

# British Poetry

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DENG405

Edited by:  
Dr. Digvijay Pandya



**L**OVELY  
**P**ROFESSIONAL  
**U**NIVERSITY

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# **BRITISH POETRY**

Edited By  
Dr. Digvijay Pandya

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# SYLLABUS

## British Poetry

### Objectives:

- To acquaint the learners with the most important poetic texts of the eighteenth century.
- To help the learners to appreciate the poetic imagery.

Sr. No.	Topics
1.	Geoffrey Chaucer: The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales (non-detailed study): Introduction to the text and author  Geoffrey Chaucer: The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales (non-detailed study): Discussion and analysis
2.	Milton: Paradise Lost-I; Introduction of the author and the text, importance of Prologue, ; (Non detailed study) : Discussion and analysis, Grand style and Character portrayal of Satan
3.	Shakespeare as a poet, Sonnets: Introduction, Being your slave what should I do, Love , Shakespeare: Thou blind fool, That time of year thou mayst in me behold, what dost thou to mine eyes
4.	Alexander Pope: The Rape of the Lock; (non detailed study): Introduction of the author and Text analysis Alexander Pope: The Rape of the Lock; the use of supernatural machinery Alexander Pope: The Rape of the Lock; as a social satire n as a Mock Epic
5	Thomas Gray: The Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard: Introduction of the author and the text Thomas Gray: The Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard: Discussion and analysis Thomas Gray: The Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard: Theme

6.	<p>William Blake- Introduction of the author and Songs of Innocence: The Lamb, The little black Boy, Songs of Experience (A Poison Tree, The Tyger, The Sick Rose)</p> <p>William Blake- Songs of Experience (A Poison Tree, The Tyger, The Sick Rose), William Wordsworth: Ode on Intimations of Immortality</p>
7	<p>Major Terms (brief introduction to be given): assonance ,ballad ,blank verse , neo-classicism and romanticism ,conceit ,couplet ,elegy ,epic</p> <p>Major Terms (brief introduction to be given): Figure of speech ,heroic couplet ,iambic pentameter ,lyric ,metaphor, simile, metonymy , synecdoche ,meter , ode ,pastoral, personification ,rhyme ,sonnet</p> <p>Major Terms (brief introduction to be given): Negative Capability, Renaissance of Wonder, Hellenism, Supernaturalism, Fancy and imagination, Dramatic Monologue</p> <p>Major Terms (brief introduction to be given): Victorian Compromise, Pre Raphaelite Poetry, Art for Art's sake, Aestheticism, Imagist, War poets, Movement poets, Modernist Poetry</p>
8	<p>John Keats: Ode on a Grecian Urn, Ode to a Nightingale, Ode to Autumn,</p> <p>Robert Browning: Introduction of the poet: Poem: My Last Duchess</p> <p>Robert Browning: The Last Ride Together, Discussion on His philosophy</p>
9	<p>Lord Tennyson: The Lady of Shallot, Ulysses, Mathew Arnold: Dover Beach, W.B. Yeats: Introduction of the author and His poem: A Prayer for my daughter. W. B. Yeats: Second Coming and As an Irish Poet</p>
10	<p>Ted Hughes : Introduction of the Poet and Detailed study of his poem: The Thought Fox</p> <p>Ted Hughes : Thrushes and Hughes as an animal poet</p> <p>T.S.Eliot : The Waste Land (non-detailed): Introduction of the Author and text</p> <p>T.S.Eliot : The Waste Land (non-detailed): Discussion and analysis</p>

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## Unit 1: Major Literary Terms-I

Notes

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  - 1.2.3 Classification of Ballads
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  - 1.2.5 Broadside Ballads
  - 1.2.6 Literary Ballads
- 1.3 Introduction to Blank Verse
- 1.4 Summary
- 1.5 Keywords
- 1.6 Review Questions
- 1.7 Further Readings

### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Know about assonance, blank verse and ballad
- Know about the classification and origins of ballad.

### Introduction

Genre is an important word in the English class. We teach different genres of literature such as poetry, short stories, myths, plays, non-fiction, novels, mysteries, and so on. When we speak about a kind of literature we are really speaking about a genre of literature. So when someone asks you what genre of literature you like, you might answer, poetry, novels, comics, and so on.

#### 1.1 Introduction to Assonance

##### 1.1.1 Assonance

Assonance is the repetition of vowel sounds to create internal rhyming within phrases or sentences, and together with alliteration and consonance serves as one of the building blocks of verse. For example, in the phrase "Do you like blue?", the /u:/ is repeated within the sentence and is assonant.

Notes



*Did u know?* Assonance is found more often in verse than in prose. It is used in (mainly modern) English-language poetry, and is particularly important in Old French, Spanish and Celtic languages.

The eponymous student of Willy Russell’s *Educating Rita* described it as “getting the rhyme wrong”.

Examples

1.	The silken sad uncertain rustling of each purple curtain	— Edgar Allan Poe, “The Raven”
2.	And murmuring of innumerable bees	— Alfred Lord Tennyson, <i>The Princess</i> VII.203
3.	The crumbling thunder of seas	— Robert Louis Stevenson
4.	That solitude which suits abstruser musings	— Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “Frost at Midnight”
5.	The scurrying furred small friars squeal in the dowse	— Dylan Thomas
6.	Dead in the middle of little Italy, little did we know that we riddled two middle men who didn’t do diddily.	— Big Pun, “Twinz”
7.	It’s hot and it’s monotonous	— Stephen Sondheim, <i>Sunday in the Park with George</i> , <i>It’s Hot Up Here</i>
8.	Tundi tur unda	— Catullus 11
9.	On a proud round cloud in white high night	— E.E.Cummings, <i>if a Cheer Rules Elephant Angel Child Should Sit</i>
10.	I’ve never seen so many Dominican women with cinnamon tans	— Will Smith, “Miami”
11.	I bomb atomically-Socrates’ philosophies and hypotheses can’t define how I be droppin’ these mockeries	— Inspectah Deck, from the Wu-Tang Clan’s “Triumph”
12.	Up in the arroyo a rare owl’s nest I did spy, so I loaded up my shotgun and watched owl feathers fly	— Jon Wayne, <i>Texas Assonance</i>
13.	Some kids who played games about Narnia got gradually balmier and balmier	— C.S. Lewis, “The Voysge of the Dawn Treader”
14.	And the moon rose over an open field	— Paul Simon, <i>America</i>
15.	Yo, I’m a hot and bothered astronaut crashing while Jacking off to buffering vids of Asher Roth eating apple sauce	— Earl Sweatshirt of OFWGKTA – “Earl”

J. R. R. Tolkien's *Errantry* is a poem whose meter contains three sets of trisyllabic assonances in every set of four lines. Assonance can also be used in forming proverbs, often a form of short poetry. In the Oromo language of Ethiopia, note the use of a single vowel throughout the following proverb, an extreme form of assonance:

- kan mana baala, alaa gaala ("A leaf at home, but a camel elsewhere"; somebody who has a big reputation among those who do not know him well.)

In more modern verse, stressed assonance is frequently used as a rhythmic device in modern rap. An example is Public Enemy's 'Don't Believe The Hype': "Their pens and pads I snatch 'cause I've **had it**/I'm not an **addict**, fiending for **static**/I see their tape recorder and I **grab it**/No, you can't **have it** back, silly **rabbit**".

Assonance differs from RHYME in that RHYME is a similarity of vowel and consonant. "Lake" and "fate" demonstrate RHYME; "lake" and "fate" assonance. Assonance is a common substitution for END-RHYME in the popular ballad, as in these lines from "The Twa Corbies":

In behint yon auld fail dyke,  
I wot there lies a new-slain Knight.

Such substitution of assonance for END-RHYME is also characteristic of Emily Dickinson's verse, and is used extensively by many contemporary poets.

## 1.2 Introduction to Ballad

Ballad is a form of verse, often a narrative set to music. Ballads were particularly characteristic of British and Irish popular poetry and song from the later medieval period until the 19th century and used extensively across Europe and later the Americas, Australia and North Africa. Many ballads were written and sold as single sheet broadsides. The form was often used by poets and composers from the 18th century onwards to produce lyrical ballads. In the later 19th century it took on the meaning of a slow form of popular love song and the term is now often used as synonymous with any love song, particularly the pop or rock power ballad.

### 1.2.1 Origins of Ballad

The ballad probably derives its name from medieval French dance songs or "ballares" (from which we also get ballet), as did the alternative rival form that became the French Ballade. In theme and function they may originate from Scandinavian and Germanic traditions of storytelling that can be seen in poems such as *Beowulf*.



*Notes* The earliest example we have of a recognisable ballad in form in England is 'Judas' in a 13th-century manuscript.

### 1.2.2 Ballad Form

Most, but not all, northern and west European ballads are written in ballad stanzas or quatrains (four-line stanzas) of alternating lines of iambic (an unstressed followed by a stressed syllable) tetrameter (eight syllables) and iambic trimeter (six syllables), known as ballad meter. Usually, only the second and fourth line of a quatrain are rhymed (in the scheme *a, b, c, b*), which has been taken to suggest that, originally, ballads consisted of couplets (two lines) of rhymed verse, each of 14 syllables. As can be seen in this stanza from 'Lord Thomas and Fair Annet':

## Notes

The **horse** | fair **Ann** | et **rode** | upon |  
 He **amb** | led **like** | the **wind** |,  
 With **sil** | ver **he** | was **shod** | before,  
 With **burn** | ing **gold** | behind |.

However, there is considerable variation on this pattern in almost every respect, including length, number of lines and rhyming scheme, making the strict definition of a ballad extremely difficult. In southern and Eastern Europe, and in countries that derive their tradition from them, ballad structure differs significantly, like Spanish romanceros, which are octosyllabic and use consonance rather than rhyme.



Task

Explain ballad form and traditional ballads.

In all traditions most ballads are narrative in nature, with a self-contained story, often concise and relying on imagery, rather than description, which can be tragic, historical, romantic or comic. Another common feature of ballads is repetition, sometimes of fourth lines in succeeding stanzas, as a refrain, sometimes of third and fourth lines of a stanza and sometimes of entire stanzas.

### 1.2.3 Classification of Ballads

European Ballads have been generally classified into three major groups: traditional, broadside and literary. In America a distinction is drawn between ballads that are versions of European, particularly British and Irish songs, and 'native American ballads', developed without reference to earlier songs. A further development was the evolution of the blues ballad, which mixed the genre with Afro-American music. For the late 19th century the music publishing industry found a market for what are often termed sentimental ballads, and these are the origin of the modern use of the term ballad to mean a slow love song.

### 1.2.4 Traditional Ballads

The traditional, classical or popular (meaning of the people) ballad has been seen as originating with the wandering minstrels of late medieval Europe. From the end of the 15th century we have printed ballads that suggest a rich tradition of popular music. We know from a reference in William Langland's *Piers Plowman*, that ballads about Robin Hood were being sung from at least the late 14th century and the oldest detailed material we have is Wynkyn de Worde's collection of Robin Hood ballads printed about 1495.

Early collections of ballads were made by Samuel Pepys (1633–1703) and in the Roxburghe Ballads collected by Robert Harley, 1st Earl of Oxford and Mortimer (1661–1724). In the 18th century there were increasing numbers of such collections, including Thomas D'Urfey's *Wit and Mirth: or, Pills to Purge Melancholy* (1719–20) and Bishop Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765). The last of these also contained some oral material and by the end of the 18th century this was becoming increasingly common, with collections including John Ritson's, *The Bishopric Garland* (1784), which paralleled the work of figures like Robert Burns and Walter Scott in Scotland.

Key work on the traditional ballad was undertaken in the late 19th century in Denmark by Svend Grundtvig and for England and Scotland by the Harvard professor Francis James Child. They attempted to record and classify all the known ballads and variants in their chosen regions. Since

Child died before writing a commentary on his work it is uncertain exactly how and why he differentiated the 305 ballads printed that would be published as *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*. There have been many different and contradictory attempts to classify traditional ballads by theme, but commonly identified types are the religious, supernatural, tragic, love ballads, historic, legendary and humorous.

### 1.2.5 Broadsides Ballads

Broadsides ballads were a product of the development of cheap print in the 16th century. They were generally printed on one side of a medium to large sheet of poor quality paper. In their heyday of the first half of the 17th century, they were printed in black-letter or gothic type and included multiple, eye-catching illustrations, a popular tune title, as well as an alluring poem. By the 18th century, they were printed in white letter or roman type and often without much decoration. These later sheets could include many individual songs, which would be cut apart and sold individually as “slipsongs.” Alternatively, they might be folded to make small cheap books or “chapbooks” which often drew on ballad stories. They were produced in huge numbers, with over 400,000 being sold in England annually by the 1660s. Tessa Watt estimates the number of copies sold may have been in the millions. Many were sold by travelling chapmen in city streets or at fairs. The subject matter varied from what has been defined as the traditional ballad, although many traditional ballads were printed as broadsides. Among the topics were love, religion, drinking-songs, legends, and early journalism, which included disasters, political events and signs, wonders and prodigies.

### Self Assessment

Fill in the blanks:

- ..... is the repetition of vowel sounds to create internal rhyming within phrases or sentences.
- Assonance is a common substitution of ..... in the popular ballad.
- Ballad is a form of ..... .
- European ballads have been generally classified into ..... major groups.
- ..... is poetry written in unrhymed iambic pentameter.

### 1.2.6 Literary Ballads

Literary or lyrical ballads grew out of an increasing interest in the ballad form among social elites and intellectuals, particularly in the Romantic Movement from the later 18th century. Respected literary figures like Robert Burns and Sir Walter Scott in Scotland both collected and wrote their own ballads, using the form to create an artistic product. Similarly in England William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge produced a collection of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798, including Coleridge’s ‘*The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*’. At the same time in Germany Goethe cooperated with Schiller on a series of ballads, some of which were later set to music by Schubert. Later important examples of the poetic form included Rudyard Kipling’s ‘*Barrack Room Ballads*’ (1892-6) and Oscar Wilde’s ‘*Ballad of Reading Goal*’ (1897).

## 1.3 Introduction to Blank Verse

Blank verse is poetry written in unrhymed iambic pentameter. It has been described as “probably the most common and influential form that English poetry has taken since the sixteenth century” and Paul Fussell has claimed that “about three-quarters of all English poetry is in blank verse.”

Notes

The first documented use of blank verse in the English language was by Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey in his translation of the Aenied. He was possibly inspired by the Latin original, as classical Latin verse (as well as Greek verse) did not use rhyme; or he may have been inspired by the Italian verse form of Versi Sciolti, which also contained no rhyme. The play, Arden of Faversham (circa 1590 by an unknown author) is a notable example of end-stopped blank verse.

Christopher Marlowe was the first English author to make full use of the potential of blank verse, and also established it as the dominant verse form for English drama in the age of Elizabeth I and James I. The major achievements in English blank verse were made by William Shakespeare, who wrote much of the content of his plays in unrhymed iambic pentameter, and Milton, whose Paradise Lost is written in blank verse. Miltonic blank verse was widely imitated in the 18th century by such poets as James Thomson (in The Seasons) and William Cowper (in The Task). Romantic English poets such as William Wordsworth, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and John Keats used blank verse as a major form. Shortly afterwards, Alfred, Lord Tennyson became particularly devoted to blank verse, using it for example in his long narrative poem "The Princess", as well as for one of his most famous poems: "Ulysses". Among American poets, Hart Crane and Wallace Stevens are notable for using blank verse in extended compositions at a time when many other poets were turning to free verse.

Blank Verse is any verse comprised of unrhymed lines all in the same meter, usually *iambic pentameter*. It was developed in Italy and became widely used during the Renaissance because it resembled classical, unrhymed poetry. Marlowe's "mighty line," which demonstrated blank verse's range and flexibility, made blank verse the standard for many English writers, including both Shakespeare and Milton, and it remained a very practiced form up until the twentieth century when Modernism rebelled and openly experimented with the tradition. Regardless, blank verse was embraced by Yeats, Pound, Frost, and Stevens who skillfully brought the tradition through this century. While it may not be as common as open form, it retains an important role in the world of poetry.

Blank verse can be composed in any meter and with any amount of feet per line (any line length), though the iamb is generally the predominant foot. Along with the iamb are 3 other standard feet and a number of variations that can be employed in a blank verse poem. It is difficult almost impossible to write a blank verse poem consisting of all iambs and other types of feet get used more often than one may think. These are:

1. Iamb-two syllables, unstressed-stressed, as in "today".
2. Trochee-two syllables, stressed-unstressed, as in "standard".
3. Anapest-three syllables, unstressed-unstressed-stressed, as in "disengage".
4. Dactyl-three syllables, stressed-unstressed-unstressed, as in "probably".

Variations include:

1. Headless Iamb or Tailless Trochee- one stressed syllable. Labeling the foot depends on where it is located in the line.
2. Spondee- two stressed syllables, as in "hot dog".
3. Amphibrach- three syllables, unstressed-stressed-unstressed, as in "forgetful".
4. Double Iamb- four syllables, unstressed-unstressed-stressed-stressed, as in "will you eat it?" A double iamb is counted as two feet.

Blank verse can be written with any combination of the above feet. The name of the dominant foot coupled with the number of feet in the line provides the name of a poem's meter. For example, the dominant foot in Robert Frost's "Mending Wall" is the iamb, and there are five feet per line. Thus, the poem is written in iambic pentameter. However, that not each foot is an iamb, but Frost mixes up the feet, as in the first few lines of the poem.

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,  
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,  
And spills the upper boulders in the sun.

When we read the words, the natural rhythm is not de-dum, de-dum, de-dum—it is not strictly iambic. The first line, for example, scans as a trochee and four iambs. *Scansion*, by the way is how poets demonstrate the meter of a poem using accents to show the stressed syllables. With scanning, one can tell if a poem is metered or not and, if so, what kind of meter is present, as in “Mending Wall:”

“Something there is that doesn't love a wall”.

Of course, how a person scans a single line or an entire poem depends on the reader's natural rhythms and inclinations, and, while there may be better ways to scan a poem, there is not always a single correct scan. In the first line of “Mending Wall”, for instance, the first iamb *could* be read as a trochee, with the stress falling on “there” instead of “is.”

## 1.4 Summary

- Genre is an important word in the English class. We teach different genres of literature such as poetry, short stories, myths, plays, non-fiction, novels, mysteries, and so on.
- Assonance is the repetition of vowel sounds to create internal rhyming within phrases or sentences.
- European Ballads have been generally classified into three major groups: traditional, broadside and literary.
- The traditional, classical or popular ballad has been seen as originating with the wandering minstrels of late medieval Europe.
- Broadside ballads were a product of the development of cheap print in the 16th century.

## 1.5 Keywords

*Rhyme* : Correspondence of sound between words or the endings of words.

*Assonance* : The resemblance of sound between syllables in near by words arising from the rhyming of stressed vowels.

*Eponymous* : A word or name derived from the name of a person.

*Tetrameter* : A verse of four measures.

## 1.6 Review Questions

1. What do you mean by the term Assonance?
2. What is Ballad and Classification of ballads? Explain.
3. Define literary ballads.
4. Explain blank verse.

