auden arrived in New York City, perplexed by the "reductio ad absurdum" of a society that had lowered modern man to the mechanistic level of a statistic. In the poems that he wrote shortly before the outbreak of the war, Auden struggled to perceive some solace or living presence in the grind and shuffle of the social order. In one of his poems from the same period, "September 1, 1939," Auden located himself in the disenchanting milieu of New York City on the day World War II began, as the ideals of civilization appeared threatened once again by the forces of barbarism:

I sit in one of the dives  
On Fifty-Second Street

Uncertain and afraid  
As the clever hopes expire  
Of a low and dishonest decade

Auden was uncertain as to the value of civilization and its ability to deal with the impending war. He was not alone in this sentiment. One of his contemporaries, British poet laureate C. Day Lewis, declared in his poem "Where Are the War Poets?" that "we who lived by honest dreams / Defend the bad against the worse." Like Day Lewis, Auden struggled to perceive defensible virtues of a world in which men had been reduced to commodities and numbers. Yet for all the gravity of its memorializing of the faceless Everyman, "JS/07/M378," who is paradoxically everywhere and nowhere, Auden's "The Unknown Citizen" is a satire on the nature of a society and an ethos that pursues progress in the name of the common good while missing the point that all good should lead to human happiness.

Originally published in *The Listener*, the BBC's mass-market weekly radio program guide, "The Unknown Citizen" was intended to speak to

and for the common man. Writing in *A Reader's Guide to W. H. Auden*, John Fuller points out that the poem "sketches in, with the lightest of ironies, some details of the average man ... put through the statistician's hoop." Published in Auden's 1940 collection, *Another Time*, "The Unknown Citizen" is an ironic comment on the pathetic state of affairs in which many British found themselves at the onset of the war: individuals were honoured for their faceless roles in being good citizens who behaved according to both laws and programmatic probabilities, yet they were asked to make the sacrifice of individuality and personal passion in the name of social well-being. The *Listener's* review of *Another Time* suggests that Auden's poems from this period fall into three distinct groupings: "the first serious and obscure because the author has telescoped so much thought into the verse, the second delightfully irresponsible but with some of the squibs a little damp, the third mainly elegaic and deeply moving." In many ways, "The Unknown Citizen" falls into all three categories.

As a text, the poem supposes to be an inscription on a monument, a serious memorial to the ultimate obscurity to which modern man is condemned by the "mass" nature of his society. The Unknown Citizen lies buried in a grave without a name, but he has also been buried beneath the layers of social and commercial measurements that modern society has heaped upon the individual in the name of progress, trade, and administration. He is both a victim and a hero of his system. In this contradiction, there is no suggestion that the Citizen is a martyr; he is simply someone who should be remembered by a system that sadly is not geared to memory. The obscurity of the Citizen's condition is further complicated by the obscurity of the poem itself. We don't know who "JS" is, and Auden remains sphinx-like in leaving the issue cloudy and unresolved. The point of the poem is that the identity of the individual cited in the dedication doesn't matter. What matters is the paradox of a memorial raised by a society lacking a memory.

In the second grouping suggested by the *Listener* reviewer, the poem stands as a parody of the Jeffersonian ideal that the purpose of officialdom is to assist the public in the pursuit of happiness. The final lines "Was he happy? The question is absurd: / Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard" suggest that the means by which a human life is measured are statistical rather than spiritual or even personal, and that only unhappiness, not happiness, is the driving force of recognition behind an oblivious social system that de-

nies the passions and sentiments of those it contains.

As an elegy, the third grouping which *The Listener* review perceived in *Another Time*, "The Unknown Citizen" offers a lamentation for the loss of individuality and personal distinction. The elegy, in its truest sense, is nostalgic. It is a poetic form that glances backward to a lost time, a lost innocence, and a lost presence. The elegy always examines absence; the absence in this context is the Citizen. His passing is recorded not as a matter of grief or an outpouring of emotion, but as a moment of the celebration of conformity, mediocrity, and indistinction. This triumverate of bathetic traits is what has filled the void created by the Citizen's passing, and the poem, in this light, poses as a satire and commentary on the failings of contemporary society more than as an elegy or a lamentation of individual loss. Yet it is this sense of loss that cannot be denied. Why raise a memorial to something that is best forgotten? Auden, in this case, is being purposefully ambiguous in the name of irony, while simultaneously remaining steadfast to a profound notion of nostalgia. As is the case in such novels as D. H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow* (1915) and *Women in Love* (1920), a high price is paid for the pursuit of a better society through the imposition of a mechanistic and apassionate life.

In Auden's view, modern man pays the highest sacrifice—even higher than that paid by those who perished in World War I—because he is more than an icon; he is a statistic. Or is Auden suggesting that the new iconography of society is not the individual but the ways that measure and record the individual's life? "The Unknown Citizen" opens with the findings of the "Bureau of Statistics," a monolithic entity of social measurement that reduces man to the lowest common denominator—a number on a spread sheet. As the poem progresses, the life of the individual is measured in public facts rather than in private events, suggesting that personal biography is secondary on the scale of social worth to the value of the citizen as a mere cog within a system. The reader discovers that the Unknown Citizen was a law-abiding veteran and union member who served his community through his very facelessness and his participation in a consumer society. In a satiric yet Orwellian gesture that points out the pressures that the social system places upon the individual, (a stance anticipating Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*), "The Unknown Citizen" makes a hero out of an Everyman figure who is subsumed by a social system. Auden's stance, however, is less harsh than

Orwell's vision in its almost gentle rendering of the sentimental details that benchmark the Citizen's life, such as drinking with his "mates" and parenting "five children." The underlying irony, however, is as profound as that offered by Orwell: that which is heroic is ultimately tragic. The modern world leaves no room for the triumphant. The title, echoing the cenotaph in Whitehall or the hallowed grave of the soldier "known but to God," is meant to alarm the reader into a state of wry shock. The irony comes when the reader realizes that this is not someone else he is reading about, but himself. To this end, the citizen "known but to God" stands as a symbol of everyone in society, and as a grim reminder of how the modern state of mass man is a desert for individual identity.

Like Orwell, who was actively engaged in explorations of leftist politics in the 1930s, Auden was taken up with the great debate of his age pitting individualism and a fatigued perception of liberal democracy against the excitement and anticipation of a mass state devised on Marxist proletarian ideals. By 1939, when Auden composed "The Unknown Citizen," the debate had almost exhausted itself in the battleground of the Spanish Civil War—a war of political ideologies where the beliefs of mass identity prevailed over the weaker yet more just forces of liberal, democratic individualism. The aftermath of the Spanish conflict left an enormous number of questions unresolved. What was the role of the individual, and what price would individuals have to pay for participating in the broader contexts of socio-political structures? In Auden's case, the leftist political beliefs that he so fervently charted during his idealistic moments of the early 1930s had manifested themselves in the failures of Utopian socialism at the hands of Stalin. Ultimately, this debate of beliefs found its synthesis in World War II (which set mass-minded Fascism against more individualistic ideals) and the Cold War between the East and West. What underlies "The Unknown Citizen" is the irony that individuals and ideologies somehow don't mix when the price for belief is personal identity. Such was the letdown that the poets of Auden's generation—including such voices as Spender, Day Lewis, and MacNeice—felt and perceived as a prevailing malaise on the eve of World War II. In this light, "The Unknown Citizen" is an elegy not only to perished identity but to the perished hopes of a generation that sought to remedy the problems of Europe and the world through the pursuit of organized and overly rational social structures founded on premises that put the individual second to the needs



*'The Unknown Citizen' opens with the findings of the 'Bureau of Statistics,' a monolithic entity of social measurement that reduces man to the lowest common denominator—a number on a spread sheet."*

of society. What the poem implies is that the solution to the problems of man in society are often worse than the problems themselves. Therein lies the epicentre of the tribute and the lamentation.

On this elegaic note, the poem charts its structural course in a genuinely brilliant marriage of content and form. The irregular length of the lines and the varying rhyme scheme suggest that "The Unknown Citizen" is less of an elegy than an ode—a philosophical (in this case political) poem undertaking the examination of an overwhelming universal question. Unlike the classical elegy and truer to the ode form, the tone of the poem departs from lamentation seriousness and enters the realm of a satiric speculative narrative in its account of the life of the departed citizen as perceived by the persona of the group or "official" opinion. Rather than raise a series of ponderous questions, an attribute of the ode, "The Unknown Citizen" examines the central question of "what is man" in the context of the modern world. Auden's response is both mocking and ironic. The element of praise or "epideictic rhetoric" that is also inherent in the ode is undercut by the blitheness of the final lines and the reduction of the issue of the once-great human spirit to a matter of measurements, calculations, and abbreviations. But what is most shocking is that this is a statement of what the group (or public statement) thinks of its constituent part. The solution to this problem of self-awareness seems to be that we should recognize the value in ourselves. Auden's citizen, in this strange twist on traditional forms and structures, is both heroic and bathetic, a figure who is ennobled by his life (in the eyes of the state) and lowered by his participation in a world that ig-

nores the true values of who and what he is—a world where there is no correction for the problem of misplaced virtues. In this sense, Auden sounds a grave warning to his readers regarding the failures of a world that might have been better and that has fallen short of its positivist ideals of mass consumption and materialism. Yet in spite of this context, the State in the poem—and ultimately the poet himself—ordains the heroism in every modern individual who perseveres in the name of life regardless of society's blindness to the true value of the humanity within the personal history.