## **Answers: Self Assessment**

1. Assonance
2. End-Rhyme
3. Verse
4. Three
5. Blank verse

Notes

**1.7 Further Readings**



*Books*

- A Glossary of Literary Terms — M.H.Abrams
- Literary Terms: a practical glossary — Brian Moon
- A Guide to Literary Terms — Gail Rae
- A new handbook of Literary terms — David Mikics



*Online links*

- [http://www.tnellen.com/cybereng/lit\\_terms/terms/Literary.Terms.html](http://www.tnellen.com/cybereng/lit_terms/terms/Literary.Terms.html)
- <http://92.243.10.209:8080/liceospano/webdocs/documenti/>
- [http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0072405228/student\\_view0/](http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0072405228/student_view0/)

## Unit 2: Major Literary Terms-II

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- 2.3 Romanticism and Music
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  - 2.7.2 Conventions of Epics
- 2.8 Summary
- 2.9 Keywords
- 2.10 Review Questions
- 2.11 Further Readings

### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Know about neoclassicism, romanticism, conceit, couplet elegy and epic
- Discuss the term romanticism and music
- Explain the term conceit, metaphysical conceit and petrarchan conceit
- Know about the term couplet, elegy, epic and oral epic.

Notes

## Introduction

Literary devices refers to specific aspects of literature, in the sense of its universal function as an art form which expresses ideas through language, which we can recognize, identify, interpret and/or analyze. Literary devices collectively comprise the art form's components; the means by which authors create meaning through language, and by which readers gain understanding of and appreciation for their works. They also provide a conceptual framework for comparing individual literary works to others, both within and across genres. Both literary elements and literary techniques can rightly be called literary devices.

### 2.1 Neoclassicism

Neoclassicism is the name given to Western movements in the decorative and visual arts, literature, theatre, music, and architecture that draw inspiration from the "classical" art and culture of Ancient Greece or Ancient Rome. One such movement was dominant in Europe from the mid-18th to the 19th centuries. Neoclassicism is opposed to Modernism, in which self-expression and improvisation are considered virtues.

The English Neoclassical movement, predicated upon and derived from both classical and contemporary French models, embodied a group of attitudes toward art and human existence—ideals of order, logic, restraint, accuracy, "correctness," "restraint," decorum, and so on, which would enable the practitioners of various arts to imitate or reproduce the structures and themes of Greek or Roman originals. Though its origins were much earlier, Neoclassicism dominated English literature from the Restoration in 1660 until the end of the eighteenth century, when the publication of *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) by Wordsworth and Coleridge marked the full emergence of Romanticism.

"Neoclassicism" in each art implies a particular canon of "classic" models—e.g. Virgil, Raphael, Nicolas Poussin, and Haydn. Other cultures have other canons of classics, however, and a recurring strain of neoclassicism appears to be the natural expression of cultures that are confident of their mainstream traditions, but also feel the need to regain something that has slipped away.

Neoclassicism was a widespread and influential movement in painting and the other visual arts that began in the 1760s, reached its height in the 1780s and '90s, and lasted until the 1840s and '50s. In painting it generally took the form of an emphasis on austere linear design in the depiction of classical themes and subject matter, using archaeologically correct settings and costumes.

Neoclassicism arose partly as a reaction against the sensuous and frivolously decorative Rococo style that had dominated European art from the 1720s on. But an even more profound stimulus was the new and more scientific interest in classical antiquity that arose in the 18th century. Neoclassicism was given great impetus by new archaeological discoveries, particularly the exploration and excavation of the buried Roman cities of Herculaneum and Pompeii, the excavations of which began in 1738 and 1748, respectively. And from the second decade of the 18th century on, a number of influential publications by Bernard de Montfaucon, Giovanni Battista Piranesi, the Comte de Caylus, and Robert Wood provided engraved views of Roman monuments and other antiquities and further quickened interest in the classical past. The new understanding distilled from these discoveries and publications in turn enabled European scholars for the first time to discern separate and distinct chronological periods in Greco-Roman art, and this new sense of a plurality of ancient styles replaced the older, unqualified veneration of Roman art and encouraged a dawning interest in purely Greek antiquities. The German scholar Johann Joachim Winckelmann's writings and sophisticated theorizings were especially influential in this regard. Winckelmann saw in Greek sculpture "a noble simplicity and quiet grandeur" and called for artists to imitate Greek art. He claimed that in doing so such artists would obtain idealized depictions of natural forms that had been stripped of all transitory and individualistic aspects, and their images would thus attain a universal and archetypal significance.

Neoclassicism as manifested in painting was initially not stylistically distinct from the French Rococo and other styles that had preceded it. This was partly because, whereas it was possible for architecture

and sculpture to be modeled on prototypes in these media that had actually survived from classical antiquity, those few classical paintings that had survived were minor or merely ornamental works—until, that is, the discoveries made at Herculaneum and Pompeii. The earliest neoclassical painters were Joseph-Marie Vien, Anton Raphael Mengs, Pompeo Batoni, Angelica Kauffmann, and Gavin Hamilton; these artists were active during the 1750s, '60s, and '70s. Each of these painters, though they may have used poses and figural arrangements from ancient sculptures and vase paintings, was strongly influenced by preceding stylistic trends. An important early Neoclassical work such as Mengs's "Parnassus" owes much of its inspiration to 17th-century classicism and to Raphael for both the poses of its figures and its general composition. Many of the early paintings of the Neoclassical artist Benjamin West derive their compositions from works by Nicolas Poussin, and Kauffmann's sentimental subjects dressed in antique garb are basically Rococo in their softened, decorative prettiness. Mengs's close association with Winckelmann led to his being influenced by the ideal beauty that the latter so ardently expounded, but the church and palace ceilings decorated by Mengs owe more to existing Italian Baroque traditions than to anything Greek or Roman.

For the sake of convenience the Neoclassic period can be divided into three relatively coherent parts: the Restoration Age (1660-1700), in which Milton, Bunyan, and Dryden were the dominant influences; the Augustan Age (1700-1750), in which Pope was the central poetic figure, while Defoe, Richardson, Fielding, and Smollett were presiding over the sophistication of the novel; and the Age of Johnson (1750-1798), which, while it was dominated and characterized by the mind and personality of the inimitable Dr. Samuel Johnson, whose sympathies were with the fading Augustan past, saw the beginnings of a new understanding and appreciation of the work of Shakespeare, the development, by Sterne and others, of the novel of sensibility, and the emergence of the Gothic school—attitudes which, in the context of the development of a cult of Nature, the influence of German romantic thought, religious tendencies like the rise of Methodism, and political events like the American and French revolutions—established the intellectual and emotional foundations of English Romanticism.

## 2.2 Romanticism

Romanticism was more widespread both in its origins and influence. No other intellectual/artistic movement has had comparable variety, reach, and staying power since the end of the Middle Ages.

Romanticism (or the Romantic Era/Period) was an artistic, literary and intellectual movement that originated in the second half of the 18th century in Europe, and gained strength in reaction to the Industrial Revolution. In part, it was a revolt against aristocratic social and political norms of the Age of Enlightenment and a reaction against the scientific rationalization of nature.



*Did u know?* Romanticism was embodied most strongly in the visual arts, music, and literature, but had a major impact on historiography, education and natural history.

The movement validated strong emotion as an authentic source of aesthetic experience, placing new emphasis on such emotions as trepidation, horror and terror and awe—especially that which is experienced in confronting the sublimity of untamed nature and its picturesque qualities, both new aesthetic categories. It elevated folk art and ancient custom to something noble, made spontaneity a desirable characteristic (as in the musical impromptu), and argued for a "natural" epistemology of human activities as conditioned by nature in the form of language and customary usage.

Romanticism reached beyond the rational and Classicist ideal models to elevate a revived medievalism and elements of art and narrative perceived to be authentically medieval, in an attempt to escape the confines of population growth, urban sprawl, and industrialism, and it also attempted to embrace the exotic, unfamiliar, and distant in modes more authentic than Rococo chinoiserie, harnessing the power of the imagination to envision and to escape.

**Notes**

The modern sense of a romantic character may be expressed in Byronic ideals of a gifted, perhaps misunderstood loner, creatively following the dictates of his inspiration rather than the standard ways of contemporary society.

Although the movement was rooted in the German Sturm und Drang movement, which prized intuition and emotion over Enlightenment rationalism, the ideologies and events of the French Revolution laid the background from which both Romanticism and the Counter-Enlightenment emerged. The confines of the Industrial Revolution also had their influence on Romanticism, which was in part an escape from modern realities; indeed, in the second half of the 19th century, "Realism" was offered as a polarized opposite to Romanticism. Romanticism elevated the achievements of what it perceived as heroic individualists and artists, whose pioneering examples would elevate society. It also legitimized the individual imagination as a critical authority, which permitted freedom from classical notions of form in art. There was a strong recourse to historical and natural inevitability, a *zeitgeist*, in the representation of its ideas.

### 2.2.1 Characteristics

In a basic sense, the term "Romanticism" has been used to refer to certain artists, poets, writers, musicians, as well as political, philosophical and social thinkers of the late 18th and early to mid 19th centuries. It has equally been used to refer to various artistic, intellectual, and social trends of that era. Despite this general usage of the term, a precise characterization and specific definition of Romanticism have been the subject of debate in the fields of intellectual history and literary history throughout the 20th century, without any great measure of consensus emerging.

Arthur Lovejoy attempted to demonstrate the difficulty of defining Romanticism in his seminal article "On The Discrimination of Romanticisms" in his *Essays in the History of Ideas* (1948); some scholars see romanticism as essentially continuous with the present, some like Robert Hughes see in it the inaugural moment of modernity, some like Chateaubriand, 'Novalis' and Samuel Taylor Coleridge see it as the beginning of a tradition of resistance to Enlightenment rationalism—a 'Counter-Enlightenment'—to be associated most closely with German Romanticism. Still others place it firmly in the direct aftermath of the French Revolution. An earlier definition comes from Charles Baudelaire: "Romanticism is precisely situated neither in choice of subject nor exact truth, but in the way of feeling."

### 2.2.2 Counter-Enlightenment

Many intellectual historians have seen Romanticism as a key movement in the Counter-Enlightenment, a reaction against the Age of Enlightenment. Whereas the thinkers of the Enlightenment emphasized the primacy of reason, Romanticism emphasized intuition, imagination, and feeling, to a point that has led to some Romantic thinkers being accused of irrationalism.



*Notes* Romanticism focuses on Nature: a place free from society's judgment and restrictions. Romanticism blossomed after the age of Rationalism, a time that focused on scientific reasoning.

### 2.2.3 Genius, Originality and Authorship

The Romantic movement developed the idea of the absolute originality and artistic inspiration by the individual genius, which performs a "creation from nothingness;" this is the so-called Romantic ideology of literary authorship, which created the notion of plagiarism and the guilt of a derivativeness. This idea is often called "romantic originality." The romantic poets' turned their beliefs on originality into "the institution of originality." The English poet John Milton, who lived in the 17th century, was part of the origin of the concept.

This idea was in contrast with the preceding artistic tradition, in which copying had been seen as a fundamental practice of the creative process; and has been especially challenged since the beginning of the 20th century, with the boom of the modernist and postmodern movements.

## **2.3 Romanticism and Music**

Although the term “Romanticism” when applied to music has come to imply the period roughly from the 1820s until around 1900, the contemporary application of “romantic” to music did not coincide with this modern interpretation. In 1810 E.T.A. Hoffmann called Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven the three “Romantic Composers”, and Ludwig Spohr used the term “good Romantic style” to apply to parts of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony. Technically, Mozart and Haydn are considered Classical composers, and by most standards, Beethoven represents the start of the musical Romantic period. By the early 20th century, the sense that there had been a decisive break with the musical past led to the establishment of the 19th century as “The Romantic Era”, and it is referred to as such in the standard encyclopedias of music.

The traditional modern discussion of the music of Romanticism includes elements, such as the growing use of folk music, which are also directly related to the broader current of Romantic nationalism in the arts as well as aspects already present in 18th-century music, such as the cantabile accompanied melody to which Romantic composers beginning with Franz Schubert applied restless key modulations.

The heightened contrasts and emotions of Sturm und Drang (German for “turbulence and urge(ncy)”) seem a precursor of the Gothic novel in literature, or the sanguinary elements of some of the operas of the period of the French Revolution. The libretti of Lorenzo da Ponte for Mozart’s eloquent music convey a new sense of individuality and freedom. The romantic generation viewed Beethoven as their ideal of a heroic artist—a man who first dedicated a symphony to Consul Bonaparte as a champion of freedom and then challenged Emperor Napoleon by striking him out from the dedication of the Eroica Symphony. In Beethoven’s Fidelio he creates the apotheosis of the ‘rescue operas’ which were another feature of French musical culture during the revolutionary period, in order to hymn the freedom which underlay the thinking of all radical artists in the years of hope after the Congress of Vienna.

### **2.3.1 Romantic Literature**

In literature, Romanticism found recurrent themes in the evocation or criticism of the past, the cult of “sensibility” with its emphasis on women and children, the heroic isolation of the artist or narrator, and respect for a new, wilder, untrammled and “pure” nature. Furthermore, several romantic authors, such as Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne, based their writings on the supernatural/occult and human psychology. Romanticism also helped in the emergence of new ideas and in the process led to the emergence of positive voices that were beneficial for the marginalized sections of the society.

The roots of romanticism in poetry go back to the time of Alexander Pope (1688–1744). Early pioneers include Joseph Warton (headmaster at Winchester College) and his brother Thomas Warton, professor of Poetry at Oxford University. Joseph maintained that invention and imagination were the chief qualities of a poet. The “poet’s poet” Thomas Chatterton is generally considered to be the first Romantic poet in English. The Scottish poet James Macpherson influenced the early development of Romanticism with the international success of his Ossian cycle of poems published in 1762, inspiring both Goethe and the young Walter Scott.

An early German influence came from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, whose 1774 novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* had young men throughout Europe emulating its protagonist, a young artist

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with a very sensitive and passionate temperament. At that time Germany was a multitude of small separate states, and Goethe's works would have a seminal influence in developing a unifying sense of nationalism. Another philosophic influence came from the German idealism of Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Friedrich Schelling, making Jena (where Fichte lived, as well as Schelling, Hegel, Schiller and the brothers Schlegel) a center for early German romanticism ("Jenaer Romantik"). Important writers were Ludwig Tieck, Novalis (Heinrich von Ofterdingen, 1799), Heinrich von Kleist and Friedrich Hölderlin. Heidelberg later became a center of German romanticism, where writers and poets such as Clemens Brentano, Achim von Arnim, and Joseph Freiherr von Eichendorff met regularly in literary circles.

Important motifs in German Romanticism are travelling, nature, and ancient myths. The later German Romanticism of, for example, E. T. A. Hoffmann's *Der Sandmann* (The Sandman), 1817, and Joseph Freiherr von Eichendorff's *Das Marmorbild* (The Marble Statue), 1819, was darker in its motifs and has gothic elements.

Early Russian Romanticism is associated with the writers Konstantin Batyushkov (*A Vision on the Shores of the Lethe*, 1809), Vasily Zhukovsky (*The Bard*, 1811; *Svetlana*, 1813) and Nikolay Karamzin (*Poor Liza*, 1792; *Julia*, 1796; *Martha the Mayoress*, 1802; *The Sensitive and the Cold*, 1803). However the principal exponent of Romanticism in Russia is Alexander Pushkin (*The Prisoner of the Caucasus*, 1820–1821; *The Robber Brothers*, 1822; *Ruslan and Ludmila*, 1820; *Eugene Onegin*, 1825–1832). Pushkin's work influenced many writers in the 19th century and led to his eventual recognition as Russia's greatest poet. Other Russian poets include Mikhail Lermontov (*A Hero of Our Time*, 1839), Fyodor Tyutchev (*Silentium!*, 1830), Yevgeny Baratynsky's (*Eda*, 1826), Anton Delvig, and Wilhelm Küchelbecker. Influenced heavily by Lord Byron, Lermontov sought to explore the Romantic emphasis on metaphysical discontent with society and self, while Tyutchev's poems often described scenes of nature or passions of love. Tyutchev commonly operated with such categories as night and day, north and south, dream and reality, cosmos and chaos, and the still world of winter and spring teeming with life. Baratynsky's style was fairly classical in nature, dwelling on the models of the previous century.

In Spain, the Romantic movement developed a well-known literature with a huge variety of poets and playwrights. The most important Spanish poet during this movement was José de Espronceda. After him there were other poets like Gustavo Adolfo Becquer, Mariano Jose de Larra and the dramatist José Zorrilla, author of *Don Juan Tenorio*. Before them may be mentioned the pre-romantics Jose Cadalso and Manuel José Quintana.

Spanish Romanticism also influenced regional literatures. For example, in Catalonia and in Galicia there was a national boom of writers in the local languages, like the Catalan Jacint Verdaguer and the Galician Rosalía de Castro, the main figures of the national revivalist movements *Renaixença* and *Rexurdimento*, respectively.

Brazilian Romanticism is characterized and divided in three different periods. The first one is basically focused in the creation of a sense of national identity, using the ideal of the heroic Indian. Some examples include José de Alencar, who wrote "*Iracema*" and "*O Guarani*", and Gonçalves Dias, renowned by the poem "*Canção do Exílio*" (*Song of the Exile*). The second period is marked by a profound influence of European themes and traditions, involving the melancholy, sadness and despair related to unobtainable love. Goethe and Lord Byron are commonly quoted in these works. The third cycle is marked by social poetry, especially the abolitionist movement; the greatest writer of this period is Castro Alves.

Romanticism in British literature developed in a different form slightly later, mostly associated with the poets William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, whose co-authored book *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) sought to reject Augustan poetry in favour of more direct speech derived from folk traditions. Both poets were also involved in utopian social thought in the wake of the French

Revolution. The poet and painter William Blake is the most extreme example of the Romantic sensibility in Britain, epitomised by his claim "I must create a system or be enslaved by another man's." Blake's artistic work is also strongly influenced by medieval illuminated books. The painters J. M. W. Turner and John Constable are also generally associated with Romanticism. Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Mary Shelley, John Keats and John Clare constitute another phase of Romanticism in Britain.

In predominantly Roman Catholic countries Romanticism was less pronounced than in Germany and Britain, and tended to develop later, after the rise of Napoleon. François-René de Chateaubriand is often called the "Father of French Romanticism". In France, the movement is associated with the 19th century, particularly in the paintings of Theodore Gericault and Eugene Delacroix, the plays, poems and novels of Victor Hugo, and the novels of Alexandre Dumas and Stendhal.

Modern Portuguese poetry definitely develops its outstanding character from the work of its Romantic epitome, Almeida Garrett, a very prolific writer who helped shape the genre with the masterpiece *Folhas Caídas* (1853). This late arrival of a truly personal Romantic style would linger on to the beginning of the 20th century, notably through the works of poets such as Cesário Verde and António Nobre, segueing seamlessly to Modernism. However, an early Portuguese expression of Romanticism is found already in the genius of Manuel Maria Barbosa du Bocage, especially in his sonnets dated at the end of the 18th century.

In the United States, romantic Gothic literature made an early appearance with Washington Irving's *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* (1820) and *Rip Van Winkle* (1819), followed from 1823 onwards by the *Leatherstocking Tales* of James Fenimore Cooper, with their emphasis on heroic simplicity and their fervent landscape descriptions of an already-exotic mythicized frontier peopled by "noble savages", similar to the philosophical theory of Rousseau, exemplified by Uncas, from *The Last of the Mohicans*. There are picturesque "local color" elements in Washington Irving's essays and especially his travel books. Edgar Allan Poe's tales of the macabre and his balladic poetry were more influential in France than at home, but the romantic American novel developed fully in Nathaniel Hawthorne's atmosphere and melodrama. Later Transcendentalist writers such as Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson still show elements of its influence and imagination, as does the romantic realism of Walt Whitman. The poetry of Emily Dickinson—nearly unread in her own time—and Herman Melville's novel *Moby-Dick* can be taken as epitomes of American Romantic literature. By the 1880s, however, psychological and social realism was competing with romanticism in the novel.

### 2.3.2 Nature

The subject of the relationship of Romanticism to nature is a vast one which can only be touched on here. There has hardly been a time since the earliest antiquity that Europeans did not celebrate nature in some form or other, but the attitudes toward nature common in the Western world today emerged mostly during the Romantic period. The Enlightenment had talked of "natural law" as the source of truth, but such law was manifest in human society and related principally to civic behavior. Unlike the Chinese and Japanese, Europeans had traditionally had little interest in natural landscapes for their own sake. Paintings of rural settings were usually extremely idealized: either well-tended gardens or tidy versions of the Arcadian myth of ancient Greece and Rome.

Here again, Rousseau is an important figure. He loved to go for long walks, Climb Mountains, and generally "commune with nature." His last work is called *Les Reveries du promeneur solitaire*. Europe had become more civilized, safer, and its citizens now felt freer to travel for the simple pleasure of it. Mountain passes and deep woods were no longer merely perilous hazards to be traversed, but awesome views to be enjoyed and pondered. The violence of ocean storms came to be appreciated as an esthetic object in any number of paintings, musical tone poems, and written descriptions, as in the opening of Goethe's *Faust*.

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None of this had been true of earlier generations, who had tended to view the human and the natural as opposite poles, with the natural sometimes exercising an evil power to degrade and dehumanize those who were to drawn to it. The Romantics, just as they cultivated sensitivity to emotion generally, especially cultivated sensitivity to nature. It came to be felt that to muse by a stream; to view a thundering waterfall or even confront a rolling desert could be morally improving. Much of the nature writing of the 19th century has a religious quality to it absent in any other period. This shift in attitude was to prove extremely powerful and long-lasting, as we see today in the love of Germans, Britons and Americans for wilderness.

It may seem paradoxical that it was just at the moment when the industrial revolution was destroying large tracts of woods and fields and creating an unprecedentedly artificial environment in Europe that this taste arose; but in fact it could probably have arisen in no other time. It is precisely people in urban environments aware of the stark contrast between their daily lives and the existence of the inhabitants of the wild who romanticise nature. They are attracted to it precisely because they are no longer unselfconsciously part of it. Faust, for instance, is powerfully drawn to the moonlit landscape outside his study at the beginning of Goethe's play largely because he is so discontented with the artificial world of learning in which he has so far lived.

## 2.4 Conceit

In literature, a conceit is an extended metaphor with a complex logic that governs a poetic passage or entire poem. By juxtaposing, usurping and manipulating images and ideas in surprising ways, a conceit invites the reader into a more sophisticated understanding of an object of comparison. Extended conceits in English are part of the poetic idiom of Mannerism, during the later sixteenth and early seventeenth century.



Task

What do you mean by the term conceit in literature?

### 2.4.1 Metaphysical Conceit

In English literature the term is generally associated with the 17th century metaphysical poets, an extension of contemporary usage. In the metaphysical conceit, metaphors have a much more purely conceptual, and thus tenuous, relationship between the things being compared. Helen Gardner observed that "a conceit is a comparison whose ingenuity is more striking than its justness" and that "a comparison becomes a conceit when we are made to concede likeness while being strongly conscious of unlikeness." An example of the latter would be George Herbert's "Praise," in which the generosity of God is compared to a bottle which will take in an infinite amount of the speaker's tears.

An often-cited example of the metaphysical conceit is the metaphor from John Donne's "The Flea", in which a flea that bites both the speaker and his lover becomes a conceit arguing that his lover has no reason to deny him sexually, although they are not married:

Oh stay! three lives in one flea spare  
Where we almost, yea more than married are.  
This flea is you and I, and this  
Our marriage-bed and marriage-temple is.

When Sir Philip Sidney begins a sonnet with the conventional idiomatic expression "My true-love hath my heart and I have his", but then takes the metaphor literally and teases out a number of literal possibilities and extravagantly playful conceptions in the exchange of hearts, the result is a fully formed conceit.

### 2.4.2 Petrarchan Conceit

The Petrarchan conceit, used in love poetry, exploits a particular set of images for comparisons with the despairing lover and his un pitying but idolized mistress. For instance, the lover is a ship on a stormy sea, and his mistress “a cloud of dark disdain”; or else the lady is a sun whose beauty and virtue shine on her lover from a distance.

The paradoxical pain and pleasure of lovesickness is often described using oxymoron, for instance uniting peace and war, burning and freezing, and so forth. But images which were novel in the sonnets of Petrarch became clichés in the poetry of later imitators. Romeo uses hackneyed Petrarchan conceits when describing his love for Rosaline as “bright smoke, cold fire, sick health”.

## 2.5 Couplet

A couplet is a pair of lines of meter in poetry. It usually consists of two lines that rhyme and have the same meter. While traditionally couplets rhyme, not all do. A poem may use white space to mark out couplets if they do not rhyme. Couplets with a meter of iambic pentameter are called heroic couplets. The Poetic epigram is also in the couplet form.



*Notes* Couplets can also appear in more complex rhyme schemes. For example, Shakespearean sonnets end with a couplet.

Rhyming couplets are one of the simplest rhyme schemes in poetry. Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* are written in rhyming couplets. John Dryden in the 17th century and Alexander Pope in the 18th century were both well known for their writing in heroic couplets. They can be found in books such as *midsummer nights dream*.

Because the rhyme comes so quickly in rhyming couplets, it tends to call attention to itself. Good rhyming couplets tend to “snap” as both the rhyme and the idea come to a quick close in two lines. Here are some examples of rhyming couplets where the sense as well as the sound “rhymes”:

True wit is nature to advantage dress’d;  
 What oft was thought, but ne’er so well express’d.  
 — Alexander Pope

Whether or not we find what we are seeking  
 is idle, biologically speaking.  
 — Edna St. Vincent Millay (at the end of a sonnet)

On the other hand, because rhyming couplets have such a predictable rhyme scheme, they can feel artificial and plodding. Here is a Pope parody of the predictable rhymes of his era:

Where-e’er you find “the cooling western breeze,”  
 In the next line, it “whispers through the trees;”  
 If crystal streams “with pleasing murmurs creep,”  
 The reader’s threatened (not in vain) with “sleep.”

## 2.6 Elegy

In literature, an elegy is a mournful, melancholic or plaintive poem, especially a funeral song or a lament for the dead. “Elegy” may denote a type of musical work, usually of a sad or somber nature.

**Notes**

The elegy began as an ancient Greek metrical form and is traditionally written in response to the death of a person or group. Though similar in function, the elegy is distinct from the epitaph, ode, and eulogy: the epitaph is very brief; the ode solely exalts; and the eulogy is most often written in formal prose.

The elements of a traditional elegy mirror three stages of loss. First, there is a lament, where the speaker expresses grief and sorrow, then praise and admiration of the idealized dead, and finally consolation and solace. These three stages can be seen in W. H. Auden's classic "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," written for the Irish master, which includes these stanzas:

With the farming of a verse  
Make a vineyard of the curse,  
Sing of human unsuccess  
In a rapture of distress;

In the deserts of the heart  
Let the healing fountain start,  
In the prison of his days  
Teach the free man how to praise.

Other well-known elegies include "Fugue of Death" by Paul Celan, written for victims of the Holocaust, and "O Captain! My Captain!" by Walt Whitman, written for President Abraham Lincoln.

Many modern elegies have been written not out of a sense of personal grief, but rather a broad feeling of loss and metaphysical sadness. A famous example is the mournful series of ten poems in *Duino Elegies*, by German poet Rainer Maria Rilke. The first poem begins:

If I cried out  
who would hear me up there  
among the angelic orders?  
  
And suppose one suddenly  
took me to his heart  
I would shrivel.

Other works that can be considered elegiac in the broader sense are James Merrill's monumental *The Changing Light at Sandover*, Robert Lowell's "For the Union Dead," Seamus Heaney's *The Haw Lantern*, and the work of Czeslaw Milosz, which often laments the modern cruelties he witnessed in Europe.

**Self Assessment**

State the following sentences are True or False:

1. Romanticism was more widespread both in its origins and influence.
2. The English poet Geoffrey Chaucer, who lived in the 14th century was part of the origin of the concept.
3. Conceit is a pair of lines of meter in poetry.
4. Couplet consist of two lines that rhyme and have the same meter.
5. The epic began as an ancient Greek metrical form.

## 2.7 Epic

An epic is a lengthy narrative poem, ordinarily concerning a serious subject containing details of heroic deeds and events significant to a culture or nation. Oral poetry may qualify as an epic, and Albert Lord and Milman Parry have argued that classical epics were fundamentally an oral poetic form. Nonetheless, epics have been written down at least since the works of Virgil, Dante Alighieri, and John Milton. Many probably would not have survived if not written down. The first epics are known as primary, or original, epics. One such epic is the Old English story Beowulf. Epics that attempt to imitate these like Milton's Paradise Lost are known as literary, or secondary, epics. Another type of epic poetry is epyllion, which is a brief narrative poem with a romantic or mythological theme. The term, which means 'little epic', came into use in the nineteenth century. It refers primarily to the erudite, shorter hexameter poems of the Hellenistic period and the similar works composed at Rome from the age of the neoterics; to a lesser degree, the term includes some poems of the English Renaissance, particularly those influenced by Ovid. The most famous example of classical epyllion is perhaps Catullus 64.



*Did u know?* In the East, the most famous works of epic poetry are the Ramayana and Mahabharata, with the Iliad and the Odyssey, which form part of the Western canon, fulfilling the same function in the Western world.

### 2.7.1 Oral Epics or World Folk Epics

The first epics were products of preliterate societies and oral poetic traditions. In these traditions, poetry is transmitted to the audience and from performer to performer by purely oral means.

Early twentieth-century study of living oral epic traditions in the Balkans by Milman Parry and Albert Lord demonstrated the paratactic model used for composing these poems. What they demonstrated was that oral epics tend to be constructed in short episodes, each of equal status, interest and importance. This facilitates memorization, as the poet is recalling each episode in turn and using the completed episodes to recreate the entire epic as he performs it.



*Task* Is epic a lengthy narrative poem. Why?

Parry and Lord also showed that the most likely source for written texts of the epics of Homer was dictation from an oral performance.

Epic is a long narrative poem in elevated style presenting characters of high position in adventures forming an organic whole through their relation to a central heroic figure and through their development of episodes important to the history of a nation or race.

An attempt to delimitate nine main characteristics of an epic:

1. It opens in medias res.
2. The setting is vast, covering many nations, the world or the universe.
3. Begins with an invocation to a muse (epic invocation).
4. It starts with a statement of the theme.
5. Includes the use of epithets.
6. Contains long lists (epic catalogue).

Notes

7. Features long and formal speeches.
8. Shows divine intervention on human affairs.
9. "Star" heroes that embody the values of the civilization.

The hero generally participates in a cyclical journey or quest, faces adversaries that try to defeat him in his journey and returns home significantly transformed by his journey.

The epic hero illustrates traits, performs deeds, and exemplifies certain morals that are valued by the society the epic originates from. Many epic heroes are recurring characters in the legends of their native culture.

### 2.7.2 Conventions of Epics

1. **Praepositio:** Opens by stating the theme or cause of the epic. This may take the form of a purpose (as in Milton, who proposed "to justify the ways of God to men"); of a question (as in the Iliad, which Homer initiates by asking a Muse to sing of Achilles' anger); or of a situation (as in the Song of Roland, with Charlemagne in Spain).
2. **Invocation:** Writer invokes a Muse, one of the nine daughters of Zeus. The poet prays to the Muses to provide him with divine inspiration to tell the story of a great hero. (This convention is obviously restricted to cultures influenced by European Classical culture. The Epic of Gilgamesh, for example, or the Bhagavata Purana would obviously not contain this element).
3. **In medias res:** narrative opens "in the middle of things", with the hero at his lowest point. Usually flashbacks show earlier portions of the story.
4. **Enumeratio:** Catalogues and genealogies are given. These long lists of objects, places, and people place the finite action of the epic within a broader, universal context. Often, the poet is also paying homage to the ancestors of audience members.
5. **Epithet:** Heavy use of repetition or stock phrases: e.g., Homer's "rosy-fingered dawn" and "wine-dark sea."

## 2.8 Summary

- Neoclassicism is the name given to Western movements in the decorative and visual arts, literature, theatre, music, and architecture that draw inspiration from the "classical" art and culture of Ancient Greece or Ancient Rome.
- Romanticism was more widespread both in its origins and influence.
- In literature, Romanticism found recurrent themes in the evocation or criticism of the past, the cult of "sensibility" with its emphasis on women and children, the heroic isolation of the artist or narrator, and respect for a new, wilder, untrammelled and "pure" nature.
- The subject of the relationship of Romanticism to nature is a vast one which can only be touched on here.
- In literature, a conceit is an extended metaphor with a complex logic that governs a poetic passage or entire poem.

## 2.9 Keywords

**Impetus** : The force or energy with which a body moves.

**Usurping** : Illegally or by force.

**Conceit** : An elaborate metaphor or artistic effect.

*Opera* : A dramatic work in one or more acts that is set to music for singers and instrumentalists.

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*Eulogy* : A speech or piece of writing that praises someone highly.

## 2.10 Review Questions

1. Explain the term Neoclassicism.
2. What are the three divisions of Neoclassicism?
3. What is Romantic literature? Explain.
4. Describe the relationship of Romanticism to nature.
5. What do you mean by conceit in literature? Explain metaphysical conceit and petrarchan conceit.

## Answers: Self Assessment

- |         |          |          |
|---------|----------|----------|
| 1. True | 2. False | 3. False |
| 4. True | 5. False |          |

## 2.11 Further Readings



Books

- |                                      |                |
|--------------------------------------|----------------|
| A Glossary of Literary Terms         | — M.H.Abrams   |
| Literary Terms: a practical glossary | — Brian Moon   |
| A Guide to Literary Terms            | — Gail Rae     |
| A new handbook of Literary terms     | — David Mikics |



Online links

- <http://www.uh.edu/engines/romanticism/introduction.html>  
[http://www.tnellen.com/cybereng/lit\\_terms/terms/Literary.Terms.html](http://www.tnellen.com/cybereng/lit_terms/terms/Literary.Terms.html)

## Unit 3: Major Literary Terms-III

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### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Know about figure of speech, heroic couplet, lyric, simile
- Know about iambic pentameter and metonymy
- Know about history and variations of heroic couplet.

### Introduction

Literary elements refer to particular identifiable characteristics of a whole text. They are not “used,” per se, by authors; they represent the elements of storytelling which are common to all literary and

narrative forms. For example, every story has a theme, every story has a setting, every story has a conflict, every story is written from a particular point-of-view, etc. In order to be discussed legitimately as part of a textual analysis, literary elements must be specifically identified for that particular text.

### 3.1 Figure of Speech

A figure of speech is the use of a word or words diverging from its usual meaning. It can also be a special repetition, arrangement or omission of words with literal meaning, or a phrase with a specialized meaning not based on the literal meaning of the words in it, as in idiom, metaphor, simile, hyperbole, or personification. Figures of speech often provide emphasis, freshness of expression, or clarity. However, clarity may also suffer from their use, as any figure of speech introduces an ambiguity between literal and figurative interpretation. A figure of speech is sometimes called a rhetorical figure or a locution.

Not all theories of meaning have a concept of “literal language”. Under theories that do not, figure of speech is not an entirely coherent concept.

Rhetoric originated as the study of the ways in which a source text can be transformed to suit the goals of the person reusing the material. For this goal, classical rhetoric detected four fundamental operations that can be used to transform a sentence or a larger portion of a text: expansion, abridgement, switching, and transferring.

The four fundamental operations or categories of change, governing the formation of all figures of speech are:

- addition (*adiectio*), also called repetition/expansion/superabundance
- omission (*detractio*), also called subtraction/abridgement/lack
- transposition (*transmutatio*), also called transferring
- permutation (*immutatio*), also called switching/interchange/substitution.

These four operations were detected by classical rhetoricians, and still serve to encompass the various figures of speech. Originally these were called, in Latin, the four operations of *quadripartita ratio*. The ancient surviving text mentioning them, although not recognizing them as the four fundamental principles, is the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, of unknown authorship, where they are called (addition), (omission), (transposition) and (permutation). Quintillian then mentioned them in *Institutio Oratoria*. Philo of Alexandria also listed them as addition, subtraction, transposition, and transmutation.

#### **Examples**

The figure of speech comes in many varieties. The aim is to use the language inventively to accentuate the effect of what is being said. A few examples follow:

- “Round the rugged rocks the ragged rascal ran” is an example of alliteration, where the consonant r is used repeatedly. Whereas, “Sister Suzy sewing socks for soldiers” is a particular form of alliteration called sibilance, because it repeats the letter. Both are commonly used in poetry.
- “She would run up the stairs and then a new set of curtains” is a variety of zeugma called a syllepsis. Run up refers to ascending and also to manufacturing. The effect is enhanced by the momentary suggestion, through a pun, that she might be climbing up the curtains. The ellipsis or omission of the second use of the verb makes the reader think harder about what is being said.
- “Military Intelligence is an oxymoron” is the use of direct sarcasm to suggest that the military would have no intelligence. This might be considered to be a satire and a terse aphorism. “But he’s a soldier, so he has to be an Einstein” is the use of sarcasm through irony for the same effect. The use of hyperbole by using the word Einstein calls attention to the ironic intent. An Einstein is an example of *synchdoche*, as it uses a particular name to represent a class of people: geniuses.

Notes

- “I had butterflies in my stomach” is a metaphor, referring to my nervousness feeling as if there were flying insects in my stomach. To say “it was like having some butterflies in my stomach” would be a simile, because it uses the word like which is missing in the metaphor.

## **3.2 Heroic Couplet**

A heroic couplet is a traditional form for English poetry, commonly used for epic and narrative poetry; it refers to poems constructed from a sequence of rhyming pairs of iambic pentameter lines. The rhyme is always masculine. Use of the heroic couplet was first pioneered by Geoffrey Chaucer in the Legend of Good Women and the Canterbury Tales. Chaucer is also widely credited with first extensive use of iambic pentameter.

### **Example**

A frequently-cited example illustrating the use of heroic couplets is this passage from Cooper’s Hill by John Denham, part of his description of the Thames:

O could I flow like thee, and make thy stream  
My great example, as it is my theme!  
Though deep yet clear, though gentle yet not dull;  
Strong without rage, without o’erflowing full.

### **3.2.1 History**

The term “heroic couplet” is sometimes reserved for couplets that are largely closed and self-contained, as opposed to the enjambed couplets of poets like John Donne. The heroic couplet is often identified with the English Baroque works of John Dryden and Alexander Pope. Major poems in the closed couplet, apart from the works of Dryden and Pope, are Samuel Johnson’s *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Deserted Village*, and John Keats’s *Lamia*. The form was immensely popular in the 18th century. The looser type of couplet, with occasional enjambment, was one of the standard verse forms in medieval narrative poetry, largely because of the influence of the Canterbury Tales.

### **3.2.2 Variations**

English heroic couplets, especially in Dryden and his followers, are sometimes varied by the use of the occasional alexandrine, or hexameter line, and triplet. Often these two variations are used together to heighten a climax. The breaking of the regular pattern of rhyming pentameter pairs brings about a sense of poetic closure. Here are three examples from Book IV of Dryden’s translation of the *Aeneid*.

#### **Triplet**

Nor let him then enjoy supreme command;  
But fall, untimely, by some hostile hand,  
And lie unburied on the barren sand!  
(ll. 890-892)

#### **Alexandrine**

Her lofty courser, in the court below,  
Who his majestic rider seems to know,

Proud of his purple trappings, paws the ground,  
And champs the golden bit, and spreads the foam around.