**Source:** Bruce Meyer, in an essay for *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 1998.

### George T. Wright

*In the following excerpt, Wright discusses common characteristics within the diversity of Auden's poetry.*

What kind of poet is W. H. Auden? Critics have often condemned him for not being one kind or another, but they have seldom succeeded, even when they have wanted to, in describing the kind he is. During a career that spans two continents and several faiths, his poetry has seemed, from phase to phase, to alter not merely its loyalties but its character. Is it really British or American? really Freudian, Marxist, or Christian? Is Auden mainly a satirist, a Romantic, a journalist, a song writer, or what? Every new poem or new style of his seems to challenge what we thought we knew about him. Randall Jarrell, with delicate malice, once placed at the head of an article hostile to Auden a quotation he attributed to Heraclitus: *We never step twice into the same Auden.*

Two or three characteristics, however, seem fairly permanent. For one thing, although Auden, sometimes very obviously, borrows techniques or mannerisms from dozens of other writers, he has to an extraordinary degree the poet's ability to make what he borrows his own, to mold it into something we think of as recognizably Auden. All readers will probably see as essential qualities of his style a quickness and lightness of touch; a cleanliness of phrase and sentence; a caustic wit; an ironic hardness that, even as it recommends love as the answer to modern anxiety and injustice, is seldom in danger of sentimentality. At times Auden's wit is so exuberant and zestful as to produce, in the service of the most serious ideas, fanciful and even outrageous extravaganzas. At other times the wit is

restrained and the verse austere; his writing achieves an Augustan, a Latin, a rococo, elegance.

But, in spite of the feeling we have of an undeniable precision, most readers of Auden have had the experience, after reading one of his poems, of being thoroughly mystified—the thing doesn't make sense; the point vanishes between two stanzas; and the reader is left with a blurred image, an obscure situation, a half understood, possibly misunderstood point. It may be that Auden intends this uncertainty as a way of saying that, among all our precise instruments for measuring, computing, refining, we still have no sure knowledge of where we are. But among the causes of Auden's obscurity are some which account in large part for both the blur and the zest of his writing: his concern at once with inner experience and with society, his frequent shifts in perspective, his readiness to interpret anything as a parable of human experience, and his tireless experimentation.

Although Auden's poems always probed the illnesses of modern society he usually approached this subject through the examination of inner motives and conflicts. A consistent student of the inner life—of anxiety, guilt, fear, self-doubt, anguish, love—he brought himself for a time in the 1930s to maintain that our inner lives could be put right only if certain social changes occurred; but he always found more congenial the opposing view that, whatever its causes, the center of our *malaise*, as well as the focal point of any cure, is the lonely human being. His work tends to make the outer world symbolic of an inner reality that is the scene of all finally significant action or at least the testing ground on which all action must be tried out and evaluated. Intellectual as Auden's poetry often seems—removed, detached, impersonal—the center of it is nevertheless the inner man who is thinking, feeling, comparing, refining, mocking, doubting, believing. As Auden puts it in a poem of the 1930s: "For private reasons I must have the truth."

Still, from another point of view the *public* reasons are important. Skeptical of utopias, critical of society's administrators and managers, Auden is always alert to the contradictions between the personal and the public; and his poetry constantly shifts its angles of vision in order to show graphically the distance between the feeling inner self and what that self looks like from the point of view of the state, or of an objective observer. Even such an observer is at successive moments a social scientist, an interplanetary visitor, a psychoanalyst. The perspectives are often different, often changing; but

all of them are needed to correct one another, to fill out Auden's view of the whole man: anguished self, citizen, organism, outsider.

Outer perspectives, however, may be fairly clear (although some of their intricate combinations can be puzzling); it is the *inner* perspective that often makes poems hard for us to focus. In the early work Auden uses syntactical ellipsis to give us that hard, gruff, urgent sense of meaning deeper than words: "Can speak of trouble, pressure on men / Born all the time, brought forward into light / For warm dark moan." Frequently, too, both here and later, the syntax, though always crisp, is very involved; in fact, no other modern poet uses such various or such elaborate sentences.

Auden's poems are also full of unexplained pronouns, concepts, jokes, and contexts. Especially in the early poems (1928-32) we have a decisive sense of something happening, but not in a clearly defined place or time or situation. Many of these early poems revolve around the fighting of some unspecified war or an unexplained exile, but we do not know exactly who the enemy is, or what war we are engaged in, what its purpose is, or what we hope to gain. Although we may sometimes identify the cause with Marxist revolution (and early readers often did), we are not told enough to justify this identification; and the war is usually more intelligible as a conflict between inner forces of a Freudian kind, perhaps between a child and his elders.

The deliberate blurring is necessary to Auden's aims in these poems. The effect is that of dream-symbolism; for Auden, in exploring the inner life, is trying to present objects and events which are strong in felt, not reasoned, significance. What is important in the early poems is not the intellectual exposition of a social or psychological doctrine but the feeling that accompanies ambiguous commitment: what it feels like to go into voluntary, purposeful, if regretful, exile or partly to see one's way out of smothering anxieties and guilts. Even later on, when Auden's poetry becomes more discursive, the inner reality is still central. As with more obvious stream-of-consciousness techniques, Auden's aim is to avoid explaining what the feeling self already knows and he presents landscapes, statements, and dream-imagery as correlatives of inner anxiety or polished corruption. Indeed, much of the best of Auden's work is expressionist in character; and even the rational statements, however analytical they sometimes become, normally function in poetic structures which distort outer reality to



... Auden is remarkably attentive to the surfaces of ordinary life; for anything may, if we look at it right, suddenly glow with meaning."

conform to the self's feelings of anguish, dread, hope, faith or worry....

Another permanent feature of Auden's work is his delight in parables, in all literary or mythological structures that symbolize the relations between parts of the self or the self's relation to elements of society or nature: the unidentified war, the Marxist conception of history, the Christian picture of a world fallen but capable of redemption through miracle. Fairy tales, fantasies, dreams, or any stylized model of events may express for him certain fundamental spiritual conditions in the life of men for which he is always seeking analogues and symbols—the relations between members of a family, between master and servant, between doctor and patient, or the relations that hold in quests, in detective stories, in legends and landscapes.

Auden thus subordinates the usual practical, objective categories of value, of time, and of political order in favor of a world of parabolic relationships that are symbolic of real but inner conditions. He subordinates appearance to what he feels is deeper reality. The surfaces of life are still important to him, for it is through the physical and the immediate that a man works out his salvation. But, although in Auden's perspective one actual event may be empirically more important than another, any apparently trivial object, action, or system of relationships—a room, a meal, a forest—may have a capacity for illuminating our lives far beyond what we would expect from its modest position in ordinary life.

Holding such a view, Auden is remarkably attentive to the surfaces of ordinary life; for anything may, if we look at it right, suddenly glow with meaning. Looking at it right involves submitting it to sometimes bizarre perspectives, deliberately deranging our usual rational or sensory categories—

having Caliban talk like Henry James, or locating a pastoral poem in a city bar. This kind of derangement is constant in Auden; it enters almost always into his imagery and is largely responsible for the blur of meaning that both intrigues and perplexes. It reminds us that his poetry, however rational in tone and structure, is faithful to its source in that unconscious that never gets logical categories straight, that his verse is often wildly playful, and that he is hopelessly in love with variety, improvisation, experiment.

Experiment, like other important things, may look trivial at first, may *be so* at first; but the trivial may lead us to the richest sort of meaning. Auden's experiment often begins in parody and ends in conversion....

He mimics the tones, the verbal habits, even the imagery of other writers, of older verse forms, and of political, scientific, or religious points of view. But this mimicking is not always, or even typically, hostile. It may even be, at first, a form of reverence, an awe-stricken trying on of a new hat to see what it feels like on the head. And who knows? The hat may turn out to fit, to be the right one for the experimenter. Without the experiment, he might never have found the hat. Several of Auden's poems in 1939 and 1940 show him "trying on" Christianity before he actually became a Christian. As he states in *The Age of Anxiety*, "Human beings are, necessarily, actors who cannot become something before they have first pretended to be it...."

But trying on a hat—or a style or a Church—whatever its serious side, is also amusing; and, as one of the age's great wits, Auden is rarely far from a joke. The jokes sometimes undermine serious purposes, and his poems of the 1930s in particular often suffer from an uncertainty of feeling: there are too many tones, and we don't know how to take them. Any sincere stance Auden assumes in a poem—Freudian, Marxist, or even Christian—is always in danger of being ridiculed by that other, comic side of him. And perhaps his most remarkable achievement is that, despite his almost unmanageable multiplicity of attitudes, he has not wasted his talents in ironic play but has worked through to new forms, new ironic structures, which do justice to the critical qualifications of the ironic intelligence, and yet affirm.

Auden, then, is a thoroughly serious poet, and a thoroughly amusing one. Never only one thing at once, he keeps shifting his own perspectives on the world and, in the process, reveals different sides of

himself. His formal variety is astounding: he performs authentically as satirist, song writer, epigrammatist, didactic poet, meditative poet, elegist, odist; in long lines or short, sonnets or sestinas, octosyllabic couplets or four-stress alliterative verse, loose meter or strict, iambics or syllabics, and all kinds of rhyme. He develops styles and abandons them, a sign not of instability but of versatility—of wide, deep, and various interests. From the oracular early poems to the more direct analyses of social illness; from the quiet music of the early songs to the abstract imagery of the later 1930s that culminates in the earnest poems on Yeats and Freud; and from these to the elegance of "New Year Letter" and *The Sea and the Mirror*, and to the balanced Latin opulence of his more ambitious poems of the last three decades, Auden's poetry is continually changing.

Within these periods, even within single poems, the poetry is rarely single; it plays off mood against mood, reinforces wisdom with wit, enriches its textures with quick changes in feeling. For art, to Auden, is a mixed, a paradoxical, affair. It is play, but play is worth dying for; and yet it is, too, "in the profoundest sense, frivolous. For one thing, and one thing only, is serious: loving one's neighbor as oneself." Auden's poetry keeps bringing together the sense of everything as of intense significance, and the sense of everything as trivial and frivolous. But each attitude is coherent only in the light of the other.

In fact, as it explores both the rationalities and suddennesses of the inner life, Auden's poetry asserts as its basic insight the connectedness of everything, even of the most unlikely things. The techniques of wit, the shifting images, the unexpected turns that the prosody often takes, all stress the surprise that life is—"O what authority gives / Existence its surprise?"—its playfulness, its magic, its outlandish order. Inner life and outer spectacle, landscape and self, society and feeling—all are discovered to be connected in mysterious, puzzling, disturbing, yet marvelous ways.

Source: "The Character of the Poet" in *W. H. Auden*. revised edition. Twayne Publishers, 1981, pp. 21-8

## Sources

Callan, Edward, *Auden: A Carnival of Intellect*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1983.

*Chronical of the Second World War*, David Gould, executive editor, Essex, England: Chronicle Publishing Group, 1990.



Davison, Dennis, *W. H. Auden*, Evans Brothers Limited, 1970, 174 p.

Kettle, Arnold, "W. H. Auden: Poetry and Politics in the Thirties," in *Culture and Crisis in Britain in the Thirties*, edited by Jon Clark and others, Lawrence and Wishart, 1979, pp. 83-101.

Thompson, Laurence, *1940*, New York: William Morrow Co., Inc., 1966.

Yates, Douglas, *Bureaucratic Democracy: The Search for Democracy and Efficiency in American Government*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982.

### For Further Study

Collier, Richard, *1940: The Avalanche*, New York: The Dial Press, 1979.

Collier's approach to the subject of stretching one single year out to book-length form is to tell it in stories, quoting liberally from eyewitnesses. Most of this book concentrates on the war, but there is also some sense to be gotten of the rise of the Bureaucratic State.

Fuller, John, *A Reader's Guide to W. H. Auden*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1970.

As the dust jacket says, "this is a model Reader's Guide": it gives direct, clear explanations of all of Auden's plays and poems.

Griffin, Howard, *Conversations with Auden*, edited by Donald Allen, San Francisco: Gray Fox Press, 1981.

In many cases, these conversations are not as telling as they could be—they often come off as if Auden is trying a little too hard to be clever. Still, he was a fascinating intellectual and his thoughts on many of the subjects here are fun to read.

# Glossary of Literary Terms

## A

**Abstract:** As an adjective applied to writing or literary works, abstract refers to words or phrases that name things not knowable through the five senses.

**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.

**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.

**Allusion:** A reference to a familiar literary or historical person or event, used to make an idea more easily understood.

**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.

**Antagonist:** The major character in a narrative or drama who works against the hero or protagonist.

**Anthropomorphism:** The presentation of animals or objects in human shape or with human characteristics. The term is derived from the Greek word for "human form."

**Antihero:** A central character in a work of literature who lacks traditional heroic qualities such as courage, physical prowess, and fortitude. Antiheroes typically distrust conventional values and are unable to commit themselves to any ideals. They generally feel helpless in a world over which they have no control. Antiheroes usually accept, and often celebrate, their positions as social outcasts.

**Apprenticeship Novel:** See *Bildungsroman*

**Archetype:** The word archetype is commonly used to describe an original pattern or model from which all other things of the same kind are made. This term was introduced to literary criticism from the psychology of Carl Jung. It expresses Jung's theory that behind every person's "unconscious," or repressed memories of the past, lies the "collective unconscious" of the human race: memories of the countless typical experiences of our ancestors. These memories are said to prompt illogical associations that trigger powerful emotions in the reader. Often, the emotional process is primitive, even primordial. Archetypes are the literary images that grow out of the "collective unconscious." They appear in literature as incidents and plots that repeat basic patterns of life. They may also appear as stereotyped characters.

**Avant-garde:** 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

**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.

**Bildungsroman:** A German word meaning “novel of development.” The *bildungsroman* is a study of the maturation of a youthful character, typically brought about through a series of social or sexual encounters that lead to self-awareness. *Bildungsroman* is used interchangeably with *erziehungsroman*, a novel of initiation and education. When a *bildungsroman* is concerned with the development of an artist (as in James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*), it is often termed a *kunsterroman*. Also known as Apprenticeship Novel, Coming of Age Novel, *Erziehungsroman*, or *Kunsterroman*.

**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. Also known as Black Arts Movement.

**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. Also known as Black Comedy.

**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

**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.

**Climax:** The turning point in a narrative, the moment when the conflict is at its most intense. Typically, the structure of stories, novels, and plays is one of rising action, in which tension builds to the climax, followed by falling action, in which tension lessens as the story moves to its conclusion.

**Colloquialism:** A word, phrase, or form of pronunciation that is acceptable in casual conversation but not in formal, written communication. It is considered more acceptable than slang.

**Coming of Age Novel:** See *Bildungsroman*

**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.

**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.

**Convention:** Any widely accepted literary device, style, or form.

**D**

**Denotation:** The definition of a word, apart from the impressions or feelings it creates (connotations) in the reader.

**Denouement:** A French word meaning “the un-knotting.” In literary criticism, it denotes the resolution of conflict in fiction or drama. The *denouement* follows the climax and provides an outcome to the primary plot situation as well as an explanation of secondary plot complications. The *denouement* often involves a character’s recognition of his or her state of mind or moral condition. Also known as Falling Action.

**Description:** Descriptive writing is intended to allow a reader to picture the scene or setting in which the action of a story takes place. The form this description takes often evokes an intended emotional response—a dark, spooky graveyard will evoke fear, and a peaceful, sunny meadow will evoke calmness.

**Dialogue:** In its widest sense, dialogue is simply conversation between people in a literary work; in its most restricted sense, it refers specifically to the speech of characters in a drama. As a specific literary genre, a “dialogue” is a composition in which characters debate an issue or idea.

**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.

**Doppelgänger:** A literary technique by which a character is duplicated (usually in the form of an alter ego, though sometimes as a ghostly counterpart) or divided into two distinct, usually opposite personalities. The use of this character device is widespread in nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature, and indicates a growing awareness among authors that the “self” is really a composite of many “selves.” Also known as *The Double*.

**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 risqué or improper.

**Dramatic Irony:** Occurs when the audience of a play or the reader of a work of literature knows something that a character in the work itself does not know. The irony is in the contrast between the intended meaning of the statements or actions of a character and the additional information understood by the audience.

**Dystopia:** An imaginary place in a work of fiction where the characters lead dehumanized, fearful lives.

**E**

**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.

**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.

**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.

**Epigram:** A saying that makes the speaker’s point quickly and concisely. Often used to preface a novel.

**Epilogue:** A concluding statement or section of a literary work. In dramas, particularly those of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the epilogue is a closing speech, often in verse, delivered by an actor at the end of a play and spoken directly to the audience.

**Epiphany:** A sudden revelation of truth inspired by a seemingly trivial incident.

**Episode:** An incident that forms part of a story and is significantly related to it. Episodes may be ei-

ther self-contained narratives or events that depend on a larger context for their sense and importance.

**Epistolary Novel:** A novel in the form of letters. The form was particularly popular in the eighteenth century.

**Epithet:** A word or phrase, often disparaging or abusive, that expresses a character trait of someone or something.

**Existentialism:** A predominantly twentieth-century philosophy concerned with the nature and perception of human existence. There are two major strains of existentialist thought: atheistic and Christian. Followers of atheistic existentialism believe that the individual is alone in a godless universe and that the basic human condition is one of suffering and loneliness. Nevertheless, because there are no fixed values, individuals can create their own characters—indeed, they can shape themselves—through the exercise of free will. The atheistic strain culminates in and is popularly associated with the works of Jean-Paul Sartre. The Christian existentialists, on the other hand, believe that only in God may people find freedom from life's anguish. The two strains hold certain beliefs in common: that existence cannot be fully understood or described through empirical effort; that anguish is a universal element of life; that individuals must bear responsibility for their actions; and that there is no common standard of behavior or perception for religious and ethical matters.