(ll. 190-193)

### Alexandrine and Triplet

My Tyrians, at their injur'd queen's command,  
Had toss'd their fires amid the Trojan band;  
At once extinguish'd all the faithless name;  
And I myself, in vengeance of my shame,  
Had fall'n upon the pile, to mend the fun'ral flame.

(ll. 867-871)

## 3.3 Iambic Pentameter

Iambic pentameter is a commonly used metrical line in traditional verse and verse drama. The term describes the particular rhythm that the words establish in that line. That rhythm is measured in small groups of syllables; these small groups of syllables are called "feet". The word "iambic" describes the type of foot that is used (in English, an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable). The word "pentameter" indicates that a line has five of these "feet."

These terms originally applied to the quantitative meter of classical poetry. They were adopted to describe the equivalent meters in English accentual-syllabic verse. Different languages express rhythm in different ways. In Ancient Greek and Latin, the rhythm is created through the alternation of short and long syllables. In English, the rhythm is created through the use of stress, alternating between unstressed and stressed syllables. An English unstressed syllable is equivalent to a classical short syllable, while an English stressed syllable is equivalent to a classical long syllable. When a pair of syllables is arranged as a short followed by a long, or an unstressed followed by a stressed, pattern, that foot is said to be "iambic". The English word "trapeze" is an example of an iambic pair of syllables, since the word is made up of two syllables ("tra—peze") and is pronounced with the stress on the second syllable ("tra—PEZE", rather than "TRA—peze"). Iambic pentameter is a line made up of five such pairs of short/long, or unstressed/stressed, syllables.

Iambic rhythms come relatively naturally in English. Iambic pentameter is the most common meter in English poetry; it is used in many of the major English poetic forms, including blank verse, the heroic couplet, and some of the traditional rhymed stanza forms. William Shakespeare used iambic pentameter in his plays and sonnets.



*Did u know?* Iambic pentameter is meter that Shakespeare nearly always used when writing in verse. Most of his plays were written in iambic pentameter, except for lower-class characters who speak in prose.

### 3.3.1 Rhythmic Variations

In his plays, Shakespeare didn't always stick to ten syllables. He often played around with iambic pentameter to give color and feeling to his character's speeches. This is the key to understanding Shakespeare's language.

## Notes

**3.3.2 Feminine Ending**

Sometimes Shakespeare added an extra unstressed beat at the end of a line to emphasize a character's sense of contemplation. This variation is called a feminine ending and Hamlet's famous question is the perfect example:

To **be**, / or **not** / to **be**: / **that** is / the **ques-** / -tion

**3.3.3 Inversion**

Shakespeare also reverses the order of the stresses in some iambic to help emphasize certain words or ideas. If we look closely at the fourth iambus in the Hamlet quote above, we can see how he has placed an emphasis on the word "that" by inverting the stresses. Occasionally, Shakespeare will completely break the rules and place two stressed syllables in the same iambus, as the following quote from Richard III demonstrates:

**Now** is / the **win-** / -ter of / **our dis-** / content

In this example, the fourth iambus emphasizes that it is "our discontent," and the first iambus emphasizes that we are feeling this "now."

**Why is Iambic Pentameter Important?**

Shakespeare will always feature prominently in any discussion of iambic pentameter because he used the form with great dexterity-especially in his sonnets, but you must not be tricked into thinking that he invented it. Rather, it is a standard literary convention that has been used by many writers before and after Shakespeare. Historians are not sure how the speeches were read aloud-whether delivered naturally or with an emphasis on the stressed words. In my opinion, this is unimportant. What really matters is that the study of iambic pentameter gives us a rare glimpse into the inner workings of Shakespeare's writing process.

**3.4 Lyric**

Lyrics (in singular form lyric) are a set of words that make up a song. The writer of lyrics is a lyricist or lyrist. The meaning of lyrics can either be explicit or implicit. Some lyrics are abstract, almost unintelligible, and, in such cases, their explication emphasizes form, articulation, meter, and symmetry of expression. The lyricist of traditional musical forms such as Opera is known as a librettist.



*Notes* Lyric derives from the Greek word, meaning "singing to the lyre". A lyric poem is one that expresses a subjective, personal point of view.

The word lyric came to be used for the "words of a song"; this meaning was recorded in 1876. The common plural, predominates contemporary usage. Use of the singular form lyric to refer to a song's complete set of words is grammatically acceptable. However it's not considered acceptable to refer to a singular word in a song as a lyric.

Lyric poetry is a genre of poetry that expresses personal and emotional feelings. In the ancient world, lyric poems were those which were sung to the lyre. Lyric poems do not have to rhyme, and today do not need to be set to music or a beat. Aristotle, in *Poetics* 1447a, mentions lyric poetry

along with drama, epic poetry, dancing, painting and other forms of mimesis. The lyric poem, dating from the Romantic era, does have some thematic antecedents in ancient Greek and Roman verse, but the ancient definition was based on metrical criteria, and in archaic and classical Greek culture presupposed live performance accompanied by a stringed instrument.

### 3.4.1 Forms of Lyrics

Although arguably the most popular form of lyric poetry in the Western tradition is the 14-line sonnet, either in its Petrarchan or its Shakespearean form, lyric poetry appears in a variety of forms. Other forms of the lyric include ballades, villanelles, odes, pastourelle and canzone.

Ancient Hebrew poetry relied on repetition, alliteration, and chiasmus for many of its effects. Ancient Greek and Roman lyric poetry was composed in strophes. Pindar's epinician odes, where strophe and antistrophe are followed by an epode, represent an expansion of the same basic principle. The Greeks distinguished, however, between lyric monody (e.g. Sappho, Anacreon) and choral lyric (e.g. Pindar, Bacchylides). In all such poetry the fundamental formal feature is the repetition of a metrical pattern larger than a verse or distich. In some cases (although not in antiquity), form and theme are wed in the conception of a genre, as in the medieval *alba* or *aubade*, a dawn song in which lovers must part after a night of love, often with the watchman's refrain telling them it is time to go. A common feature of some lyric forms is the refrain of one or more verses that end each strophe. The refrain is repeated throughout the poem, either exactly or with variation. In the medieval Galician-Portuguese *cantigas de amigo*, thought to reflect an old oral tradition, 90% of the texts have a refrain.



Task

What do you mean by the term lyric? List the common meters.

Much lyric poetry depends on regular meter based either on number of syllables or on stress. The most common meters are as follows:

- Iambic—Two syllables, with the short or unstressed syllable followed by the long or stressed syllable.
- Trochaic—Two syllables, with the long or stressed syllable followed by the short or unstressed syllable. In English, this metre is found almost entirely in lyric poetry.
- Pyrrhic—Two unstressed syllables
- Anapestic—Three syllables, with the first two short or unstressed and the last long or stressed.
- Dactylic—Three syllables, with the first one long or stressed and the other two short or unstressed.
- Spondaic—Two syllables, with two successive long or stressed syllables.

Some forms have a combination of meters, often using a different meter for the refrain.

## 3.5 Simile

A simile is a figure of speech that directly compares two different things, usually by employing the words "like", "as", or "than". Even though both similes and metaphors are forms of comparison, similes indirectly compare the two ideas and allow them to remain distinct in spite of their similarities, whereas metaphors compare two things directly. For instance, a simile that compares a person with a

**Notes**

bullet would go as follows: "Chris was a record-setting runner as fast as a speeding bullet." A metaphor might read something like, "When Chris ran, he was a speeding bullet racing along the track." A mnemonic for a simile is that "a simile is similar or alike."

### 3.5.1 In Literature

Similes have been widely used in literature for their expressiveness as a figure of speech:

- Curley was flopping like a fish on a line.
- The very mist on the Essex marshes was like a gauzy and radiant fabric.
- Why, man, he doth bestride the narrow world like a Colossus. Dickens, in the opening to 'A Christmas Carol', says "But the wisdom of our ancestors is in the simile."

### 3.5.2 Explicit Similes

A simile can explicitly provide the basis of a comparison or leave this basis implicit. For instance, the following similes are implicit, leaving an audience to determine for themselves which features are being predicated of a target:

- She is like a dynamo.
- For he is like a refiner's fire.

More detail is present in the following similes, but it is still a matter of inference as to what features are actually predicated of the target:

- He fights like a lion.
- She swims like a dolphin.
- He slithers like a snake.
- He runs like a cheetah.
- He drinks like a fish.
- She kicks like a mule.
- He flopped like a fish out of water.

### Self Assessment

Fill in the blanks:

1. A ..... is a traditional form for english poetry.
2. The heroic couplet was first pioneered by ..... .
3. .... is commonly used metrical line in traditional verse and verse drama.
4. .... rhythms come relatively naturally in english.
5. .... is a figure of speech used in rhetoric.

### 3.6 Metonymy

Metonymy is a figure of speech used in rhetoric in which a thing or concept is not called by its own name, but by the name of something intimately associated with that thing or concept. For instance, "Hollywood" is used as a metonym (an instance of metonymy) for American cinema, because of the fame and cultural identity of Hollywood, California as the historical center of movie studios and

movie stars. Another example is “Westminster,” which is used as a metonym for the Parliament of the United Kingdom, because it is located there.

### Cognitive science and linguistics for metaphor and metonymy

Metonymy works by the contiguity (association) between two concepts, whereas metaphor works by the similarity between them. When people use metonymy, they do not typically wish to transfer qualities from one referent to another as they do with metaphor: there is nothing press-like about reporters or crown-like about a monarch, but “the press” and “the crown” are both common metonyms.

Two examples using the term “fishing” help make the distinction better. The phrase “to fish pearls” uses metonymy, drawing from “fishing” the idea of taking things from the ocean. What is carried across from “fishing fish” to “fishing pearls” is the domain of metonymy.

In contrast, the metaphorical phrase “fishing for information” transfers the concept of fishing into a new domain. If someone is “fishing” for information, we do not imagine that he or she is anywhere near the ocean; rather, we transpose elements of the action of fishing into a new domain thus, metonymy works by calling up a domain of usage and an array of associations, whereas metaphor picks a target set of meanings and transfers them to a new domain of usage.

## 3.7 Summary

- A figure of speech is the use of a word or words diverging from its usual meaning.
- Figures of speech often provide emphasis, freshness of expression, or clarity.
- The term “heroic couplet” is sometimes reserved for couplets that are largely closed and self-contained.
- Iambic pentameter is a commonly used metrical line in traditional verse and verse drama.
- Metonymy is a figure of speech used in rhetoric in which a thing or concept is not called by its own name.

## 3.8 Keywords

*Ambiguity* : Open to more than one interpretation.

*Accentual* : A particular way of pronouncing a language.

*Couplet* : A pair of successive lines of verse.

*Metaphor* : A figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to something to which it is not literally applicable.

*Monarch* : A sovereign head of state.

## 3.9 Review Questions

1. Describe the significant features of figure of speech.
2. Write short note on simile and heroic couplet.
3. Explain the term lyric and forms of lyric.
4. What is an iambic pentameter? Explain.

### Answers: Self Assessment

1. Heroic couplet
2. Geoffrey Chaucer
3. Iambic pentameter
4. Iambic
5. Metonymy

Notes

**3.10 Further Readings**



*Books*

- |                                      |                |
|--------------------------------------|----------------|
| A Glossary of Literary Terms         | — M.H.Abrams   |
| Literary Terms: a practical glossary | — Brian Moon   |
| A Guide to Literary Terms            | — Gail Rae     |
| A new handbook of Literary terms     | — David Mikics |



*Online links*

- <http://www.christianleadershipcenter.org/616/fospeech.htm>  
<http://iambicpentameter.net/>

## Unit 4: Major Literary Terms-IV

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## Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Explain the term synecdoche
- Know about meter in poetry
- Explain the term ode, pastoral poetry, personification
- Discuss the term rhyme, types of rhyme and sonnet.

## Introduction

Literary techniques refers to any specific, deliberate constructions or choices of language which an author uses to convey meaning in a particular way. An author's use of a literary technique usually occurs with a single word or phrase, or a particular group of words or phrases, at one single point in a text. Unlike literary elements, literary techniques are not necessarily present in every text; they represent deliberate, conscious choices by individual authors.

### 4.1 Synecdoche

Synecdoche, wherein a specific part of something is used to refer to the whole, is usually understood as a specific kind of metonymy. Sometimes, however, people make an absolute distinction between a metonym and a synecdoche, treating metonymy as different from rather than inclusive of synecdoche. There is a similar problem with the usage of simile and metaphor.

Synecdoche is closely related to metonymy, the figure of speech in which a term denoting one thing is used to refer to a related thing; indeed, synecdoche is sometimes considered a subclass of metonymy. It is more distantly related to other figures of speech, such as metaphor.

More rigorously, metonymy and synecdoche may be considered as sub-species of metaphor, intending metaphor as a type of conceptual substitution. In Lanham's *Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*, the three terms have somewhat restrictive definitions, arguably in tune with a certain interpretation of their etymologies from Greek:

- Metaphor: changing a word from its literal meaning to one not properly applicable but analogous to it; assertion of identity rather than, as with simile, likeness.
- Metonymy: substitution of cause for effect, proper name for one of its qualities, etc.
- Synecdoche: substitution of a part for whole, species for genus, etc.

The use of synecdoche is a common way to emphasize an important aspect of a fictional character; for example, a character might be consistently described by a single body part, such as the eyes, which come to represent the character. This is often used when the main character does not know or care about the names of the characters that he is referring to.

Also, sonnets and other forms of love poetry frequently use synecdoches to characterize the beloved in terms of individual body parts rather than a whole, coherent self. This practice is especially common in the Petrarchan sonnet, where the idealised beloved is often described part by part, from head to toe.



Task

What is a poem with an example of synecdoche and metonymy?

Notes

One example of a simple sentence that displays synecdoche, metaphor, and metonymy is: “Fifty keels ploughed the deep”, where “keels” is the synecdoche, as it names the whole (the ship) after a particular part (of the ship); “ploughed” is the metaphor, as it substitutes the concept of ploughing a field for moving through the ocean; and “the deep” is the metonym, as “depth” is an attribute associated with the ocean.

## 4.2 Meter

In poetry, meter is the basic rhythmic structure of a verse or lines in verse. Many traditional verse forms prescribe a specific verse meter, or a certain set of meters alternating in a particular order. The study of meters and forms of versification is known as prosody. Within linguistics, “prosody” is used in a more general sense that includes not only poetical meter but also the rhythmic aspects of prose, whether formal or informal, which vary from language to language, and sometimes between poetic traditions.

### 4.2.1 Qualitative vs. Quantitative Meter

The meter of much poetry of the Western world and elsewhere is based on particular patterns of syllables of particular types. The familiar type of meter in English language poetry is called qualitative meter, with stressed syllables coming at regular intervals (*e.g.* in iambic pentameter, typically every even-numbered syllable). Many Romance languages use a scheme that is somewhat similar but where the position of only one particular stressed syllable (*e.g.*, the last) needs to be fixed.



Notes

The meter of the old Germanic poetry of languages such as Old Norse and Old English was radically different, but still was based on stress patterns.

Many classical languages, however, use a different scheme known as quantitative meter, where patterns are based on syllable weight rather than stress. In dactylic hexameter of Classical Latin and Classical Greek, for example, each of the six feet making up the line was either a dactyl (long-short-short) or spondee (long-long), where a long syllable was literally one that took longer to pronounce than a short syllable: specifically, a syllable consisting of a long vowel or diphthong or followed by two consonants. The stress pattern of the words made no difference to the meter. A number of other ancient languages also used quantitative meter, such as Sanskrit and Classical Arabic.

### 4.2.2 Old English

The metric system of Old English poetry was different from that of modern English, and more related to the verse forms of most of older Germanic languages. It used alliterative verse, a metrical pattern involving varied numbers of syllables but a fixed number (usually four) of strong stresses in each line. The unstressed syllables were relatively unimportant, but the caesurae played a major role in Old English poetry.

### 4.2.3 Modern English

Most English metre is classified according to the same system as Classical metre with an important difference. English is an accentual language, and therefore beats and offbeats (stressed and unstressed

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syllables) take the place of the long and short syllables of classical systems. In most English verse, the metre can be considered as a sort of back beat, against which natural speech rhythms vary expressively. The most common characteristic feet of English verse are the iamb in two syllables and the anapest in three.

#### 4.2.4 Metrical Systems

The number of metrical systems in English is not agreed upon. The four major types are: accentual verse, accentual-syllabic verse, syllabic verse and quantitative verse. The alliterative verse of Old English could also be added to this list, or included as a special type of accentual verse. Accentual verse focuses on the number of stresses in a line, while ignoring the number of offbeats and syllables; accentual-syllabic verse focuses on regulating both the number of stresses and the total number of syllables in a line; syllabic verse only counts the number of syllables in a line; quantitative verse regulates the patterns of long and short syllables (this sort of verse is often considered alien to English). It is to be noted, however, that the use of foreign metres in English is all but exceptional.

#### 4.2.5 Frequently Used Metres

The most frequently encountered metre of English verse is the iambic pentameter, in which the metrical norm is five iambic feet per line, though metrical substitution is common and rhythmic variations practically inexhaustible. John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, most sonnets, and much else besides in English are written in iambic pentameter. Lines of unrhymed iambic pentameter are commonly known as blank verse. Blank verse in the English language is most famously represented in the plays of William Shakespeare and the great works of Milton, though Tennyson (*Ulysses*, *The Princess*) and Wordsworth (*The Prelude*) also make notable use of it.

A rhymed pair of lines of iambic pentameter make a heroic couplet, a verse form which was used so often in the eighteenth century that it is now used mostly for humorous effect (although see *Pale Fire* for a non-trivial case). The most famous writers of heroic couplets are Dryden and Pope.

Another important metre in English is the ballad metre, also called the "common metre", which is a four-line stanza, with two pairs of a line of iambic tetrameter followed by a line of iambic trimeter; the rhymes usually fall on the lines of trimeter, although in many instances the tetrameter also rhymes. This is the metre of most of the Border and Scots or English ballads. In hymnody it is called the "common metre", as it is the most common of the named hymn metres used to pair many hymn lyrics with melodies, such as *Amazing Grace*:

Amazing Grace! how sweet the sound  
That saved a wretch like me;  
I once was lost, but now am found;  
Was blind, but now I see.

Emily Dickinson is famous for her frequent use of ballad metre:

Great streets of silence led away  
To neighborhoods of pause —  
Here was no notice — no dissent —  
No universe — no laws.

### 4.3 Ode

Ode is a type of lyrical verse. A classic ode is structured in three major parts: the strophe, the antistrophe, and the epode. Different forms such as the homostrophic ode and the irregular ode also exist. It is an

elaborately structured poem praising or glorifying an event or individual, describing nature intellectually as well as emotionally.

Greek odes were originally poetic pieces accompanied by symphonic orchestras. As time passed on, they gradually became known as personal lyric compositions whether sung or recited (with or without accompanied music). For some, the primary instrument of choice was either the aulos or the lyre (the most revered instrument of the Ancient Greeks). The written ode, as it was practiced by the Romans, returned to the lyrical form of the Lesbian lyricists.

There are three typical forms of odes: the Pindaric, Horatian, and irregular. Pindaric odes follow the form and style of Pindar. Horatian odes follow conventions of Horace; the odes of Horace deliberately imitated the Greek lyricists such as Alcaeus and Anacreon. Odes by Catullus, as well as other poetry of Catullus, was particularly inspired by Sappho. Irregular odes are rhyming, but they do not employ the three-part form of the Pindaric ode nor the two-or four-line stanza of the Horatian ode.

### 4.3.1 English Ode

An ode is typically a lyrical verse written in praise of, or dedicated to someone or something which captures the poet's interest or serves as an inspiration for the ode. The initial model for English odes was Horace, who used the form to write meditative lyrics on various themes. The earliest odes in the English language, using the word in its strict form, were the Epithalamium and Prothalamium of Edmund Spenser.