**Expatriates:** See *Expatriatism*

**Expatriatism:** The practice of leaving one's country to live for an extended period in another country.

**Exposition:** Writing intended to explain the nature of an idea, thing, or theme. Expository writing is often combined with description, narration, or argument. In dramatic writing, the exposition is the introductory material which presents the characters, setting, and tone of the play.

**Expressionism:** An indistinct literary term, originally used to describe an early twentieth-century school of German painting. The term applies to almost any mode of unconventional, highly subjective writing that distorts reality in some way.

## F

**Fable:** A prose or verse narrative intended to convey a moral. Animals or inanimate objects with human characteristics often serve as characters in fables.

**Falling Action:** See *Denouement*

**Fantasy:** A literary form related to mythology and folklore. Fantasy literature is typically set in non-existent realms and features supernatural beings.

**Farce:** A type of comedy characterized by broad humor, outlandish incidents, and often vulgar subject matter.

**Femme fatale:** A French phrase with the literal translation "fatal woman." A *femme fatale* is a sensuous, alluring woman who often leads men into danger or trouble.

**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 siècle:** A French term meaning "end of the century." The term is used to denote the last decade of the nineteenth century, a transition period when writers and other artists abandoned old conventions and looked for new techniques and objectives.

**First Person:** See *Point of View*

**Flashback:** A device used in literature to present action that occurred before the beginning of the story. Flashbacks are often introduced as the dreams or recollections of one or more characters.

**Foil:** A character in a work of literature whose physical or psychological qualities contrast strongly with, and therefore highlight, the corresponding qualities of another character.

**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.

**Foreshadowing:** A device used in literature to create expectation or to set up an explanation of later developments.

**Form:** The pattern or construction of a work which identifies its genre and distinguishes it from other genres.

## 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.

**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.

**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.

**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

**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. Also known as Negro Renaissance and New Negro Movement.

**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.

**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.

**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.

**Hyperbole:** In literary criticism, deliberate exaggeration used to achieve an effect.

## I

**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.

**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.

**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.

**Irony:** In literary criticism, the effect of language in which the intended meaning is the opposite of what is stated.

## J

**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.

## L

**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.

**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.

## 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."

**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.

**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.

**Mood:** The prevailing emotions of a work or of the author in his or her creation of the work. The mood of a work is not always what might be expected based on its subject matter.

**Motif:** A theme, character type, image, metaphor, or other verbal element that recurs throughout a single work of literature or occurs in a number of different works over a period of time. Also known as *Motiv* or *Leitmotiv*.

**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.

**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.

**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. See also Primitivism.

**Novel of Ideas:** A novel in which the examination of intellectual issues and concepts takes precedence over characterization or a traditional storyline.

**Novel of Manners:** A novel that examines the customs and mores of a cultural group.

**Novel:** A long fictional narrative written in prose, which developed from the novella and other early forms of narrative. A novel is usually organized under a plot or theme with a focus on character development and action.

**Novella:** An Italian term meaning "story." This term has been especially used to describe fourteenth-century Italian tales, but it also refers to modern short novels.

## 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.

**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.

**Oxymoron:** A phrase combining two contradictory terms. Oxymorons may be intentional or unintentional.

## P

**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.

**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.

**Pen Name:** See *Pseudonym*

**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.

**Personification:** A figure of speech that gives human qualities to abstract ideas, animals, and inanimate objects. Also known as *Prosopopoeia*.

**Picaresque Novel:** Episodic fiction depicting the adventures of a roguish central character ("pícaro" is Spanish for "rogue"). The picaresque hero is commonly a low-born but clever individual who wanders into and out of various affairs of love, danger, and farcical intrigue. These involvements may take place at all social levels and typically present a humorous and wide-ranging satire of a given society.

**Plagiarism:** Claiming another person's written material as one's own. Plagiarism can take the form of direct, word-for-word copying or the theft of the substance or idea of the work.

**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."

**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.

**Point of View:** The narrative perspective from which a literary work is presented to the reader. There are four traditional points of view. The "third person omniscient" gives the reader a "godlike" perspective, unrestricted by time or place, from which to see actions and look into the minds of characters. This allows the author to comment openly on characters and events in the work. The "third person" point of view presents the events of the story from outside of any single character's perception, much like the omniscient point of view, but the reader must understand the action as it takes place and without any special insight into characters' minds or motivations. The "first person" or "personal" point of view relates events as they are perceived by a single character. The main character "tells" the story and may offer opinions about the action and characters which differ from those of the author. Much less common than omniscient, third person, and first person is the "second person" point of view, wherein the author tells the story as if it is happening to the reader.

**Polemic:** A work in which the author takes a stand on a controversial subject, such as abortion or religion. Such works are often extremely argumentative or provocative.

**Pornography:** Writing intended to provoke feelings of lust in the reader. Such works are often condemned by critics and teachers, but those which can be shown to have literary value are viewed less harshly.

**Post-Aesthetic Movement:** An artistic response made by African Americans to the black aesthetic

movement of the 1960s and early '70s. Writers since that time have adopted a somewhat different tone in their work, with less emphasis placed on the disparity between black and white in the United States. In the words of post-aesthetic authors such as Toni Morrison, John Edgar Wideman, and Kristin Hunter, African Americans are portrayed as looking inward for answers to their own questions, rather than always looking to the outside world.

**Postmodernism:** Writing from the 1960s forward characterized by experimentation and continuing to apply some of the fundamentals of modernism, which included existentialism and alienation. Postmodernists have gone a step further in the rejection of tradition begun with the modernists by also rejecting traditional forms, preferring the anti-novel over the novel and the antihero over the hero.

**Primitivism:** The belief that primitive peoples were nobler and less flawed than civilized peoples because they had not been subjected to the tainting influence of society. See also Noble Savage.

**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 unmetred, 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.

**Protest Fiction:** Protest fiction has as its primary purpose the protesting of some social injustice, such as racism or discrimination.

**Proverb:** A brief, sage saying that expresses a truth about life in a striking manner.

**Pseudonym:** A name assumed by a writer, most often intended to prevent his or her identification as the author of a work. Two or more authors may work together under one pseudonym, or an author may use a different name for each genre he or she publishes in. Some publishing companies maintain "house pseudonyms," under which any number of authors may write installments 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.

## 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.

**Repartee:** Conversation featuring snappy retorts and witticisms.

**Resolution:** The portion of a story following the climax, in which the conflict is resolved. See also *Denouement*.

**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.

**Rising Action:** The part of a drama where the plot becomes increasingly complicated. Rising action leads up to the climax, or turning point, of a drama.

**Roman a clef:** A French phrase meaning "novel with a key." It refers to a narrative in which real persons are portrayed under fictitious names.

**Romance:** A broad term, usually denoting a narrative with exotic, exaggerated, often idealized characters, scenes, and themes.

**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 ex-

pression 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*

## 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.

**Science Fiction:** A type of narrative about or based upon real or imagined scientific theories and technology. Science fiction is often peopled with alien creatures and set on other planets or in different dimensions.

**Second Person:** See *Point of View*

**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.

**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.

**Slave Narrative:** Autobiographical accounts of American slave life as told by escaped slaves. These works first appeared during the abolition movement of the 1830s through the 1850s.

**Socialist Realism:** The Socialist Realism school of literary theory was proposed by Maxim Gorky and established as a dogma by the first Soviet Congress of Writers. It demanded adherence to a communist worldview in works of literature. Its doctrines required an objective viewpoint comprehensible to the working classes and themes of social struggle featuring strong proletarian heroes. Also known as Social Realism.

**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.

**Structure:** The form taken by a piece of literature. The structure may be made obvious for ease of understanding, as in nonfiction works, or may be obscured for artistic purposes, as in some poetry or seemingly “unstructured” prose.

**Sturm und Drang:** A German term meaning “storm and stress.” It refers to a German literary movement of the 1770s and 1780s that reacted against the order and rationalism of the enlightenment, focusing instead on the intense experience of extraordinary individuals.

**Style:** A writer’s distinctive manner of arranging words to suit his or her ideas and purpose in writing. The unique imprint of the author’s personality upon his or her writing, style is the product of an author’s way of arranging ideas and his or her use of diction, different sentence structures, rhythm, figures of speech, rhetorical principles, and other elements of composition.

**Subjectivity:** Writing that expresses the author’s personal feelings about his subject, and which may or may not include factual information about the subject.

**Subplot:** A secondary story in a narrative. A subplot may serve as a motivating or complicating force for the main plot of the work, or it may provide emphasis for, or relief from, the main plot.

**Surrealism:** A term introduced to criticism by Guillaume Apollinaire and later adopted by Andre Breton. It refers to a French literary and artistic movement founded in the 1920s. The Surrealists sought to express unconscious thoughts and feelings in their works. The best-known technique used for achieving this aim was automatic writing—transcriptions of spontaneous outpourings from the unconscious. The Surrealists proposed to unify the contrary levels of conscious and unconscious, dream and reality, objectivity and subjectivity into a new level of “super-realism.”

**Suspense:** A literary device in which the author maintains the audience’s attention through the buildup of events, the outcome of which will soon be revealed.

**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.

## T

**Tall Tale:** A humorous tale told in a straightforward, credible tone but relating absolutely impossible events or feats of the characters. Such tales were commonly told of frontier adventures during the settlement of the west in the United States.

**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.

**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.

## U

**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."

## 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.

**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. Also known as Victorian Age and Victorian Period.

## 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

**Zeitgeist:** A German term meaning "spirit of the time." It refers to the moral and intellectual trends of a given era.

# Subject/Theme Index

\***Boldface** denotes discussion in Themes section.

## A

### Abandonment

*A Pièd*: 15, 17–19, 22–23

### Adulthood

*Fern Hill*: 90, 92–96, 100

### Alienation

*A Pièd*: 18

*The Unknown Citizen*: 305

### Alienation and Loneliness

*Not Waving but Drowning*: 217

### Allegory

*The Unknown Citizen*: 312–13

### American Midwest

*I Hear America Singing*: 156–57

### American Northeast

*Mother to Son*: 182, 184

### American South

*I Hear America Singing*: 154–56

### Angry Young Men

*High Windows*: 115

### Art vs. Experience

*Ode to a Nightingale*: 232

### Asia

*Auto Wreck*: 34–36

*The Unknown Citizen*: 307

## B

### Beat Movement

*The Courage that My Mother*

*Had*: 83

### Beauty

*Nothing Gold Can Stay*: 202, 204–05

### Beauty

*Auto Wreck*: 40–43

*The Bells*: 55–56, 58

*Fern Hill*: 103–04

*Hurt Hawks*: 143–49

*Ode to a Nightingale*: 227,

229–32, 235, 238–43

*Sonnet 116*: 290, 292

### Black Arts Movement

*A Pièd*: 27–29

### Brotherhood

*The Man He Killed*: 168

## C

### Change and Transformation

*Nothing Gold Can Stay*: 204

### Childhood

*Fern Hill*: 90, 92–96, 98–103

*My Papa's Waltz*: 190, 193,

196–97

### Christianity

*The Unknown Citizen*: 312–14

### City Life

*Chicago*: 60, 63–66

### Civil Rights

*Any Human to Another*: 5

### Classicism

*Ode to a Nightingale*: 239–42

[*On His Blindness*] *Sonnet 16*:

270–72

### Conformity

*The Unknown Citizen*: 301,

303–04, 308

### Consciousness

*Ode to a Nightingale*: 232

### Courage

*The Courage that My Mother*

*Had*: 78, 80–86

*"Hope" Is the Thing with*

*Feathers*: 122, 124, 128

### Crime and Criminals

*Chicago*: 64–67

*Nothing Gold Can Stay*: 206

### Cruelty

*Chicago*: 60, 62–65

*Hurt Hawks*: 143–44, 146

*My Papa's Waltz*: 199–200

*On the Pulse of Morning*: 278–80

### Cubism

*old age sticks*: 254–55

### Cycle of Life

*The Bells*: 51

*old age sticks*: 248

## D

### Dance

*My Papa's Waltz*: 190, 192–200

### Death

*Auto Wreck*: 32–38

*Not Waving but Drowning*:

214–25

### Death

*A Pièd*: 23–27

*The Bells*: 45, 49–52, 54

*The Courage that My Mother*

*Had*: 80–81, 83–84, 87–89

*Fern Hill*: 99–101

*Hurt Hawks*: 136, 138–48

*The Man He Killed*: 168–70

*My Papa's Waltz*: 190, 192–94, 196–97  
*Ode to a Nightingale*: 227, 230–32, 234–38, 241–43  
*The Unknown Citizen*: 303, 305, 308

**Depression and Melancholy**  
*The Courage that My Mother Had*: 78, 80, 82  
*Not Waving but Drowning*: 217–20  
*Ode to a Nightingale*: 231–33, 238, 242–43

**Despair**  
*Mother to Son*: 180

**Dialect**  
*Mother to Son*: 180–82, 185–86

**Dialogue**  
*Sonnet 116*: 293

**Dreams and Visions**  
*Hurt Hawks*: 143–45, 147  
*I Hear America Singing*: 151, 153–54, 157  
*Ode to a Nightingale*: 228–29, 231–33, 235  
*On the Pulse of Morning*: 277–79

**Duty**  
*[On His Blindness] Sonnet 16*: 263

## E

**Emotions**  
*Auto Wreck*: 40, 42  
*The Bells*: 45, 48, 51–52  
*Chicago*: 63–64  
*Fern Hill*: 99, 103–04  
*"Hope" Is the Thing with Feathers*: 124–26, 128, 133–34  
*Mother to Son*: 182, 184  
*My Papa's Waltz*: 190, 192, 196  
*Nothing Gold Can Stay*: 204  
*Sonnet 116*: 287, 289–90

**Envy**  
*High Windows*: 106, 108–13

**Error**  
*Not Waving but Drowning*: 221, 223

**Eternity**  
*Fern Hill*: 93, 100  
*Ode to a Nightingale*: 231–32, 235  
*On the Pulse of Morning*: 279

**Ethics**  
*Any Human to Another*: 4

**Europe**  
*A Pièd*: 20  
*The Bells*: 52  
*The Courage that My Mother Had*: 83  
*Fern Hill*: 96–98  
*Nothing Gold Can Stay*: 207

*Ode to a Nightingale*: 235  
*[On His Blindness] Sonnet 16*: 264–66, 269–71  
*Sonnet 116*: 291–92  
*The Unknown Citizen*: 306–08

**Evil**  
*Auto Wreck*: 38–39  
*The Bells*: 50  
*Chicago*: 62–64, 65

**Exile**  
*A Pièd*: 20

## F

**Farm and Rural Life**  
*Any Human to Another*: 6–7  
*Fern Hill*: 90, 93–97, 99, 101–03

**Fate and Chance**  
*Auto Wreck*: 38  
*Fern Hill*: 96  
*Hurt Hawks*: 143–44, 146–47  
*Nothing Gold Can Stay*: 202, 204, 206

**Fear and Terror**  
*A Pièd*: 17, 19  
*The Bells*: 48–51  
*My Papa's Waltz*: 192–93, 196, 199–200  
*Ode to a Nightingale*: 227, 230–32  
*The Unknown Citizen*: 312–13

**Flesh vs. Spirit**  
*Hurt Hawks*: 140

**Freedom**  
*Fern Hill*: 92–93, 95–96, 98

**Freedom**  
*High Windows*: 106, 110–13

**French Revolution**  
*Ode to a Nightingale*: 233, 235

## G

**God**  
*Auto Wreck*: 39–40, 42–43  
*High Windows*: 109–11, 114–16  
*Hurt Hawks*: 139–40, 146–49  
*[On His Blindness] Sonnet 16*: 260, 262–64, 266

**God and Religion**  
*High Windows*: 110  
*Hurt Hawks*: 140

**Great Depression**  
*Any Human to Another*: 5–7

**Grief and Sorrow**  
*Any Human to Another*: 3–4, 8–10  
*The Courage that My Mother Had*: 78, 80  
*Fern Hill*: 100–01  
*Not Waving but Drowning*: 221, 223  
*Nothing Gold Can Stay*: 204–205

*Ode to a Nightingale*: 230–33  
*The Unknown Citizen*: 310–11

**Guilt and Innocence**  
*Auto Wreck*: 33

## H

**Happiness and Gaiety**  
*Any Human to Another*: 4  
*The Bells*: 47–48, 50–52  
*Fern Hill*: 93–96, 98–105  
*I Hear America Singing*: 163–64  
*My Papa's Waltz*: 199–200  
*Ode to a Nightingale*: 227, 229–32, 235, 238–39, 241–43  
*The Unknown Citizen*: 301, 304–06

**Harlem Renaissance**  
*Any Human to Another*: 10–14  
*Mother to Son*: 182, 184

**Hatred**  
*Any Human to Another*: 4  
*Hurt Hawks*: 138–39, 142

**Heroism**  
*A Pièd*: 25, 27, 29  
*The Unknown Citizen*: 310

**History**  
*Auto Wreck*: 39–43  
*On the Pulse of Morning*: 274, 276–77, 280

**Honor**  
*Auto Wreck*: 39, 41–43

**Hope**  
*"Hope" Is the Thing with Feathers*: 122–31  
*Mother to Son*: 177, 179, 181  
*Ode to a Nightingale*: 230, 235, 240, 243  
*On the Pulse of Morning*: 274, 277, 279–82

**Human Condition**  
*High Windows*: 111

**Humor**  
*"Hope" Is the Thing with Feathers*: 131, 134  
*Mother to Son*: 187–88  
*My Papa's Waltz*: 190, 192, 195  
*Not Waving but Drowning*: 218, 220–21, 223–24  
*The Unknown Citizen*: 313–14