In the 17th century the most important original odes in English are those of Abraham Cowley and Andrew Marvell. Marvell, in his Horatian Ode upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland uses a regular form (two four-foot lines followed by two three-foot lines) modelled on Horace, while Cowley wrote "Pindarique" odes which had irregular patterns of line lengths and rhyme schemes, though they were iambic. The principle of Cowley's Pindariques was based on a misunderstanding of Pindar's metrical practice but was widely imitated nonetheless, with notable success by John Dryden. The English ode's most common rhyme scheme is ABABCDECDE.

## 4.4 Pastoral

Pastoral is a mode of literature in which the author employs various techniques to place the complex life into a simple one. Paul Alpers distinguishes pastoral as a mode rather than a genre, and he bases this distinction on the recurring attitude of power; that is to say that pastoral literature holds a humble perspective toward nature. Thus, pastoral as a mode occurs in many types of literature (poetry, drama, etc.) as well as genres (most notably the pastoral elegy).

Gifford defines pastoral in three ways. The first way emphasizes the historical literary perspective of the pastoral in which authors recognize and discuss life in the country and in particular the life of a shepherd. This is summed up by Leo Marx with the phrase "No shepherd, no pastoral". The second type of the pastoral is literature that "describes the country with an implicit or explicit contrast to the urban". The third type of pastoral depicts the country life with derogative classifications.

Traditionally, pastoral refers to the lives of herdsmen in a romanticized, exaggerated, but representative way. In literature, the adjective 'pastoral' refers to rural subjects and aspects of life in the countryside among shepherds, cowherds and other farm workers that are often romanticized and depicted in a highly unrealistic manner. The pastoral life is usually characterized as being closer to the Golden age than the rest of human life. The setting is a Locus Amoenus, or a beautiful place in nature, sometimes connected with images of the Garden of Eden. An example of the use of the genre is the short poem Robene and Makyne which also contains the conflicted emotions often present in the genre. A more tranquil mood is set by Christopher Marlowe's well known lines from *The Passionate Shepherd to His Love*:

## Notes

Come live with me and be my Love,  
 And we will all the pleasures prove  
 That hills and valleys, dale and field,  
 And all the craggy mountains yield.  
 There will we sit upon the rocks  
 And see the shepherds feed their flocks,  
 By shallow rivers, to whose falls  
 Melodious birds sing madrigals.

“The Passionate Shepherd to His Love” exhibits the concept of Gifford’s second definition of pastoral. The speaker of the poem, who is the titled shepherd, draws on the idealization of urban material pleasures to win over his love rather than resorting to the simplified pleasures of pastoral ideology. This can be seen in the listed items: “lined slippers,” “purest gold,” “silver dishes,” and “ivory table” (lines 13, 15, 16, 21, 23). The speaker takes on a voyeuristic point of view with his love, and they are not directly interacting with the other true shepherds and nature.

Pastoral shepherds and maidens usually have Greek names like Corydon or Philomela, reflecting the origin of the pastoral genre. Pastoral poems are set in beautiful rural landscapes, the literary term for which is “locus amoenus” (Latin for “beautiful place”), such as Arcadia, a rural region of Greece, mythological home of the god Pan, which was portrayed as a sort of Eden by the poets. The tasks of their employment with sheep and other rustic chores is held in the fantasy to be almost wholly undemanding and is left in the background, abandoning the shepherdesses and their swains in a state of almost perfect leisure. This makes them available for embodying perpetual erotic fantasies. The shepherds spend their time chasing pretty girls—or, at least in the Greek and Roman versions, pretty lads as well. The eroticism of Virgil’s second eclogue, *Formosum pastor Corydon ardebat Alexin* (“The shepherd Corydon burned with passion for pretty Alexis”) is entirely homosexual, although the use of that term is anachronistic due to a lack of any idea of sexual identity in the times in which Virgil was writing.

#### 4.4.1 Pastoral Poetry

Pastoral literature continued after Hesiod with the poetry of the Hellenistic Greek Theocritus, several of whose Idylls are set in the countryside and involve dialogues between herdsmen. Theocritus may have drawn on authentic folk traditions of Sicilian shepherds. He wrote in the Doric dialect but the metre he chose was the dactylic hexameter associated with the most prestigious form of Greek poetry, epic. This blend of simplicity and sophistication would play a major part in later pastoral verse. Theocritus was imitated by the Greek poets Bion and Moschus.



*Task* How do you write a pastoral poetry?

#### 4.4.2 Pastoral Epic

Milton is perhaps best known for his epic “Paradise Lost”, one of the few Pastoral epics ever written. A notable part of Paradise Lost is book IV where he chronicles Satan’s trespass into paradise. Milton’s iconic descriptions of the garden are shadowed by the fact that we see it from Satan’s perspective and are thus led to commiserate with him. Milton elegantly works through a presentation of Adam and Eve’s pastorally idyllic, eternally fertile living conditions and focuses upon their stewardship of the garden. He gives much focus to the fruit bearing trees and Adam and Eve’s care of them, sculpting an

image of pastoral harmony. However, Milton in turn continually comes back to Satan, constructing him as a character the audience can easily identify with and perhaps even like. Milton creates Satan as character meant to destabilize the audience's understanding of themselves and the world around them. Through this mode, Milton is able to create a working dialogue between the text and his audience about the 'truths' they hold for themselves.

## 4.5 Personification

Personification is giving human qualities to animals or objects. Personification is a figure of speech in which the poet describes an abstraction, a thing, or a nonhuman form as if it were a person. William Blake's "O Rose, thou art sick!", is one example; Donne's "Death, be not proud" is another. Gregory Corso quarrels with a series of personified abstractions in his poem "The Whole Mess . . . Almost." Personification is often used in symbolic or allegorical poetry; for instance, the virtue of Justice takes the form of the knight Artergal in Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*.

Personification - a figure of speech in which abstractions, animals, ideas, and inanimate objects are endowed with human form, character, traits, or sensibilities. An entirely imaginary creature or person also may be conceived of as representing an idea or object. Like a metaphor, personification is a frequent resource in poetry.

A colloquial example of personification is when one refers to a ship as "she." Another example of personification is "the wind shrieked through the window."

### **Example:**

A smiling moon, a jovial sun

In "Mirror" by Sylvia Plath, for example, the mirror—the "I" in the first line—is given the ability to speak, see and swallow, as well as human attributes such as truthfulness.

I am silver and exact.  
I have no preconceptions.  
Whatever I see I swallow immediately  
Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike.  
I am not cruel, only truthful—

In John Keats' "To Autumn," the fall season is personified as "sitting careless on a granary floor" (line 14) and "drowsed with the fume of poppies" (line 17.)

## 4.6 Rhyme

A rhyme is a repetition of similar sounds in two or more words and is most often used in poetry and songs. The word "rhyme" may also refer to a short poem, such as a rhyming couplet or other brief rhyming poem such as nursery rhymes.

In a perfect rhyme the last stressed vowel and all following sounds are identical in both words. If the sound preceding the stressed vowel is also identical, the rhyme is sometimes considered to be inferior and not a perfect rhyme after all. An example of such a "super-rhyme" or "more than perfect rhyme" is the "identical rhyme", in which not only the vowels but also the onsets of the rhyming syllables are identical, as in gun and begun. Punning rhymes such as "bare" and "bear" are also identical rhymes. The rhyme may of course extend even farther back than the last stressed vowel. If it extends all the way to the beginning of the line, so that there are two lines that sound identical, then it is called a "holorhyme".

Notes

### 4.6.1 Types of Rhyme

The word rhyme can be used in a specific and a general sense. In the specific sense, two words rhyme if their final stressed vowel and all following sounds are identical; two lines of poetry rhyme if their final strong positions are filled with rhyming words. A rhyme in the strict sense is also called a perfect rhyme. Examples are sight and flight, deign and gain, madness and sadness.

### 4.6.2 Perfect Rhymes

Perfect rhymes can be classified according to the number of syllables included in the rhyme, which is dictated by the location of the final stressed syllable.

- **Masculine:** a rhyme in which the stress is on the final syllable of the words (rhyme, sublime).
- **Feminine:** a rhyme in which the stress is on the penultimate (second from last) syllable of the words (picky, tricky).
- **Dactylic:** a rhyme in which the stress is on the antepenultimate (third from last) syllable (cacophonies, Aristophanes).

### 4.6.3 General Rhymes

In the general sense, general rhyme can refer to various kinds of phonetic similarity between words, and to the use of such similar-sounding words in organizing verse. Rhymes in this general sense are classified according to the degree and manner of the phonetic similarity:

- **Syllabic:** a rhyme in which the last syllable of each word sounds the same but does not necessarily contain vowels. (cleaver, silver, or pitter, patter).
- **Imperfect:** a rhyme between a stressed and an unstressed syllable. (wing, caring).
- **Semirhyme:** a rhyme with an extra syllable on one word. (bend, ending).
- **Oblique (or slant/forced):** a rhyme with an imperfect match in sound. (green, fiend; one, thumb).
- **Assonance:** matching vowels. (shake, hate) Assonance is sometimes used to refer to slant rhymes.
- **Consonance:** matching consonants. (rabies, robbers).
- **Half Rhyme (or sprung rhyme):** matching final consonants. (bent, ant).
- **Alliteration (or head rhyme):** matching initial consonants. (short, ship).

A rhyme is not classified as a rhyme if one of the words being rhymed is the entirety of the other word (for example, Ball and all).

### 4.6.4 Eye Rhyme

Eye rhymes or sight rhymes refer to similarity in spelling but not in sound, as with cough, bough, or love, move. These are not rhymes in the strict sense, but often were in earlier language periods.

### 4.6.5 Mind Rhyme

Mind Rhyme is a kind of substitution rhyme similar to rhyming slang, but it is less generally codified and is "heard" only when generated by a specific verse context. For instance, "this sugar is neat / and tastes so sour." If a reader or listener thinks of the word "sweet" instead of "sour", then a mind rhyme has occurred.

### 4.6.6 Classification by Position

The preceding classification has been based on the nature of the rhyme; but we may also classify rhymes according to their position in the verse:

- Tail rhyme is also called end rhyme: a rhyme in the final syllable(s) of a verse (the most common kind)
- When a word at the end of the line rhymes with a word in the interior of the line, it is called an internal rhyme.
- Holorhyme has already been mentioned, by which not just two individual words, but two entire lines rhyme.

A rhyme scheme is the pattern of rhyming lines in a poem. Internal rhyme is rhyme which occurs within a single line of verse.

- A form of verisimilitude often invoked in fantasy and science fiction invites readers to pretend such stories are true by referring to objects of the mind such as fictional books or years that do not exist apart from an imaginary world.

Imagination in this sense, not being limited to the acquisition of exact knowledge by the requirements of practical necessity, is, up to a certain point, free from objective restraints. The ability to imagine one's self in another person's place is very important to social relations and understanding.



*Did u know?* Albert Einstein said, "Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world." But in reality, without knowledge, imagination cannot be developed.

In various spheres, however, even imagination is in practice limited: thus a person whose imaginations do violence to the elementary laws of thought, or to the necessary principles of practical possibility, or to the reasonable probabilities of a given case is regarded as insane.

The same limitations beset imagination in the field of scientific hypothesis. Progress in scientific research is due largely to provisional explanations which are developed by imagination, but such hypotheses must be framed in relation to previously ascertained facts and in accordance with the principles of the particular science.

## 4.7 Sonnet

The sonnet is one of several forms of poetry originating in Europe, mainly Great Britain and Italy, and commonly has 14 lines. The term "sonnet" derives from the Occitan word sonet and the Italian word sonetto, both meaning "little song" or "little sound". By the thirteenth century, it had come to signify a poem of fourteen lines that follows a strict rhyme scheme and specific structure. The conventions associated with the sonnet have evolved over its history. The writers of sonnets are sometimes referred to as "sonneteers," although the term can be used derisively. One of the best-known sonnet writers is William Shakespeare, who wrote 154 of them (not including those that appear in his plays). A Shakespearean, or English, sonnet consists of 14 lines, each line containing ten syllables and written in iambic pentameter, in which a pattern of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable is repeated five times.



*Did u know?* The rhyme scheme in a Shakespearean sonnet is *a-b-a-b, c-d-c-d, e-f-e-f, g-g*; the last two lines are a rhyming couplet.

## Notes

Traditionally, English poets employ iambic pentameter when writing sonnets, but not all English sonnets have the same metrical structure: the first sonnet in Sir Philip Sidney's sequence *Astrophel and Stella*, for example, has 12 syllables: it is iambic hexameters, albeit with a turned first foot in several lines. In the Romance languages, the hendecasyllable and Alexandrine are the most widely used metres.

#### 4.7.1 Italian (Petrarchan) Sonnet

The Italian sonnet was created by Giacomo da Lentini, head of the Sicilian School under Frederick II. Guittone d'Arezzo rediscovered it and brought it to Tuscany where he adapted it to his language when he founded the Neo-Sicilian School (1235–1294). He wrote almost 250 sonnets. Other Italian poets of the time, including Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) and Guido Cavalcanti (c. 1250–1300) wrote sonnets, but the most famous early sonneteer was Petrarca (known in English as Petrarch). Other fine examples were written by Michelangelo.

The structure of a typical Italian sonnet of this time included two parts which together formed a compact form of "argument". First, the octave (two quatrains), forms the "proposition" which describes a "problem", followed by a sestet (two tercets), which proposes a resolution. Typically, the ninth line creates what is called the "turn" or "volta" which acts to signal the move from proposition to resolution. Even in sonnets that don't strictly follow the problem/resolution structure, the ninth line still often marks a "turn" by signaling a change in the tone, mood, or stance of the poem.

In the sonnets of Giacomo da Lentini, the octave rhymed *a-b-a-b, a-b-a-b*; later, the *a-b-b-a, a-b-b-a* pattern became the standard for Italian sonnets. For the sestet there were two different possibilities: *c-d-e-c-d-e* and *c-d-c-c-d-c*. In time, other variants on this rhyming scheme were introduced such as *c-d-c-d-c-d*.

The first known sonnets in English, written by Sir Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, used this Italian scheme, as did sonnets by later English poets including John Milton, Thomas Gray, William Wordsworth and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Early twentieth-century American poet Edna St. Vincent Millay also wrote most of her sonnets using the Italian form.

This example, "On His Blindness" by Milton gives a sense of the Italian rhyming scheme;

When I consider how my light is spent (a)  
 Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide, (b)  
 And that one talent which is death to hide, (b)  
 Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent (a)  
 To serve therewith my Maker, and present (a)  
 My true account, lest he returning chide; (b)  
 "Doth God exact day-labor, light denied?" (b)  
 I fondly ask; but Patience to prevent (a)  
 That murmur, soon replies, "God doth not need (c)  
 Either man's work or his own gifts; who best (d)  
 Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state (e)  
 Is Kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed (c)  
 And post o'er land and ocean without rest; (d)  
 They also serve who only stand and wait." (e)

**English (Shakespearean) sonnet**

When English sonnets were introduced by Thomas Wyatt in the early 16th century, his sonnets and those of his contemporary the Earl of Surrey were chiefly translations from the Italian of Petrarch and the French of Ronsard and others. While Wyatt introduced the sonnet into English, it was Surrey who gave it a rhyming meter, and a structural division into quatrains of a kind that now characterizes the typical English sonnet. Having previously circulated in manuscripts only, both poets' sonnets were first published in Richard Tottel's *Songes and Sonnetts*, better known as Tottel's *Miscellany* (1557).

It was, however, Sir Philip Sidney's sequence *Astrophel and Stella* (1591) that started the English vogue for sonnet sequences: the next two decades saw sonnet sequences by William Shakespeare, Edmund Spenser, Michael Drayton, Samuel Daniel, Fulke Greville, William Drummond of Hawthornden, and many others. These sonnets were all essentially inspired by the Petrarchan tradition, and generally treat of the poet's love for some woman; with the exception of Shakespeare's sequence. The form is often named after Shakespeare, not because he was the first to write in this form but because he became its most famous practitioner. The form consists of fourteen lines structured as three quatrains and a couplet. The third quatrain generally introduces an unexpected sharp thematic or imagistic "turn"; the volta. In Shakespeare's sonnets, however, the volta usually comes in the couplet, and usually summarizes the theme of the poem or introduces a fresh new look at the theme. With only a rare exception, the meter is iambic pentameter, although there is some accepted metrical flexibility (*e.g.*, lines ending with an extra-syllable feminine rhyme, or a trochaic foot rather than an iamb, particularly at the beginning of a line). The usual rhyme scheme is end-rhymed *a-b-a-b, c-d-c-d, e-f-e-f, g-g*.

This example, Shakespeare's Sonnet 116, illustrates the form (with some typical variances one may expect when reading an Elizabethan-age sonnet with modern eyes):

Let me not to the marriage of true minds (a)  
 Admit impediments, love is not love (b)\*  
 Which alters when it alteration finds, (a)  
 Or bends with the remover to remove. (b)\*  
 O no, it is an ever fixed mark (c)\*\*  
 That looks on tempests and is never shaken; (d)\*\*\*  
 It is the star to every wand'ring bark, (c)\*\*  
 Whose worth's unknown although his height be taken. (d)\*\*\*  
 Love's not time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks (e)  
 Within his bending sickle's compass come, (f)\*  
 Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks, (e)  
 But bears it out even to the edge of doom: (f)\*  
 If this be error and upon me proved, (g)\*  
 I never writ, nor no man ever loved. (g)\*

\* PRONUNCIATION/RHYME: Note changes in pronunciation since composition.

\*\* PRONUNCIATION/METER: "Fixed" pronounced as two-syllables, "fixed."

\*\*\* RHYME/METER: Feminine-rhyme-ending, eleven-syllable alternative.

Notes

**Self Assessment**

State the following sentences are True or False:

1. Synecdoche is closely related to metonymy.
2. In poetry meter is the basic rhythmic structure of a verse or lines in verse.
3. A rhymed pair of lines of iambic pentameter make a sonnet.
4. Eight feet making up the line was either a dactyl or spondee.
5. An ode is typically a lyrical verse written in praise of.
6. ABBACDECDE is the most common rhyme of English ode.
7. Repetition of similar sounds in two or more words and is most often used in poetry and songs are called rhyme.
8. Milton was the most famous writer of heroic couplets.
9. Pastoral is a mode of literature in which the author employs various techniques.
10. Metonymy and synecdoche may be considered as sub-species of metaphor.

**4.7.2 Spenserian Sonnet**

A variant on the English form is the Spenserian sonnet, named after Edmund Spenser (c.1552–1599) in which the rhyme scheme is, *abab, bcbc, cdcd, ee*. In a Spenserian sonnet there does not appear to be a requirement that the initial octave sets up a problem that the closing sestet “answers”, as is the case with a Petrarchan sonnet. Instead, the form is treated as three quatrains connected by the interlocking rhyme scheme and followed by a couplet. The linked rhymes of his quatrains suggest the linked rhymes of such Italian forms as *terza rima*. This example is taken from Amoretti.