## I

**Identity**  
*Any Human to Another*: 4  
*"Hope" Is the Thing with Feathers*: 124  
*Mother to Son*: 181

**Imagery and Symbolism**  
*A Pièd*: 24, 28  
*The Courage that My Mother Had*: 80–81  
*Fern Hill*: 99, 100

*High Windows*: 114  
*"Hope" Is the Thing with Feathers*: 128–34  
*Hurt Hawks*: 138–39, 144–45  
*I Hear America Singing*: 151, 155, 159  
*Mother to Son*: 177, 179–80, 184, 187–88  
*My Papa's Waltz*: 192  
*Not Waving but Drowning*: 216–17, 219–20  
*Ode to a Nightingale*: 240–43  
*On the Pulse of Morning*: 277–78, 280  
*Sonnet 116*: 287, 289–90, 295, 297, 299  
*The Unknown Citizen*: 312–14  
**Imagination**  
*Ode to a Nightingale*: 230–33  
**Immigrants and Immigration**  
*Chicago*: 65  
**Impatience**  
*[On His Blindness] Sonnet 16*: 264, 267  
**Impermanence**  
*Fern Hill*: 96  
**Individual vs. the Universe**  
*Mother to Son*: 180  
**Individualism**  
*I Hear America Singing*: 153  
**Irony**  
*The Man He Killed*: 172, 174, 176  
*Not Waving but Drowning*: 221  
*The Unknown Citizen*: 301, 303–06, 308, 310–12, 314

## J

**Japan**  
*The Unknown Citizen*: 307–08  
**Jazz Age**  
*Nothing Gold Can Stay*: 206

## K

**Killers and Killing**  
*Chicago*: 60, 62, 64–65, 67  
*The Man He Killed*: 168–70  
**Knowledge**  
*Auto Wreck*: 39–43  
*Ode to a Nightingale*: 227, 230–34  
**Knowledge and Ignorance**  
*On the Pulse of Morning*: 278

## L

**Landscape**  
*Any Human to Another*: 3–4  
*Chicago*: 60, 63, 65–67  
*Fern Hill*: 93, 98

*Hurt Hawks*: 139–42  
*Ode to a Nightingale*: 229, 231  
*On the Pulse of Morning*: 274–79  
**Language & Meaning**  
*old age sticks*: 248  
**Language and Meaning**  
*The Bells*: 50  
**Law and Order**  
*Auto Wreck*: 32–33, 35–36  
*Chicago*: 65–67  
*Mother to Son*: 177, 180, 182–84  
*Nothing Gold Can Stay*: 205–06  
**Light**  
*[On His Blindness] Sonnet 16*: 263  
**Limitation**  
*[On His Blindness] Sonnet 16*: 263  
**Loneliness**  
*Any Human to Another*: 3–4  
*A Pièd*: 15, 18, 22–23  
*High Windows*: 111–12  
*Not Waving but Drowning*: 215–17, 219  
**Love and Passion**  
*A Pièd*: 24, 26–27  
*Auto Wreck*: 39–43  
*The Courage that My Mother Had*: 87, 89  
*High Windows*: 114–15  
*Ode to a Nightingale*: 229–230, 232, 234–35, 238–43  
*[On His Blindness] Sonnet 16*: 270, 272  
*Sonnet 116*: 287, 289–99  
**Lower Class**  
*I Hear America Singing*: 153, 155, 157, 159–60  
**Loyalty**  
*Ode to a Nightingale*: 236–37  
*Sonnet 116*: 287, 290, 292–98, 300

## M

**Marriage**  
*The Bells*: 45, 48, 50, 54  
*Sonnet 116*: 298–99  
**Meaning of Life**  
*A Pièd*: 19  
**Memory**  
*The Courage that My Mother Had*: 81  
*My Papa's Waltz*: 193  
**Mental and Physical Infirmary**  
*[On His Blindness] Sonnet 16*: 260, 262–64, 266  
**Middle East**  
*A Pièd*: 20  
**Modernism**  
*Chicago*: 67, 69  
**Monarchy**  
*Ode to a Nightingale*: 230, 234–35

*[On His Blindness] Sonnet 16*: 264–66  
*Sonnet 116*: 288  
**Money and Economics**  
*Any Human to Another*: 5–7  
*Chicago*: 60, 62–63, 65–66  
*Mother to Son*: 182  
*Nothing Gold Can Stay*: 206  
*The Unknown Citizen*: 301, 303–05, 307–08  
**Monologue**  
*Mother to Son*: 184  
*Sonnet 116*: 293–96  
**Mood**  
*The Bells*: 47–48, 54  
**Moral Corruption**  
*Chicago*: 64  
**Morals and Morality**  
*Auto Wreck*: 39–42  
*Chicago*: 64  
**Music**  
*A Pièd*: 26, 28  
*The Bells*: 47, 50, 52–54, 57–58  
*Fern Hill*: 93–94, 96, 98, 101–02  
*"Hope" Is the Thing with Feathers*: 122–24, 126–28, 130–31, 133  
*I Hear America Singing*: 151, 153–55, 158–64  
*Mother to Son*: 186–87  
*Not Waving but Drowning*: 219  
*Ode to a Nightingale*: 227, 229–33, 235, 238–40, 242–43  
*On the Pulse of Morning*: 274, 276–77, 280, 282–83  
*The Unknown Citizen*: 312, 314  
**Mystery and Intrigue**  
*A Pièd*: 17–19  
**Myths and Legends**  
*Auto Wreck*: 39–40, 42–43  
*Mother to Son*: 188–89  
*Ode to a Nightingale*: 236–43

## N

**Narration**  
*Chicago*: 68–70  
*"Hope" Is the Thing with Feathers*: 130–31  
*Hurt Hawks*: 136, 138–40  
*The Man He Killed*: 167–69, 172  
*Not Waving but Drowning*: 221–23  
**Nature**  
*Auto Wreck*: 38–39  
*Fern Hill*: 90, 93–95, 104  
*"Hope" Is the Thing with Feathers*: 124–27  
*Hurt Hawks*: 140–41, 143–47  
*Nothing Gold Can Stay*: 202–05  
*Ode to a Nightingale*: 227, 229–33, 235

**Nature and Its Meaning**

- Fern Hill*: 95
- "*Hope*" *Is the Thing with Feathers*: 125
- Hurt Hawks*: 140
- 1920s
  - Any Human to Another*: 10-13
  - Nothing Gold Can Stay*: 206
- 1930s
  - Any Human to Another*: 1, 5-7
- 1950s
  - old age sticks*: 250
- 1960s
  - Auto Wreck*: 36
- North America
  - The Bells*: 52-53
  - Chicago*: 66
- Nuclear War
  - The Courage that My Mother Had*: 83
  - old age sticks*: 250-51

**O**

- Old Age
  - old age sticks*: 245, 247-49, 254-56
- Order and Disorder
  - Auto Wreck*: 33
  - My Papa's Waltz*: 194

**P**

- Painting
  - My Papa's Waltz*: 195-96
- Patience
  - [*On His Blindness*] *Sonnet 16*: 262-64, 267
- Patriotism
  - I Hear America Singing*: 154
  - The Unknown Citizen*: 304
- Perception
  - The Courage that My Mother Had*: 87-89
  - I Hear America Singing*: 162-64
  - Ode to a Nightingale*: 227-28, 230-33, 235
  - The Unknown Citizen*: 309-11
- Permanence
  - The Courage that My Mother Had*: 80, 82
  - Sonnet 116*: 287, 291-92
- Persecution
  - Any Human to Another*: 9
- Perseverance
  - "*Hope*" *Is the Thing with Feathers*: 122-25
  - Mother to Son*: 177, 179-80, 182, 184
  - Sonnet 116*: 297
- Personification
  - The Bells*: 49-51
  - Chicago*: 70-71

- The Courage that My Mother Had*: 86
- Fern Hill*: 103
- "*Hope*" *Is the Thing with Feathers*: 131, 134
- Sonnet 116*: 297
- Philosophical Ideas
  - Auto Wreck*: 39-40, 42
  - Hurt Hawks*: 136, 139-44
  - Nothing Gold Can Stay*: 205, 208
- Plants
  - Ode to a Nightingale*: 239, 241-43
- Point of View
  - Any Human to Another*: 13
  - Not Waving but Drowning*: 216, 218, 221
- Politicians
  - A Pièd*: 20
  - Auto Wreck*: 35-36
  - Fern Hill*: 96-97
  - I Hear America Singing*: 155-57
  - On the Pulse of Morning*: 282, 284-86

**Politics**

- Any Human to Another*: 5, 7
- A Pièd*: 15, 20
- Auto Wreck*: 34-36
- Chicago*: 65-67, 69
- Fern Hill*: 96-97
- I Hear America Singing*: 151, 153, 155-57
- My Papa's Waltz*: 195-96
- Nothing Gold Can Stay*: 207
- Ode to a Nightingale*: 233-35
- [*On His Blindness*] *Sonnet 16*: 260, 265-66
- On the Pulse of Morning*: 280, 282-84
- The Unknown Citizen*: 301, 303-05, 307-08

**Postwar Society**

- High Windows*: 111-12

**Pride**

- Chicago*: 60, 62-65
- On the Pulse of Morning*: 279

**Primitivism**

- Hurt Hawks*: 140

**Protestantism**

- [*On His Blindness*] *Sonnet 16*: 264-65

**Public vs. Private Life**

- Not Waving but Drowning*: 218

**R**

**Race**

- Any Human to Another*: 1, 3, 5-14
- A Pièd*: 25-28
- Mother to Son*: 177, 179-87

- On the Pulse of Morning*: 274, 279-80, 282

**Race and Racism**

- Mother to Son*: 180

**Racism and Prejudice**

- A Pièd*: 27-29
- Mother to Son*: 177, 182-84
- On the Pulse of Morning*: 279-80, 282

**Religion and Religious Thought**

- A Pièd*: 22-23
- Auto Wreck*: 40, 42
- High Windows*: 106, 108-13
- Hurt Hawks*: 140-42, 147
- Mother to Son*: 184, 187-89
- Ode to a Nightingale*: 229-30, 234
- [*On His Blindness*] *Sonnet 16*: 262, 265-66
- On the Pulse of Morning*: 274, 276-78
- Sonnet 116*: 292
- The Unknown Citizen*: 314

**Romanticism**

- The Bells*: 52

**Russia**

- The Unknown Citizen*: 306-07

**S**

**Saints**

- The Unknown Citizen*: 303

**Salvation**

- Hurt Hawks*: 138, 140

**Satire**

- The Unknown Citizen*: 301, 303, 306, 309-11

**Science and Technology**

- The Unknown Citizen*: 305

**Sea and Sea Adventures**

- Fern Hill*: 101
- Not Waving but Drowning*: 216-17, 219

**Self-Realization**

- Fern Hill*: 100-01

**Sentimentality**

- The Unknown Citizen*: 310-11

**Setting**

- The Bells*: 47-49
- The Man He Killed*: 168-69

**Sex**

- High Windows*: 110

**Sex and Sexuality**

- High Windows*: 106, 108-13
- Ode to a Nightingale*: 238-42
- Sonnet 116*: 297, 299-300

**Sin**

- Nothing Gold Can Stay*: 205

**Slavery**

- I Hear America Singing*: 155-57

**Soul**

- "*Hope*" *Is the Thing with Feathers*: 123-26
- Mother to Son*: 179, 184



- South Africa  
*The Man He Killed*: 172, 174–75
- Soviet Union  
*A Pièd*: 20  
*Nothing Gold Can Stay*: 207
- Spirituality  
*The Courage that My Mother Had*: 87–89  
*High Windows*: 110–12  
*Mother to Son*: 177, 179
- Storms and Weather Conditions  
*"Hope" Is the Thing with Feathers*: 124–26, 129–30
- Strength  
*Chicago*: 63, 67  
*The Courage that My Mother Had*: 80–81, 84
- Strength and Weakness  
*Chicago*: 63  
*The Courage that My Mother Had*: 81
- The Sublime  
*Hurt Hawks*: 144, 146–47
- Submission  
*[On His Blindness] Sonnet 16*: 264
- Suicide  
*Not Waving but Drowning*: 215, 218, 220
- Supernatural  
*The Bells*: 50
- Symbolist Movement  
*The Bells*: 52–53
- T**
- Time  
*Sonnet 116*: 290
- Time and Change  
*Nothing Gold Can Stay*: 202, 204–05  
*Sonnet 116*: 290, 292
- Tone  
*The Bells*: 49, 51, 54  
*The Courage that My Mother Had*: 78, 80, 87  
*Hurt Hawks*: 147–48  
*The Man He Killed*: 166, 168  
*Not Waving but Drowning*: 214, 216–17, 219–20  
*The Unknown Citizen*: 303
- Transcendentalism  
*"Hope" Is the Thing with Feathers*: 126
- Truth and Falsehood  
*Sonnet 116*: 290
- U**
- Utopianism  
*High Windows*: 106, 108–12
- V**
- Victorian Age  
*The Man He Killed*: 170–71
- Violence and Cruelty  
*On the Pulse of Morning*: 279
- W**
- War  
*A Pièd*: 19  
*The Man He Killed*: 169
- War, the Military, and Soldier Life  
*Any Human to Another*: 6–7  
*A Pièd*: 18–20  
*Auto Wreck*: 30, 34–36  
*The Courage that My Mother Had*: 82–83  
*Fern Hill*: 96–98  
*The Man He Killed*: 166, 168–76  
*Mother to Son*: 182–84  
*Not Waving but Drowning*: 219–20  
*Nothing Gold Can Stay*: 206–07  
*Ode to a Nightingale*: 234–35  
*old age sticks*: 250–51  
*[On His Blindness] Sonnet 16*: 264–66  
*On the Pulse of Morning*: 276–77, 279–83  
*The Unknown Citizen*: 303–11
- Wildlife  
*"Hope" Is the Thing with Feathers*: 122–26, 128–31  
*Hurt Hawks*: 136, 138–42, 144–49  
*Ode to a Nightingale*: 227, 229, 231–32, 236–38
- World War II  
*Fern Hill*: 90, 96–97  
*The Unknown Citizen*: 306, 308
- Y**
- Yearning  
*The Courage that My Mother Had*: 78

# Cumulative Author/Title Index

## A

Angelou, Maya  
*Harlem Hopscotch*: V2  
*On the Pulse of Morning*: V3  
*Angle of Geese* (Momaday): V2  
 Anonymous  
*Swing Low Sweet Chariot*: V1  
*Any Human to Another* (Cullen): V3  
 Arnold, Matthew  
*Dover Beach*: V2  
 Auden, W. H.  
*Musée des Beaux Arts*: V1  
*The Unknown Citizen*: V3  
*Auto Wreck* (Shapiro): V3

## B

Barrett, Elizabeth  
*Sonnet 43*: V2  
 Bashō, Matsuo  
*Falling Upon Earth*: V2  
*The Bean Eaters* (Brooks): V2  
*Because I Could Not Stop for Death*  
 (Dickinson): V2  
*The Bells* (Poe): V3  
 Blake, William  
*The Tyger*: V2  
 Brooks, Gwendolyn  
*The Bean Eaters*: V2  
*The Sonnet-Ballad*: V1  
 Browning, Elizabeth Barrett  
*Sonnet 43*: V2  
 Browning, Robert  
*My Last Duchess*: V1  
 Byron, Lord  
*The Destruction of  
 Sennacherib*: V1

## C

*The Charge of the Light Brigade*  
 (Tennyson): V1  
*Chicago* (Sandburg): V3  
 Clifton, Lucille  
*Miss Rosie*: V1  
*The Courage that My Mother Had*  
 (Millay): V3  
*The Creation* (Johnson): V1  
 Cullen, Countee  
*Any Human to Another*: V3  
 Cummings, e. e.  
*l(a)*: V1  
*old age sticks*: V3

## D

*The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner*  
 (Jarrell): V2  
*The Destruction of Sennacherib*  
 (Byron): V1  
 Dickinson, Emily  
*Because I Could Not Stop for  
 Death*: V2  
*"Hope" Is the Thing with  
 Feathers*: V3  
*The Soul Selects Her Own  
 Society*: V1  
*Do Not Go Gentle into that Good  
 Night* (Thomas): V1  
 Donne, John  
*Holy Sonnet 10*: V2  
 Dove, Rita  
*This Life*: V1  
*Dover Beach* (Arnold): V2

## E

Eliot, T. S.  
*The Love Song of J. Alfred  
 Prufrock*: V1

## F

*Falling Upon Earth* (Bashō): V2  
*Fern Hill* (Thomas): V3  
*Fifteen* (Stafford): V2  
 Frost, Robert  
*Nothing Gold Can Stay*: V3  
*The Road Not Taken*: V2  
*Stopping by Woods on a Snowy  
 Evening*: V1

## H

Hardy, Thomas  
*The Man He Killed*: V3  
*Harlem* (Hughes): V1  
*Harlem Hopscotch* (Angelou): V2  
 Hayden, Robert  
*Those Winter Sundays*: V1  
 Heaney, Seamus  
*Midnight*: V2  
*High Windows* (Larkin): V3  
*Holy Sonnet 10* (Donne): V2  
*"Hope" Is the Thing with Feathers*  
 (Dickinson): V3  
 Hughes, Langston  
*Harlem*: V1  
*Mother to Son*: V3  
*Hurt Hawks* (Jeffers): V3

**I**

*I Hear America Singing* (Whitman): V3  
*In a Station of the Metro* (Pound): V2  
*An Irish Airman Foresees His Death* (Yeats): V1

**J**

Jarrell, Randall  
*The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner*: V2  
 Jeffers, Robinson  
*Hurt Hawks*: V3  
 Johnson, James Weldon  
*The Creation*: V1

**K**

Keats, John  
*Ode on a Grecian Urn*: V1  
*Ode to a Nightingale*: V3  
*When I Have Fears that I May Cease to Be*: V2

**L**

*l(a)* (cummings): V1  
 Larkin, Philip  
*High Windows*: V3  
 Longfellow, Henry Wadsworth  
*Paul Revere's Ride*: V2  
*The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* (Eliot): V1