Happy ye leaves! whenas those lily hands  
Happy ye leaves! whenas those lily hands, (a)  
Which hold my life in their dead doing might, (b)  
Shall handle you, and hold in love’s soft bands, (a)  
Like captives trembling at the victor’s sight. (b)  
And happy lines on which, with starry light, (b)  
Those lamping eyes will deign sometimes to look, (c)  
And read the sorrows of my dying sprite, (b)  
Written with tears in heart’s close bleeding book. (c)  
And happy rhymes! bathed in the sacred brook (c)  
Of Helicon, whence she derived is, (d)  
When ye behold that angel’s blessed look, (c)  
My soul’s long lacked food, my heaven’s bliss. (d)  
Leaves, lines, and rhymes seek her to please alone, (e)  
Whom if ye please, I care for other none. (e)

**4.7.3 Modern Sonnet**

With the advent of free verse, the sonnet came to be seen as somewhat old-fashioned and fell out of use for a time among some schools of poets. However, a number of modern poets, including Wilfred

Owen, John Berryman, George Meredith, Edwin Morgan, Robert Frost, Rupert Brooke, George Sterling, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Federico García Lorca, E.E. Cummings, Jorge Luis Borges, Pablo Neruda, Robert Lowell, Joan Brossa, Vikram Seth, Rainer Maria Rilke, Jan Kal, Ernest Hilbert, Kim Addonizio, and Seamus Heaney continued to use the form. Elizabeth Bishop's inverted "Sonnet" was one of her last poems. Ted Berrigan's book, "The Sonnets", is an arresting and curious take on the form. Paul Muldoon often experiments with 14 lines and sonnet rhymes, though without regular sonnet meter. The advent of the New Formalism movement in the United States has also contributed to contemporary interest in the sonnet.

#### 4.8 Summary

- Synecdoche, wherein a specific part of something is used to refer to the whole, is usually understood as a specific kind of metonymy.
- Ode is a type of lyrical verse. A classic ode is structured in three major parts: the strophe, the antistrophe, and the epode.
- Pastoral is a mode of literature in which the author employs various techniques to place the complex life into a simple one.
- Pastoral shepherds and maidens usually have Greek names like Corydon or Philomela, reflecting the origin of the pastoral genre.
- A rhyme is a repetition of similar sounds in two or more words and is most often used in poetry and songs.

#### 4.9 Keywords

*Spondee* : A foot consisting of two long syllables.

*Anapest* : A metrical foot consisting of two short or unstressed syllables followed by one long or stressed syllable.

*Prosody* : The pattern of rhythm and sound used in poetry.

*Hymnody* : The singer or composition of hymns.

#### 4.10 Review Questions

1. What are synecdoche and example of it?
2. What does the english term pastoral poetry mean?
3. Differentiate between eye rhyme and mind rhyme.
4. What do you mean by the term personification?
5. What is sonnet? Explain spenserian sonnet.

#### **Answers: Self Assessment**

- |          |          |          |
|----------|----------|----------|
| 1. True  | 2. True  | 3. False |
| 4. False | 5. True  | 6. False |
| 7. True  | 8. False | 9. True  |
| 10. True |          |          |

Notes

**4.11 Further Readings**



*Books*

- |                                      |                |
|--------------------------------------|----------------|
| A Glossary of Literary Terms         | — M.H.Abrams   |
| Literary Terms: a practical glossary | — Brian Moon   |
| A Guide to Literary Terms            | — Gail Rae     |
| A new handbook of Literary terms     | — David Mikics |



*Online links*

- <http://grammar.about.com/od/rs/g/synecdocheterm.htm>  
[http://www.ajdrake.com/e252\\_fall\\_04/materials/guides/poetry\\_form.htm](http://www.ajdrake.com/e252_fall_04/materials/guides/poetry_form.htm)  
<http://cla.calpoly.edu/~dschwart/engl339/pastoral.html>

## Unit 5: Major Literary Terms-V

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### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Know about negative capability, hellenism, supernaturalism
- Explain the term renaissance of wonder, fancy and imagination
- Discuss briefly about dramatic monologue.

### Introduction

"Literary terms" refers to the words themselves with which we identify and designate literary elements and techniques. They are not found in literature and they are not "used" by authors. Literary terms are just a list of terms used in literature. They could be things like allegory, metaphor or hyperbole. They could also be things used to describe different types of literature like autobiography, etc.

### 5.1 Negative Capability

Negative capability describes the resistance to a set of institutional arrangements or a system of knowledge about the world and human experience. It explains the capacity of human beings to reject the totalizing constraints of a closed context, and to both experience phenomenon free from any epistemological bounds as well as to assert their own will and individuality upon their activity. The term was first used by the Romantic poet John Keats to critique those who sought to categorize all experience and phenomena and turn them into a theory of knowledge. It has recently been appropriated

Notes

by social theorist Roberto Unger to explain how human beings innovate and resist within confining social contexts.

### 5.1.1 Keats: The Poet's Turn of Phrase

John Keats used the term negative capability to describe the artist as one who is receptive to the world and its natural phenomena, and to reject those who tried to formulate theories or categorize knowledge. In a letter to his brothers on December 21, 1817 he employed negative capability to criticize Coleridge, who he thought sought knowledge over beauty:

I had not a dispute but a disquisition with Dilke, on various subjects; several things dovetailed in my mind, and at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in literature and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously-I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason-Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half knowledge. This pursued through Volumes would perhaps take us no further than this that with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration.

The origin of the term is unknown, but some scholars have hypothesized that Keats was influenced in his studies of medicine and chemistry, and that it refers to the negative pole of an electric current which is passive and receptive. In the same way that the negative pole receives the current from the positive pole, the poet receives impulses from a world that is full of mystery and doubt, which cannot be explained but which the poet can translate into art.

Although this was the only time that Keats used the term, this view of aesthetics and rejection of a rationalizing tendency has influenced much commentary on Romanticism and the tenets of human experience.

## 5.2 Renaissance of Wonder

The Renaissance was a cultural movement that spanned roughly the 14th to the 17th century, beginning in Italy in the Late Middle Ages and later spreading to the rest of Europe. The term is also used more loosely to refer to the historical era, but since the changes of the Renaissance were not uniform across Europe, this is a general use of the term. As a cultural movement, it encompassed a flowering of literature, science, art, religion, and politics, and a resurgence of learning based on classical sources, the development of linear perspective in painting, and gradual but widespread educational reform. Traditionally, this intellectual transformation has resulted in the Renaissance being viewed as a bridge between the middle Ages and the Modern era. Although the Renaissance saw revolutions in many intellectual pursuits, as well as social and political upheaval, it is perhaps best known for its artistic developments and the contributions of such polymaths as Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo, who inspired the term "Renaissance man".

There is a consensus the Renaissance began in Florence, Tuscany in the 14th century. Various theories have been proposed to account for its origins and characteristics, focusing on a variety of factors including the social and civic peculiarities of Florence at the time; its political structure; the patronage of its dominant family, the Medici.



*Task* Define the term Renaissance.

The Renaissance has a long and complex historiography, and there has been much debate among historians as to the usefulness of Renaissance as a term and as a historical delineation. Some have called into question whether the Renaissance was a cultural "advance" from the middle Ages, instead

seeing it as a period of pessimism and nostalgia for the classical age, while others have instead focused on the continuity between the two eras. Indeed, some have called for an end to the use of the term, which they see as a product of presentism—the use of history to validate and glorify modern ideals. The word Renaissance has also been used to describe other historical and cultural movements, such as the Carolingian Renaissance and the Renaissance of the 12th century.

The Renaissance was a cultural movement that profoundly affected European intellectual life in the early modern period. Beginning in Italy, and spreading to the rest of Europe by the 16th century, its influence affected literature, philosophy, art, politics, science, religion, and other aspects of intellectual inquiry. Renaissance scholars employed the humanist method in study, and searched for realism and human emotion in art.

In all, the Renaissance could be viewed as an attempt by intellectuals to study and improve the secular and worldly, both through the revival of ideas from antiquity, and through novel approaches to thought. Some scholars, such as Rodney Stark, play down the Renaissance in favor of the earlier innovations of the Italian city states in the High Middle Ages, which married responsive government, Christianity and the birth of capitalism. This analysis argues that, whereas the great European states were absolutist monarchies, and others were under direct Church control, the independent city republics of Italy took over the principles of capitalism invented on monastic estates and set off a vast unprecedented commercial revolution which preceded and financed the Renaissance.

### **5.3 Hellenism**

Hellenism, as a neoclassical movement distinct from other Roman or Greco-Roman forms of neoclassicism emerging after the European Renaissance, is most often associated with Germany and England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In Germany, the preeminent figure in the movement was Johann Joachim Winckelmann, the art historian and aesthetic theoretician who first articulated what would come to be the orthodoxies of the Greek ideal in sculpture (though he only examined Roman copies of Greek statues, and was murdered before setting foot in Greece). For Winckelmann, the essence of Greek art was noble simplicity and sedate grandeur, often encapsulated in sculptures representing moments of intense emotion or tribulation. Other major figures include Hegel, Schlegel, Schelling and Schiller.

In England, the so-called “second generation” Romantic poets, especially John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Lord Byron are considered exemplars of Hellenism. Drawing from Winckelmann, these poets frequently turned to Greece as a model of ideal beauty, transcendent philosophy, democratic politics, and homosociality or homosexuality. Women poets, such as Mary Robinson, Felicia Hemans, Letitia Elizabeth Landon and Elizabeth Barrett Browning were also deeply involved in retelling the myths of classical Greece.

The Victorian period saw new forms of Hellenism, none more famous than the social theory of Matthew Arnold in his book, *Culture and Anarchy*. For Arnold, Hellenism was the opposite of Hebraism. The former term stood for “spontaneity,” and for “things as they really are; the latter term stood for “strictness of conscience,” and for “conduct and obedience.” Human history, according to Arnold, oscillated between these two modes. Other major figures include Swinburne, Pater, Wilde, and Symonds.

### **5.4 Supernaturalism**

Supernaturalism is the theological belief that a force or power other than man or nature is ultimate. This supernatural force (God) regulates both man and nature, making both of them subordinate to it.

- God as creator.
- Man is considered to be higher than the rest of nature.

**Notes**

Supernaturalism is a belief in an otherworldly realm or reality that, in one way or another, is commonly associated with all forms of religion. Evidence of neither the idea of nature nor the experience of a purely natural realm is found among primitive people, who inhabit a wonder world charged with the sacred power (or mana), spirits, and deities. Primitive man associates whatever is experienced as uncanny or powerful with the presence of a sacred or numinous power; yet he constantly lives in a profane realm that is made comprehensible by a paradigmatic, mythical sacred realm.

What is supernaturalism? It is the belief that events and values require supernatural powers or authority for their explanation. Natural explanations may be reliable on an immediate level, but they in turn must eventually require a supernatural cause.



*Did u know?* According to supernaturalism, a supernatural order is the original and fundamental source of all that exists. It is this supernatural order which defines the limits of what may be known.

The difference between these two positions is one of the fundamental differences between atheists and theists-it is a difference which tends to cause the most disagreement and most friction. Atheists tend to be naturalists - taking the perspective that this natural world is all there is, all there is to know, and does not require anything "supernatural" to explain it. Theists tend to be supernaturalists - assuming that a supernatural realm exists beyond what we see and is necessary in order to explain our universe.

Supernaturalism is the belief that there are beings, forces, and phenomena such as God, angels or miracles which interact with the physical universe in remarkable and unique ways. Supernaturalism is a fundamental premise of theism. Theists by definition hold to a supernaturalistic worldview which stands in contrast to the atheistic premise of naturalism, which denies the existence of any supernatural phenomena.

The word supernatural comes from the Latin word super meaning "above" + nature. It should however, be noted that although some supernatural phenomena may not be perceived by natural or empirical senses, a great many supernatural events have been witnessed in biblical and modern times. Numerous events in Earth's history require a supernaturalistic belief before they can be correctly understood or interpreted.

**Self Assessment**

State the following sentences are True or False:

1. Negative capability describes the resistance to a set of institutional arrangements.
2. The term negative capability was first used by the Romantic poet John Milton.
3. Renaissance was a neoclassical movement that spanned roughly the 14th to 17th century.
4. The Renaissance has a long and complex historiography.
5. Hellenism is a cultural movement distinct from other Roman.
6. Mary Robinson were deeply involved in retelling the myths of classical Greece.
7. The Supernatural force regulates both man and nature.

**5.5 Fancy and Imagination**

Imagination, also called the faculty of imagining, is the ability of forming mental images, sensations and concepts, in a moment when they are not perceived through sight, hearing or other senses.

Imagination is the work of the mind that helps develop. Imagination helps provide meaning to experience and understanding to knowledge; it is a fundamental facility through which people make sense of the world, and it also plays a key role in the learning process. A basic training for imagination is listening to storytelling (narrative), in which the exactness of the chosen words is the fundamental factor to “evoke worlds.”

It is accepted as the innate ability and process of inventing partial or complete personal realms within the mind from elements derived from sense perceptions of the shared world. The term is technically used in psychology for the process of reviving in the mind, percepts of objects formerly given in sense perception. Since this use of the term conflicts with that of ordinary language, some psychologists have preferred to describe this process as “imaging” or “imagery” or to speak of it as “reproductive” as opposed to “productive” or “constructive” imagination. Imagined images are seen with the “mind’s eye.”



*Notes* Imagination can also be expressed through stories such as fairy tales or fantasies. Most famous inventions or entertainment products were developed from the inspiration of someone’s imagination.

“Imagination is an effort of the mind to develop a discourse that had previously been known, a development of a concept of what is already there by the help of our reason, to develop a results of new thinking.” The common use of the term is for the process of forming new images in the mind that have not been previously experienced with the help of what is ever been seen, hear, or feel before, or at least only partially or in different combinations. Some typical examples follow:

- Fairy tale
- Fiction

Imagination is an experimental partition of the mind used to develop theories and ideas based on functions. Taking objects from real perceptions, the imagination uses complex IF-functions to develop new or revised ideas. This part of the mind is vital to developing better and easier ways to accomplish old and new tasks. These experimental ideas can be safely conducted inside a virtual world and then, if the idea is probable and the function is true, the idea can be actualized in reality.



*Did u know?* Imagination is the key to new development of the mind and can be shared with others, progressing collectively.

Regarding the volunteer effort, imagination can be classified as:

- Voluntary (the dream from the sleep, the daydream).
- Involuntary (the reproductive imagination, the creative imagination, the dream of perspective).

## 5.6 Dramatic Monologue

M. H. Abrams notes the following three features of the dramatic monologue as it applies to poetry:

1. A single person, who is patently not the poet, utters the speech that makes up the whole of the poem, in a specific situation at a critical moment.
2. This person addresses and interacts with one or more other people; but we know of the auditors’ presence, and what they say and do, only from clues in the discourse of the single speaker.

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3. The main principle controlling the poet's choice and formulation of what the lyric speaker says is to reveal to the reader, in a way that enhances its interest, the speaker's temperament and character.

Definitions of the dramatic monologue, a form invented and practiced principally by Robert Browning, Alfred Tennyson, Dante Rossetti, and other Victorians, have been much debated in the last several decades. Everyone agrees that to be a dramatic monologue a poem must have a speaker and an implied auditor and that the reader often perceives a gap between what that speaker says and what he or she actually reveals. In one of the most influential, though hotly contested definitions, Robert Langbaum saw the form as a continuation of an essentially Romantic "poetry of experience" in which the reader experiences a tension between sympathy and judgment. One problem with this approach, as Glenn Everett has argued, lies in the fact that contemporary readers of Browning's poems found them vastly different from Langbaum's Wordsworthian model.

Many writers on the subject have disagreed, pointing out that readers do not seem ever to sympathize with the speakers in some of Browning's major poems, such as "Porphyria's Lover" or "My Last Duchess." Glenn Everett proposes that Browninesque dramatic monologue has three requirements:

1. The reader takes the part of the silent listener.
2. The speaker uses a case-making, argumentative tone.
3. We complete the dramatic scene from within, by means of inference and imagination.

## 5.7 Summary

- Negative capability describes the resistance to a set of institutional arrangements or a system of knowledge about the world and human experience.
- The Renaissance was a cultural movement that profoundly affected European intellectual life in the early modern period.
- Supernaturalism is the theological belief that a force or power other than man or nature is ultimate.
- Imagination, also called the faculty of imagining, is the ability of forming mental images, sensations and concepts.

## 5.8 Keywords

*Consensus* : General agreement.

*Upheaval* : Violent or sudden change or an upward displacement of part of the earth's crust.

*Spanned* : The full extent of something from end to end.

*Monologue* : A long speech by one actor in a play.

## 5.9 Review Questions

1. Write a short note on negative capability.
2. Explain the term Renaissance of wonder.
3. What is supernaturalism?
4. Define the term Dramatic monologue and write the features of dramatic monologue which applies in poetry, according to M.H. Abrams.

## Answers: Self Assessment

## Notes

- |         |          |          |
|---------|----------|----------|
| 1. True | 2. False | 3. False |
| 4. True | 5. False | 6. True  |
| 7. True |          |          |

## 5.10 Further Readings



### *Books*

- |                                      |                |
|--------------------------------------|----------------|
| A Glossary of Literary Terms         | — M.H.Abrams   |
| Literary Terms: a practical glossary | — Brian Moon   |
| A Guide to Literary Terms            | — Gail Rae     |
| A new handbook of Literary terms     | — David Mikics |



### *Online links*

- <http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/rb/dm1.html>  
<http://www.keatsian.co.uk/negative-capability.htm>

## Unit 6: Major Literary Terms-VI

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### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Know about the victorian compromise and victorian period—early and late
- Explain the term pre-raphaelite poetry and art for art's sake
- Describe the term aestheticism.

### Introduction

Exploring the patterns created by the formal elements of literature—alliteration, image, tone, and metaphor, for example—helps us to understand more deeply a text's meaning and the nuances that enrich that meaning. This kind of formal close reading of the text is fundamental to any analysis of literature. A literary theme is often not apparent early in every story. The theme is not the same as the storyline or the subject. The theme is the meaning on a deeper, more abstract level.

### 6.1 Victorian Compromise

The particular situation, which saw prosperity and progress on the one hand, and poverty, ugliness and injustice on the other, which opposed ethical conformism to corruption, moralism and philanthropy to money and capitalistic greediness, and which separated private life from public

behaviour, is usually referred to as the “Victorian Compromise”. However, it also aroused the concern of more and more theorists and reformers who tried to improve living conditions at all levels, including hospitals, schools and prisons.

The word Victorian has come to be used to describe a set of moral and sexual values. The Victorians were great moralisers, probably because they faced numerous problems on such a scale that they felt obliged to advocate certain values which offered solution or escape. As a rule the values they promoted reflected not the world as they saw it the harsh social reality around them, but the world as they would have like it to be.

The Victorian Compromise was a complex and contradictory era. It was the age of progress, stability, great social reforms but it was also characterised by poverty, injustice and social unrest. The Victorians promoted a code of values that reflect the world as they wanted it to be, not as it really was, based on personal duty, hard work, respectability and charity. In this period was very important to work hard to improve the society. The idea of respectability distinguished the middle from lower class. Respectability was a mixture of both morality and hypocrisy, severity and conformity to social standards. It implied the possession of good manners, the ownership of comfortable house with servants and a carriage, regular attendance at church, and charity activity. Philanthropy was a wide phenomenon: the rich middle class exploited the poor ruthlessly and at the same time managed to help “stay children, fallen women and drunk men”. The husband represented the authority and the key role of woman regarded the education of children and the housework. Sexuality was generally repressed in its public and private forms, and prudery in its most extreme manifestations led to denunciation of nudity in art, and the rejection of words with sexual connotation from everyday vocabulary.

### 6.1.1 Faith and Progress

This is the period of the novel because they represent the complexity of the period and the profound changes that characterised it. For the first time there was a communion of interests and opinions between writers and their readers. Same code of values: optimism, conformism and philanthropy. The writers depicted society as they saw it; they were aware of evils of their society and denounced them, however they did not criticise the world they lived in, they just aimed at making readers realise social injustice and voiced their fears and doubts. The setting was the city because it was the main symbol of the industrial civilisation, the expression of anonymous lives and lost identities. Dandy is a bourgeois artist who in spite of his uneasiness, remains a member of his class.