**M**

*The Man He Killed* (Hardy): V3  
 McElroy, Colleen  
*A Pièd*: V3  
*Midnight* (Heaney): V2  
 Millay, Edna St. Vincent  
*The Courage that My Mother Had*: V3  
 Milton, John  
*[On His Blindness] Sonnet 16*: V3  
*Mirror* (Plath): V1  
*Miss Rosie* (Clifton): V1  
 Momaday, N. Scott  
*Angle of Geese*: V2  
*Mother to Son* (Hughes): V3  
*Musée des Beaux Arts* (Auden): V1  
*My Last Duchess* (Browning): V1  
*My Papa's Waltz* (Roethke): V3

**N**

*Not Waving but Drowning* (Smith): V3  
*Nothing Gold Can Stay* (Frost): V3

**O**

*O Captain! My Captain!* (Whitman): V2  
*Ode to a Nightingale* (Keats): V3  
*Ode to the West Wind* (Shelley): V2  
*old age sticks* (cummings): V3  
*[On His Blindness] Sonnet 16* (Milton): V3  
*On the Pulse of Morning* (Angelou): V3

**P**

*Paul Revere's Ride* (Longfellow): V2  
*A Pièd* (McElroy): V3  
 Plath, Sylvia  
*Mirror*: V1  
 Poe, Edgar Allan  
*The Bells*: V3  
*The Raven*: V1  
 Pound, Ezra  
*In a Station of the Metro*: V2

**R**

*The Raven* (Poe): V1  
*The Red Wheelbarrow* (Williams): V1  
*The Road Not Taken* (Frost): V2  
 Roethke, Theodore  
*My Papa's Waltz*: V3

**S**

*Sailing to Byzantium* (Yeats): V2  
 Sandburg, Carl  
*Chicago*: V3  
 Shakespeare, William  
*Sonnet 18*: V2  
*Sonnet 116*: V3  
*Sonnet 130*: V1  
 Shapiro, Karl  
*Auto Wreck*: V3  
 Shelley, Percy Bysshe  
*Ode to the West Wind*: V2  
 Smith, Stevie  
*Not Waving but Drowning*: V3  
*Sonnet 16 [On His Blindness]* (Milton): V3

*Sonnet 18* (Shakespeare): V2  
*Sonnet 43* (Browning): V2  
*Sonnet 116* (Shakespeare): V3  
*Sonnet 130* (Shakespeare): V1  
*The Sonnet-Ballad* (Brooks): V1  
*The Soul Selects Her Own Society* (Dickinson): V1  
 Stafford, William  
*Fifteen*: V2  
*Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* (Frost): V1  
*Swing Low Sweet Chariot* (Anonymous): V1

**T**

Tennyson, Alfred, Lord  
*The Charge of the Light Brigade*: V1  
*Ulysses*: V2  
*This Life* (Dove): V1  
 Thomas, Dylan  
*Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night*: V1  
*Fern Hill*: V3  
*Those Winter Sundays* (Hayden): V1  
*Tintern Abbey* (Wordsworth): V2  
*The Tyger* (Blake): V2

**U**

*Ulysses* (Tennyson): V2  
*The Unknown Citizen* (Auden): V3

**W**

*When I Have Fears that I May Cease to Be* (Keats): V2  
 Whitman, Walt  
*I Hear America Singing*: V3  
*O Captain! My Captain!*: V2  
 Williams, William Carlos  
*The Red Wheelbarrow*: V1  
 Wordsworth, William  
*Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey*: V2

**Y**

Yeats, William Butler  
*An Irish Airman Foresees His Death*: V1  
*Sailing to Byzantium*: V2

# Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index

## African American

- Angelou, Maya  
*Harlem Hopscotch*: V2  
*On the Pulse of Morning*: V3
- Brooks, Gwendolyn  
*The Bean Eaters*: V2  
*The Sonnet-Ballad*: V1
- Clifton, Lucille  
*Miss Rosie*: V1
- Cullen, Countee  
*Any Human to Another*: V3
- Dove, Rita  
*This Life*: V1
- Hayden, Robert  
*Those Winter Sundays*: V1
- Hughes, Langston  
*Harlem*: V1  
*Mother to Son*: V3
- Johnson, James Weldon  
*The Creation*: V1
- McElroy, Colleen  
*A Pièd*: V3

## American

- Angelou, Maya  
*Harlem Hopscotch*: V2  
*On the Pulse of Morning*: V3
- Auden, W. H.  
*Musée des Beaux Arts*: V1  
*The Unknown Citizen*: V3
- Brooks, Gwendolyn  
*The Bean Eaters*: V2  
*The Sonnet-Ballad*: V1
- Clifton, Lucille  
*Miss Rosie*: V1

- Cullen, Countee  
*Any Human to Another*: V3
- cummings, e. e.  
*l(a)*: V1  
*old age sticks*: V3
- Dickinson, Emily  
*Because I Could Not Stop for  
 Death*: V2  
*"Hope" Is the Thing with  
 Feathers*: V3  
*The Soul Selects Her Own  
 Society*: V1
- Dove, Rita  
*This Life*: V1
- Eliot, T. S.  
*The Love Song of J. Alfred  
 Prufrock*: V1
- Frost, Robert  
*Nothing Gold Can Stay*: V3  
*The Road Not Taken*: V2  
*Stopping by Woods on a Snowy  
 Evening*: V1
- Hayden, Robert  
*Those Winter Sundays*: V1
- Hughes, Langston  
*Harlem*: V1  
*Mother to Son*: V3
- Jarrell, Randall  
*The Death of the Ball Turret  
 Gunner*: V2
- Jeffers, Robinson  
*Hurt Hawks*: V3
- Johnson, James Weldon  
*The Creation*: V1
- Longfellow, Henry Wadsworth  
*Paul Revere's Ride*: V2
- McElroy, Colleen  
*A Pièd*: V3

- Millay, Edna St. Vincent  
*The Courage that My Mother  
 Had*: V3
- Momaday, N. Scott  
*Angle of Geese*: V2
- Plath, Sylvia  
*Mirror*: V1
- Poe, Edgar Allan  
*The Bells*: V3  
*The Raven*: V1
- Pound, Ezra  
*In a Station of the Metro*: V2
- Roethke, Theodore  
*My Papa's Waltz*: V3
- Sandburg, Carl  
*Chicago*: V3
- Shapiro, Karl  
*Auto Wreck*: V3
- Stafford, William  
*Fifteen*: V2
- Whitman, Walt  
*I Hear America Singing*: V3  
*O Captain! My Captain!*: V2
- Williams, William Carlos  
*The Red Wheelbarrow*: V1

## Cherokee

- Momaday, N. Scott  
*Angle of Geese*: V2

## English

- Arnold, Matthew  
*Dover Beach*: V2
- Auden, W. H.  
*Musée des Beaux Arts*: V1  
*The Unknown Citizen*: V3

Blake, William  
*The Tyger*: V2

Browning, Elizabeth Barrett  
*Sonnet 43*: V2

Browning, Robert  
*My Last Duchess*: V1

Byron, Lord  
*The Destruction of Sennacherib*: V1

Donne, John  
*Holy Sonnet 10*: V2

Eliot, T. S.  
*The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*: V1

Hardy, Thomas  
*The Man He Killed*: V3

Keats, John  
*Ode on a Grecian Urn*: V1  
*Ode to a Nightingale*: V3  
*When I Have Fears that I May Cease to Be*: V2

Larkin, Philip  
*High Windows*: V3

Milton, John  
*[On His Blindness]*  
*Sonnet 16*: V3

Shakespeare, William  
*Sonnet 18*: V2  
*Sonnet 116*: V3  
*Sonnet 130*: V1

Shelley, Percy Bysshe  
*Ode to the West Wind*: V2

Smith, Stevie  
*Not Waving but Drowning*: V3

Tennyson, Alfred, Lord  
*The Charge of the Light Brigade*: V1  
*Ulysses*: V2

Williams, William Carlos  
*The Red Wheelbarrow*: V1

Wordsworth, William  
*Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey*: V2

## German

Roethke, Theodore  
*My Papa's Waltz*: V3

## Irish

Heaney, Seamus  
*Midnight*: V2

Yeats, William Butler  
*An Irish Airman Foresees His Death*: V1  
*Sailing to Byzantium*: V2

## Japanese

Bashō, Matsuo  
*Falling Upon Earth*: V2

## Jewish

Shapiro, Karl  
*Auto Wreck*: V3

## Kiowa

Momaday, N. Scott  
*Angle of Geese*: V2

## Native American

Momaday, N. Scott  
*Angle of Geese*: V2

## Russian

Shapiro, Karl  
*Auto Wreck*: V3

## Scottish

Byron, Lord  
*The Destruction of Sennacherib*: V1

## Spanish

Williams, William Carlos  
*The Red Wheelbarrow*: V1

## Swedish

Sandburg, Carl  
*Chicago*: V3

## Welsh

Thomas, Dylan  
*Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night*: V1  
*Fern Hill*: V3