Art For Art's Sake: the function of art is that give eternal beauty; only art and beauty can save from evil and destruction. Whitman was born in New York into a working-class family. He had little formal education and he started to work as an office boy and then he became a journalist. When he was thirty years old he travelled in New York, New Orleans and Chicago and he discovered the vastness of his country and the variety of its inhabitants. During the civil war he devoted himself to visiting wounded soldiers in the army hospital, he continued to believe in the value of democracy and technological progress. The Whitman poetry was incorporated in the ninth edition of *Leaves of Grass*.



*Notes* “All art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their own peril. Those who read the symbol do so at their own peril.”—by Oscar Wilde, Preface, “The Picture of Dorian Gray”

The Victorian Period revolves around the political career of Queen Victoria. She was crowned in 1837 and died in 1901 (which put a definite end to her political career). A great deal of change took

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place during this period—brought about because of the Industrial Revolution; so it's not surprising that the literature of the period is often concerned with social reform. As Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) wrote, "The time for levity, insincerity, and idle babble and play-acting, in all kinds, is gone by; it is a serious, grave time."

Of course, in the literature from this period, we see a duality, or double standard, between the concerns for the individual (the exploitation and corruption both at home and abroad) and national success—in what is often referred to as the Victorian Compromise. In reference to Tennyson, Browning and Arnold, E. D. H. Johnson argues: "Their writings... locate the centers of authority not in the existing social order but within the resources of individual being."

Against the backdrop of technological, political, and socioeconomic change, the Victorian Period was bound to be a volatile time, even without the added complications of the religious and institutional challenges brought by Charles Darwin and other thinkers, writers, and doers.

### 6.1.2 Victorian Period—Early and Late

The Period is often divided into two parts: the early Victorian Period (ending around 1870) and the late Victorian Period. Writers associated with the early period are: Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892), Robert Browning (1812-1889), Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861), Emily Bronte (1818-1848), Matthew Arnold (1822-1888), Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882), Christina Rossetti (1830-1894), George Eliot (1819-1880), Anthony Trollope (1815-1882) and Charles Dickens (1812-1870).

Writers associated with the late Victorian Period include: George Meredith (1828-1909), Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889), Oscar Wilde (1856-1900), Thomas Hardy (1840-1928), Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936), A.E. Housman (1859-1936), and Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894).

While Tennyson and Browning represented pillars in Victorian poetry, Dickens and Eliot contributed to the development of the English novel. Perhaps the most quintessentially Victorian poetic works of the period is: Tennyson's "In Memorium" (1850), which mourns the loss of his friend. Henry James describes Eliot's "Middlemarch" (1872) as "organized, moulded, balanced composition, gratifying the reader with the sense of design and construction."

## 6.2 Pre-Raphaelite Poetry

The term *Pre-Raphaelite*, which refers to both art and literature, is confusing because there were essentially two different and almost opposed movements, the second of which grew out of the first. The term itself originated in relation to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, an influential group of mid-nineteenth-century avant-garde painters associated with Ruskin who had great effect upon British, American, and European art. Those poets who had some connection with these artists and whose work presumably shares the characteristics of their art include Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Christina Rossetti, George Meredith, William Morris, and Algernon Charles Swinburne.

The second form of Pre-Raphaelitism, which grows out of the first under the direction of D.G. Rossetti, is Aesthetic Pre-Raphaelitism, and it in turn produced the Arts and Crafts Movement, modern functional design, and the Aesthetes and Decadents. Rossetti and his follower Edward Burne-Jones (1833-1898) emphasized themes of eroticized medievalism and pictorial techniques that produced moody atmosphere. This form of Pre-Raphaelitism has most relevance to poetry; for although the earlier combination of a realistic style with elaborate symbolism appears in a few poems, particularly those of the Rossettis, this second stage finally had the most influence upon literature. All the poets associated with Pre-Raphaelitism draw upon the poetic continuum that descends from Spenser through Keats and Tennyson—one that emphasizes lush vowel sounds, sensuous description, and subjective psychological states.



*Did u know?* Pre-Raphaelitism in poetry had major influence upon the writers of the Decadence as well as upon Gerard Manley Hopkins and W.B. Yeats, both of whom were also influenced by Ruskin and visual Pre-Raphaelitism.

## Notes

In the mid-19th century, a group of young British artists caused shock and scandal when they revealed the existence of their 'secret Brotherhood' dedicated to overthrowing the artistic conventions of the day.

Steeped in symbolism, boasting an almost unnatural eye for realism, and richly coloured, the works of the Pre-Raphaelites consciously tried to turn back the clock to the days of the early Renaissance, while simultaneously insisting on painting and drawing their subjects from direct observation.

Their impact was significant, and would go on to influence numerous additional writers and designers beyond their initial small circle in the years after their first successes. Today they are widely seen as one of the first avant-garde art movements in history, and the instigators of numerous later artistic and social movements.

The poetry of drawing: Pre-Raphaelite designs, studies and watercolours are the most comprehensive survey of Pre-Raphaelite works on paper to date, and is presented with the assistance of the Birmingham Museum. All of the leading figures of the period are represented, including the original Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (Millais, Holman Hunt, Rossetti), the artist and social critic John Ruskin, and the second-wave of Pre-Raphaelites (including Burne-Jones, Sandys and Solomon).

Those poets who had some connection with the Pre-Raphaelite circle include Christina Rossetti, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, George Meredith, William Morris, and Algernon Charles Swinburne. Pre-Raphaelitism in poetry had major influence upon the writers of the Decadence of the 1890s, such as Ernest Dowson, Lionel Johnson, Michael Field, and Oscar Wilde, as well as upon Gerard Manley Hopkins and William Butler Yeats, both of whom were influenced by John Ruskin and visual Pre-Raphaelitism.

Pre-Raphaelitism in painting had two forms or stages, first, the hard-edge symbolic naturalism of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood that began in 1849 and, second, the moody, erotic medievalism that took form in the later 1850s. Many critics imply that only this second, or Aesthetic, Pre-Raphaelitism has relevance to poetry. In fact, although the combination of realistic style with elaborate symbolism that distinguishes the early movement appears in a few poems, particularly in those by James Collinson and the Rossettis, this second stage finally had the largest—at least the most easily noticeable—influence on literature.

Nonetheless, if one looks for a poet whose work parallels the artistic project of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, one immediately notices Robert Browning, whose work was enormously popular with them all and a particular influence on Rossetti, who wrote out *Pauline* (1833) from the British Museum copy. Like the paintings of the Brotherhood, Browning's poems simultaneously extend the boundaries of subject and create a kind of abrasive realism, and like the work of the young painters, his also employ elaborate symbolism drawn from biblical types to carry the audience beyond the aesthetic surface, to which he, like the painters, aggressively draws attention. One must mention the Browninesque element in Pre-Raphaelite poetry because it appears intermittently all the way up to Hopkins in self-consciously difficult language, the dramatic monologue, and elaborate applications of biblical typology.

Aesthetic Pre-Raphaelitism, nonetheless, has most in common with the poets of this group, all of whom draw upon the poetic continuum that descends from Spenser through Keats and Tennyson—upon the poetic line, in other words, that emphasizes lush vowel sounds, sensuous description, subjective psychological states, elaborate personification, and complex poetic forms, such as the *sestina*, borrowed from Italian and Provençal love poetry.

## Notes

**6.3 Art for Art's Sake**

"Art for art's sake" is the usual English rendering of a French slogan, from the early 19th century, "L'art pour l'art", and expresses a philosophy that the intrinsic value of art, and the only "true" art, is divorced from any didactic, moral or utilitarian function. Such works are sometimes described as "autotelic", from the Greek autoteles, "complete in itself", a concept that has been expanded to embrace "inner-directed" or "self-motivated" human beings.

A Latin version of this phrase, "Ars gratia artis", is used as a slogan by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and appears in the circle around the roaring head of Leo the Lion in their motion picture logo.

"L'art pour l'art" (translated as "art for art's sake") is credited to Theophile Gautier (1811–1872), who was the first to adopt the phrase as a slogan. Gautier was not, however, the first to write those words: they appear in the works of Victor Cousin, Benjamin Constant, and Edgar Allan Poe. For example, Poe argues in his essay "The Poetic Principle" (1850), that

*We have taken it into our heads that to write a poem simply for the poem's sake and to acknowledge such to have been our design, would be to confess ourselves radically wanting in the true poetic dignity and force:— but the simple fact is that would we but permit ourselves to look into our own souls we should immediately there discover that under the sun there neither exists nor can exist any work more thoroughly dignified, more supremely noble, than this very poem, this poem per se, this poem which is a poem and nothing more, this poem written solely for the poem's sake.*



**Task** Consider the term Art for Art's Sake in detail.

"Art for art's sake" was a bohemian creed in the nineteenth century, a slogan raised in defiance of those who, from John Ruskin to the much later Communist advocates of socialist realism, thought that the value of art was to serve some moral or didactic purpose. "Art for art's sake" affirmed that art was valuable as art that artistic pursuits were their own justification and that art did not need moral justification, and indeed, was allowed to be morally subversive.

In fact, James McNeill Whistler wrote the following in which he discarded the accustomed role of art in the service of the state or official religion, which had adhered to its practice since the Counter-Reformation of the sixteenth century:

Art should be independent of all claptrap —should stand alone and appeal to the artistic sense of eye or ear, without confounding this with emotions entirely foreign to it, as devotion, pity, love, patriotism and the like.

Such a brusque dismissal also expressed the artist's distancing himself from sentimentalism. All that remains of Romanticism in this statement is the reliance on the artist's own eye and sensibility as the arbiter.

The explicit slogan is associated in the history of English art and letters with Walter Pater and his followers in the Aesthetic Movement, which was self-consciously in rebellion against Victorian moralism. It first appeared in English in two works published simultaneously in 1868: Pater's review of William Morris's poetry in the Westminster Review and in William Blake by Algernon Charles Swinburne. A modified form of Pater's review appeared in his *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), one of the most influential texts of the Aesthetic Movement.

**Self Assessment**

Fill in the blanks:

1. The Victorian period revolves around the political career of .....
2. The Victorian period was bound to be a ..... time.

3. The word Victorian has come to be used to describe a set of ..... and ..... values.
4. The British decadent writers were much influenced by the ..... professor Walter Pater.
5. .... was a movement in early 20th century Anglo-American poetry.

Notes

## **6.4 Aestheticism**

Aestheticism or the Aesthetic Movement was a 19th century European art movement that emphasized aesthetic values more than socio-political themes for literature, fine art, the decorative arts, and interior design. Generally, it represents the same tendencies that symbolism or decadence represented in France, or *decadentismo* represented in Italy, and may be considered the British version of the same style. It was part of the anti-19th century reaction and had post-Romantic origins, and as such anticipates modernism. It was a feature of the late 19th century from about 1868 to about 1900.

### **6.4.1 Aesthetic Literature**

The British decadent writers were much influenced by the Oxford professor Walter Pater and his essays published during 1867–68, in which he stated that life had to be lived intensely, with an ideal of beauty. His text *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) was very well regarded by art-oriented young men of the late 19th century. Writers of the Decadent movement writers used the slogan “Art for Art’s Sake” (*L’art pour l’art*), the origin of which is debated. Some claim that it was invented by the philosopher Victor Cousin, although Angela Leighton in the publication *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism and the Legacy of a Word* (2007) notes that the phrase was used by Benjamin Constant as early as 1804. It is generally accepted to have been promoted by Theophile Gautier in France, who interpreted the phrase to suggest that there was not any real association between art and morality.

The artists and writers of Aesthetic style tended to profess that the Arts should provide refined sensuous pleasure, rather than convey moral or sentimental messages. As a consequence, they did not accept John Ruskin and Matthew Arnold’s utilitarian conception of art as something moral or useful. Instead, they believed that Art did not have any didactic purpose; it need only be beautiful. The Aesthetes developed a cult of beauty, which they considered the basic factor of art. Life should copy Art, they asserted. They considered nature as crude and lacking in design when compared to art. The main characteristics of the style were: suggestion rather than statement, sensuality, great use of symbols, and synaesthetic effects—that is, correspondence between words, colours and music. Music was used to establish mood.

## **6.5 Imagist**

Imagism was a movement in early 20th-century Anglo-American poetry that favored precision of imagery and clear, sharp language. The Imagists rejected the sentiment and discursiveness typical of much Romantic and Victorian poetry. This was in contrast to their contemporaries, the Georgian poets, who were by and large content to work within that tradition. Group publication of work under the Imagist name appearing between 1914 and 1917 featured writing by many of the most significant figures in Modernist poetry in English, as well as a number of other Modernist figures prominent in fields other than poetry.

Based in London, the Imagists were drawn from Great Britain, Ireland and the United States. Somewhat unusually for the time, the Imagists featured a number of women writers among their major figures. Imagism is also significant historically as the first organised Modernist English language literary movement or group.

Notes



*Notes* In the words of T. S. Eliot: "The point de repere usually and conveniently taken as the starting-point of modern poetry is the group denominated 'imagists' in London about 1910."

At the time Imagism emerged, Longfellow and Tennyson were considered the paragons of poetry, and the public valued the sometimes moralising tone of their writings. In contrast, Imagism called for a return to what were seen as more Classical values, such as directness of presentation and economy of language, as well as a willingness to experiment with non-traditional verse forms. The focus on the "thing" as "thing" (an attempt at isolating a single image to reveal its essence) also mirrors contemporary developments in avant-garde art, especially Cubism. Although Imagism isolates objects through the use of what Ezra Pound called "luminous details", Pound's Ideogrammic Method of juxtaposing concrete instances to express an abstraction is similar to Cubism's manner of synthesizing multiple perspectives into a single image.

## 6.6 Summary

- The word Victorian has come to be used to describe a set of moral and sexual values.
- The Victorian Compromise was a complex and contradictory era. It was the age of progress, stability, great social reforms but it was also characterised by poverty, injustice and social unrest.
- "Art for art's sake" is the usual English rendering of a French slogan, from the early 19th century.
- The British decadent writers were much influenced by the Oxford professor Walter Pater and his essays published during 1867–68.
- Imagism was a movement in early 20th-century Anglo-American poetry that favored precision of imagery and clear, sharp language.

## 6.7 Keywords

*Volatile* : Capable to change rapidly and unpredictably.

*Philanthropy* : The desire to promote the welfare of others.

*Instigator* : Bring about.

*Topology* : The way in which constituent parts are arranged.

*Aesthetic* : Concerned with beauty.

## 6.8 Review Questions

1. Examine the concepts of the Victorian compromise.
2. Explain the term pre-raphaelite poetry.
3. Define aestheticism. Explain the term aesthetic literature.

## **Answers: Self Assessment**

1. Queen Victoria
2. Volatile
3. Moral and Sexual
4. Oxford
5. Imagism

## 6.9 Further Readings

Notes



*Books*

- |                                      |                |
|--------------------------------------|----------------|
| A Glossary of Literary Terms         | — M.H.Abrams   |
| Literary Terms: a practical glossary | — Brian Moon   |
| A Guide to Literary Terms            | — Gail Rae     |
| A new handbook of Literary terms     | — David Mikics |



*Online links*

- <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/7474/Aestheticism>  
<http://doc.studenti.it/riassunto/inglese/victorian-compromise.html>

## Unit 7: Major Literary Terms-VII

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### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Discuss briefly about the poems, war poets and movement poets
- Explain the term modernist poetry.

### Introduction

The main idea or underlying meaning of a literary work. A theme may be stated or implied. Theme differs from the subject or topic of a literary work in that it involves a statement or opinion about the topic. Not every literary work has a theme. Themes may be major or minor. A major theme is an idea the author returns to time and again. It becomes one of the most important ideas in the story. Minor themes are ideas that may appear from time to time. It is important to recognize the difference between the theme of a literary work and the subject of a literary work. The subject is the topic on which an author has chosen to write. The theme, however, makes some statement about or expresses some opinion on that topic. For example, the subject of a story might be war while the theme might be the idea that war is useless.

### 7.1 War Poets

A War poet is a poet writing in time of and on the subject of war. The term, which is applied especially to those in military service during World War I, was documented as early as 1848 in reference to German revolutionary poet, George Herwegh.

It was in English poetry, such as that of Wilfred Owen, that the war poem became an established genre marker and attracted growing popular interest. At the time the term soldier poet was used, but then dropped out of favour. The evolution of the concept was linked to a distinction drawn between poets who were anti-war in attitude and those who wrote more traditional war poetry. What makes a war poet is not well-defined. The public may have seen war poems as reportage creating direct emotional links to the soldier.

Several poets writing in English were soldiers, and wrote about their experiences of war. Number of them died on active service, most famously Rupert Brooke, Edward Thomas, Isaac Rosenberg, Wilfred Owen, and Charles Sorley. Others including Ivor Gurney and Siegfried Sassoon survived, but many were scarred by their experiences, reflected in their poetry.

Many poems by British war poets were published in newspapers and then collected into anthologies. Several of these early anthologies were published during the war and were very popular, though the tone of the poetry changed as the war progressed. One of the wartime anthologies was *The Muse in Arms*, published in 1917. Several anthologies were also published in the years after the war had ended.

In France the popular poet and song-writer Theodore Botrel was appointed as official “Bard of the armies” in 1915. According to the *New York Times* he was authorised by the Minister of War “to enter all military depots, camps and hospitals for the purpose of reciting and singing his patriotic poems.”



*Did u know?* Calligrammes, subtitled Poems of war and peace 1913-1916, is a collection of poems by Guillaume Apollinaire published in 1918.

The Italians had their own war poetry, most notably that of Giuseppe Ungaretti. According to Patrick Bridgwater in *The German Poets of the First World War*, the closest comparison to Owen would be Anton Schnack, and Schnack’s only peer would be August Stramm.



*Task* Write a short note on war poets.

In Russian literature, Nikolay Gumilyov’s war poems were assembled in the collection *The Quiver* (1916). Alexander Blok’s *The Twelve* is a culmination of apocalyptic broodings during the war years. During the First World War, Ilya Ehrenburg became a war correspondent for a St. Petersburg newspaper. He wrote a series of articles about the mechanized war that later on were also published as a book, “*The Face of War*”. His poetry now also concentrated on subjects of war and destruction, as in “*On the Eve*”, his third lyrical book. Nikolay Semenovich Tikhonov volunteered for the army at the outbreak of World War I and served in a hussar regiment; he entered the Red Army in 1918 and was demobilized in 1922. He began writing poetry early; his first collection, *Orda* (*The horde*, 1922), “shows startling maturity” and “contains most of the few short poems which have made him famous.”

Robert H. Ross characterises ‘war poets’ as a subgroup of the Georgian Poetry writers: those who were in uniform including therefore Robert Graves, Isaac Rosenberg, Robert Nichols, Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon.

Robert Graves and David Jones both served in the trenches and survived. Graves did not use his war experience as poetic material, instead recounting it as autobiography in *Goodbye to All that*, whereas Jones postponed its use, incorporating it into modernist forms.

In November 1985, a slate memorial was unveiled in Poet’s Corner commemorating 16 poets of the Great War: Richard Aldington, Laurence Binyon, Edmund Blunden, Rupert Brooke, Wilfrid Gibson, Robert Graves, Julian Grenfell, Ivor Gurney, David Jones, Robert Nichols, Wilfred Owen, Herbert Read, Isaac Rosenberg, Siegfried Sassoon, Charles Sorley and Edward Thomas.

## Notes



*Notes* The entire genre of British war poetry is ably discussed in Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* and in Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture*.

## 7.2 The Poems

Siegfried Sassoon, *How to Die*; Wilfred Owen, *Anthem for a Doomed Youth*; Wilfred Owen, *Dulce et Decorum Est*; Herbert Read, *The Happy Warrior*; W. N. Hodgson, *Before Action*; Wilfred Gibson, *Back*; Philip Larkin, *MCMXIV*.

### 7.2.1 Movement Poets

The Movement was a term coined by J. D. Scott, literary editor of *The Spectator*, in 1954 to describe a group of writers including Kingsley Amis, Philip Larkin, Donald Davie, D.J. Enright, John Wain, Elizabeth Jennings, Thom Gunn, and Robert Conquest. The Movement was essentially English in character; poets in Scotland and Wales were not generally included.

Thomas Blackburn, Edwin Brock, Hilary Corke, John Fuller, Francis Hope, Ted Hughes, Richard Kell, Thomas Kinsella, Laurence Lerner, Edward Lucie-Smith, George MacBeth, James Michie, Jonathan Price, Vernon Scannell, Anthony Thwaite, Hugo Williams.

The term Movement was coined by J. D. Scott in 1954 to refer to a group of poets including Kingsley Amis, Donald Davie, D. J. Enright, John Wain, Elizabeth Jennings, Thom Gunn, Robert Conquest and of course, Philip Larkin. Together they marked the emergence of the petit-bourgeois provincial intelligentsia, impatient of the Establishment but ultimately committed to neutrality. Indeed, there was never an organised school of poets armed with manifestos and some of the lead figures even denied a conscious involvement, though they appeared together in a number of anthologies and radio programmes. Later, the term came to theorise a distinctive poetic sensibility. Essentially the Movement was a reaction against the extreme romanticism and surrealist detachment of the New Apocalypticists like Dylan Thomas. On the other hand, the Movement poets reconstructed neoclassicism. According to John Press, it was "a general retreat from direct comment or involvement in any political or social doctrine." One way of accounting for the emergence of the Movement is to see it as a part of the general post-war period of reconstruction. The thematic shift and the return to traditional forms and rhythms therefore seem to be natural responses to a national mood of rebuilding. One of the Movement poets, John Wain, once commented: "At such a time, when exhaustion and boredom in the foreground are balanced by guilt and fear in the background, it is natural that a poet should feel the impulse to build." Another of them, Donald Davie, also echoed the same thought: "We had to go back to basics." The Movement poets sought to create an ordinary brand of poetry. They preferred everyday pictures to sensational imagery, and prioritised a friendly, colloquial tone over rhetorical complications. A lead figure of this group, Kingsley Amis, found that they have placed poetry in between "the gardening and the cookery" instead of libraries and seminar hall. Actually, Larkin was little annoyed by the academic sterility of much of Movement poetry, and never actively promoted himself as one of the group. After reading Conquest's draft introduction to *New Lines*, Larkin privately reveals to him what should be his aesthetic theory: "I feel we have got the method right – plain language, absence of posturings, sense of proportion, humour, abandonment of the dithyrambic ideal—and are waiting for the matter: a fuller and more sensitive response to life as it appears from day to day."

Antithetical to Romanticism, Larkin rejects the famous dichotomy of Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn.' "I have always believed," he writes, "that beauty is beauty, truth, that is not all ye know on

earth nor all ye need to know." He thus briskly separates the realms that Keats held in ambiguous balance. Larkin often discouraged all sorts of comparative readings, yet 'The Whitsun Weddings' may be viewed as a searching reevaluation of the Keatsian odes. Keats's stanzas are autonomous and focus on different aspects of the urn sequentially, while their invocatory openings except the second stanza convey a sense of starting afresh every time. The Keatsian stanzas in 'The Whitsun Weddings' differ from those in Ode on a Grecian Urn both rhythmically and thematically. Instead of varied sestets, Larkin's evenly rhymed stanzas with the a b a b c d e c d e pattern as well as the enjambement take on the reader unstopping like the narrator's journey by the train. Keats held beauty as timeless. Larkin's poem is rooted in a specific time and is also aware of its flow: "That Whitsun, I was late getting away." Paradoxical to the Romantic sensuousness, our organs are here smothered by hot cushions, blinding windscreens and stinking fish-docks. Later the noise of "whoops and skirls" irritates our auditory perception, strikingly in contrast to the "unheard melodies" of Romantic literature. And above all, Larkin's view of marriage as a "happy funeral" and a "religious wounding" strongly destabilises the Romantic creed of "More happy love! More happy, happy love!"

In 'High Windows', too, Larkin is not romanticising the amorous attitude of young people like Keats. He prefers to simply narrate it, as if it is nothing ceremonial, and uses colloquial words from day to day sex life:

"When I see a couple of kids  
And guess he is fucking her and she's  
Taking pills or wearing a diaphragm".

In fact, it is difficult to find a complex syntax or an unusual word in Larkin's poetry. His picture of English suburbs with "industrial froth" and "acres of dismantled cars", and the occasional portraits of the verdurous countryside in 'The Whitsun Weddings' are quite familiar to the common English reader. 'The Explosion' is also very colloquial and picturesque in its depiction of humdrum mortals like the miners. The outward structure of 'Water' and 'Days' are almost like nursery rhymes, however subtle philosophy they may convey inwardly. Larkin thus breaks the barrier between the poet and the general reader, as Amis observes in 'A Bookshop Idyll.' "Life as it appears from day to day" thus comes again and again in Larkin's poetry. He is neither existentialist nor romantic; from a neutral point he writes what he says in a plain language for the non-specialist recipient, which is the ultimate credo of the Movement poetry.

### Self Assessment

State the following sentences are True or False:

1. A war poet is a poet writing in the time of and on the subject of war.
2. Many poems by British war poets were published in magazine.
3. Nikolay Semenovich Tikhonov volunteered for the military at the out break of world war I.
4. The term movement was coined by J.D. Scott in 1954.
5. Modernist poetry refers to poetry written between 1950 and 1990.

### 7.3 Modernist Poetry

Modernist poetry refers to poetry written between 1890 and 1950 in the tradition of modernist literature in the English language, but the dates of the term depend upon a number of factors, including the nation of origin, the particular school in question, and the biases of the critic setting the dates. It is usually said to have begun with the French Symbolist movement and it artificially

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ends with the Second World War. The beginning and ending of the modernist period are of course arbitrary: poets like Yeats and Rilke started in a post-Romantic, Symbolist vein and modernised their poetic idiom under the impact of political and literary developments; other poets, like T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, or E.E. Cummings went on to produce significant work after World War II. The questions of impersonality and objectivity seem to be crucial to Modernist poetry. Modernism developed out of a tradition of lyrical expression, emphasising the personal imagination, culture, emotions and memories of the poet. For the modernists, it was essential to move away from the merely personal towards an intellectual statement that poetry could make about the world. Even when they reverted to the personal, like Eliot in the *Four Quartets* or Pound in “*The Cantos*”, they distilled the personal into a poetic texture that claimed universal human significance. After World War II, a new generation of poets sought to revoke the effort of their predecessors towards impersonality and objectivity. Modernism ends with the turn towards confessional poetry in the work of Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath, among others.

Modernist poetry in English is generally considered to have emerged in the early years of the 20th century with the appearance of the Imagists. In common with many other modernists, these poets wrote in reaction to the perceived excesses of Victorian poetry, with its emphasis on traditional formalism and ornate diction. In many respects, their criticism echoes what William Wordsworth wrote in Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* to instigate the Romantic movement in British poetry over a century earlier, criticising the gauche and pompous school which then pervaded, and seeking to bring poetry to the layman.

In general, modernists saw themselves as looking back to the best practices of poets in earlier periods and other cultures. Their models included ancient Greek literature, Chinese and Japanese poetry, the troubadours, Dante and the medieval Italian philosophical poets, and the English Metaphysical poets.

Much of early modernist poetry took the form of short, compact lyrics. As it developed, however, longer poems came to the fore. These represent the main contribution of the modernist movement to the 20th-century English poetic canon.

## 7.4 Summary

- A War poet is a poet writing in time of and on the subject of war.
- Many poems by British war poets were published in newspapers and then collected into anthologies.
- In Russian literature, Nikolay Gumilyov’s war poems were assembled in the collection *The Quiver* (1916).
- Modernist poetry refers to poetry written between 1890 and 1950 in the tradition of modernist literature in the English language.
- After World War II, a new generation of poets sought to revoke the effort of their predecessors towards impersonality and objectivity.

## 7.5 Keywords

- Diaphragm* : A dome-shaped muscular partition separating the thorax from the abdomen in mammals.
- Dichotomy* : A division or contrast between two things that are opposed.
- Amorous* : Feeling sexual desire.
- Enjambement* : The continuation of a sentence without a pause beyond the end of a line.
- Volunteer* : A person who freely offers to do something.

**7.6 Review Questions**

1. What is war poet? Explain.
2. Examine the concepts of movement poet.
3. Discuss the term modernist poetry.

**Answers: Self Assessment**

- |         |          |          |
|---------|----------|----------|
| 1. True | 2. False | 3. False |
| 4. True | 5. False |          |

**7.7 Further Readings***Books*

- |                                      |                |
|--------------------------------------|----------------|
| A Glossary of Literary Terms         | — M.H.Abrams   |
| Literary Terms: a practical glossary | — Brian Moon   |
| A Guide to Literary Terms            | — Gail Rae     |
| A new handbook of Literary terms     | — David Mikics |

*Online links*

- <http://www.megaessays.com/viewpaper/39900.html>
- <http://edsitement.neh.gov/curriculum-unit/introduction-modernist-poetry>

## Unit 8: Geoffrey Chaucer

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Objectives

Introduction

- 8.1 The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales (Non-detailed Study): Introduction to the Text
- 8.2 Prologue to the Canterbury Tales: Introduction to the Author
- 8.3 Summary
- 8.4 Keywords
- 8.5 Review Questions
- 8.6 Further Readings

### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Know the introduction to the text, the Canterbury Tales
- Know about the author, Geoffrey Chaucer.

### Introduction

The Canterbury Tales is a collection of stories written in Middle English by Geoffrey Chaucer at the end of the 14th century. The tales are told as part of a story-telling contest by a group of pilgrims as they travel together on a journey from Southwark to the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket at Canterbury Cathedral. The prize for this contest is a free meal at the Tabard Inn at Southwark on their return.

Following a long list of works written earlier in his career, including Troilus and Criseyde, House of Fame, and Parliament of Fowls, the Canterbury Tales was Chaucer's magnum opus. He uses the tales and the descriptions of the characters to paint an ironic and critical portrait of English society at the time, and particularly of the Church. Structurally, the collection bears the influence of The Decameron, which Chaucer is said to have come across during his first diplomatic mission to Italy in 1372. However, Chaucer peoples his tales with 'sondry folk' rather than Boccaccio's fleeing nobles.

### **8.1 The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales (Non-detailed Study): Introduction to the Text**

The Canterbury Tales is at once one of the most famous and most frustrating works of literature ever written. Since its composition in late 1300s, critics have continued to mine new riches from its complex ground, and started new arguments about the text and its interpretation. Chaucer's richly detailed text, so Dryden said, was "God's plenty", and the rich variety of the Tales is partly perhaps the reason for its success. It is both one long narrative and an encyclopedia of shorter narratives; it is both one large drama, and a compilation of most literary forms known to medieval literature: romance, fabliau, Breton lay, moral fable, verse romance, beast fable, prayer to the Virgin and so the list goes on. No

single literary genre dominates the Tales. The tales include romantic adventures, fabliaux, saint's biographies, animal fables, religious allegories and even a sermon, and range in tone from pious, moralistic tales to lewd and vulgar sexual farces. More often than not, moreover, the specific tone of the tale is extremely difficult to firmly pin down.

This, indeed, is down to one of the key problems of interpreting the Tales themselves-voice: how do we ever know who is speaking? Because Chaucer, early in the Tales, promises to repeat the exact words and style of each speaker as best he can remember it, there is always a tension between Chaucer and the pilgrim's voice he ventriloquises as he re-tells his tale: even the "Chaucer" who is a character on the pilgrim has a distinct and deliberately unChaucerian voice. Is it the Merchant's voice-and the Merchant's opinion-or Chaucer's? Is it Chaucer the character or Chaucer the writer? If it is Chaucer's, are we supposed to take it at face value, or view it ironically? It is for this reason that, throughout this ClassicNote, a conscious effort has been made to refer to the speaker of each tale (the Merchant, in the Merchant's Tale, for example) as the "narrator", a catch-all term which represents both of, or either one of, Chaucer and the speaker in question.

No one knows for certain when Chaucer began to write the Tales-the pilgrimage is usually dated 1387, but that date is subject to much scholarly argument-but it is certain that Chaucer wrote some parts of the Tales at different times, and went back and added Tales to the melting pot. The Knight's Tale, for example, was almost certainly written earlier than the Canterbury project as a separate work, and then adapted into the voice of the Knight; and the Second Nun's Tale, as well as probably the Monk's, probably have a similar compositional history.

Chaucer drew from a rich variety of literary sources to create the Tales, though his principal debt is likely to Boccaccio's Decameron, in which ten nobles from Florence, to escape the plague, stay in a country villa and amuse each other by each telling tales. Boccaccio likely had a significant influence on Chaucer. The Knight's Tale was an English version of a tale by Boccaccio, while six of Chaucer's tales have possible sources in the Decameron: the Miller's Tale, the Reeve's, the Clerk's, the Merchant's, the Franklin's, and the Shipman's.



*Notes* Chaucer's pilgrims to Canterbury form a wider range of society compared to Boccaccio's elite storytellers, allowing for greater differences in tone and substance.

The text of the Tales itself does not survive complete, but in ten fragments. Due to the fact that there are no links made between these ten fragments in most cases, it is extremely difficult to ascertain precisely in which order Chaucer wanted the tales to be read. This Classic Note corresponds to the order followed in Larry D. Benson's "Riverside Chaucer", which is undoubtedly the best edition of Chaucer currently available.

## **8.2 Prologue to the Canterbury Tales: Introduction to the Author**

Before William Shakespeare, Geoffrey Chaucer was the preeminent English poet, and he remains in the top tier of the English canon. He also was the most significant poet to write in Middle English. Chaucer was born in the early 1340s to a fairly rich, well-to-do, though not aristocratic family. His father, John Chaucer, was a vintner and deputy to the king's butler. His family's financial success came from work in the wine and leather businesses, and they had considerable inherited property in London. Little information exists about Chaucer's education, but his writings demonstrate a close familiarity with a number of important books of his contemporaries and of earlier times. Chaucer likely was fluent in several languages, including French, Italian, and Latin. Sons of wealthy London

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merchants could receive good educations at this time, and there is reason to believe that, if Chaucer did not attend one of the schools on Thames Street near his boyhood home, then he was at least well-educated at home. Certainly his work showcases a passion for reading a huge range of literature, classical and modern.

Chaucer first appears in public records in 1357 as a member of the house of Elizabeth, Countess of Ulster. This was a conventional arrangement in which sons of middle-class households were placed in royal service so that they could obtain a courtly education. Two years later, Chaucer served in the army under Edward III and was captured during an unsuccessful offensive at Reims, although he was later ransomed. Chaucer served under a number of diplomatic missions.

### Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

- The Canterbury Tales is a collection of stories written in Middle English by
  - Geoffrey Chaucer
  - William Shakespeare
  - John Milton
  - John Keats
- Chaucer drew from a rich variety of literature sources to create the
  - Stories
  - Articles
  - Tales
  - Nobel
- The name of Geoffrey Chaucer is
  - William Chaucer
  - Duke Chaucer
  - Philippa Chaucer
  - John Chaucer
- Chaucer first appears in public records in 1357 as a member of the house of
  - Edward
  - Elizabeth
  - Parliament
  - None of these
- Chaucer first published work was
  - The book of the country
  - Courtly love
  - The book of the Duchess

By 1366 Chaucer had married Philippa Pan, who had been in service with the Countess of Ulster. Chaucer married well for his position, for Philippa Chaucer received an annuity from the queen consort of Edward III. Philippa's sister Katherine de Roet was John of Gaunt's mistress for twenty years before becoming the Duke's wife. Through this connection, John of Gaunt was Chaucer's "kinsman." Chaucer himself secured an annuity as yeoman of the king and was listed as one of the king's esquires.



Task

Write brief introduction to the author of Canterbury Tales.

Chaucer's first published work was *The Book of the Duchess*, a poem of over 1,300 lines, supposed to be an elegy for Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster, addressed to her widower, the Duke. For this first of his important poems, which was published in 1370, Chaucer used the dream-vision form, a genre made popular by the highly influential 13th-century French poem of courtly love, the *Roman de la Rose*, which Chaucer translated into English. Throughout the following decade, Chaucer continued with his diplomatic career, traveling to Italy for negotiations to open a Genoa port to Britain as well as military negotiations with Milan. During his missions to Italy, Chaucer encountered the work of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, which were later to have profound influence upon his own writing. In 1374 Chaucer was appointed comptroller of the customs and subsidy of wool, skins, and tanned

hides for the Port of London, his first position away from the British court. Chaucer's only major work during this period was *House of Fame*, a poem of around 2,000 lines in dream-vision form, which ends so abruptly that some scholars consider it unfinished.



*Did u know?* According to Derek Pearsall, "the one biographical fact everyone remembers about Chaucer" is his brush with the law, when, in a deed of May 1st 1380.

Derek Pearsall is released from culpability in the raptus or rape of Cecily Chaumpaigne. No-one knows exactly what the accusation-despite attempts to mistranslate "raptus" as "abduction" - precisely amounted to, still less whether it was rooted in truth. But it casts an ominous shadow over an otherwise pure-white biography, and, rather like the presence of the Pardoner and the Manciple in the *Tales*, gives a discordant dark wash to our image of Chaucer.

In October 1385, Chaucer was appointed a justice of the peace for Kent, and in August 1386 he became knight of the shire for Kent. Around the time of his wife's death in 1387, Chaucer moved to Greenwich and later to Kent. Changing political circumstances eventually led to Chaucer falling out of favor with the royal court and leaving Parliament, but when Richard II became King of England, Chaucer regained royal favor.

During this period Chaucer used writing primarily as an escape from public life. His works included *Parlement of Foules*, a poem of 699 lines. This work is a dream-vision for St. Valentine's Day that makes use of the myth that each year on that day the birds gathers before the goddess Nature to choose their mates. This work was heavily influenced by Boccaccio and Dante.

Chaucer's next work was *Troilus and Criseyde*, which was influenced by *The Consolation of Philosophy*, which Chaucer himself translated into English. Chaucer took some the plot of *Troilus* from Boccaccio's *Filostrato*. This 8,000-line rime-royal poem recounts the love story of Troilus, son of the Trojan king Priam, and Criseyde, widowed daughter of the deserter priest Calkas, against the background of the Trojan War.

The *Canterbury Tales* secured Chaucer's literary reputation. It is his great literary accomplishment, a compendium of stories by pilgrims traveling to the shrine of Thomas a Becket in Canterbury. Chaucer introduces each of these pilgrims in vivid, brief sketches in the General Prologue and intersperses the twenty-four tales with short dramatic scenes with lively exchanges. Chaucer did not complete the full plan for the tales, and surviving manuscripts leave some doubt as to the exact order of the tales that remain. However, the work is sufficiently complete to be considered a unified book rather than a collection of unfinished fragments. The *Canterbury Tales* is a lively mix of a variety of genres told by travelers from all aspects of society. Among the genres included are courtly romance, fabliaux, saint's biography, allegorical tale, beast fable, and medieval sermon.

Information concerning Chaucer's descendants is not fully clear. It is likely that he and Philippa had two sons and two daughters. Thomas Chaucer died in 1400; he was a large landowner and political officeholder, and his daughter, Alice, became Duchess of Suffolk. Little is known about Lewis Chaucer, Geoffrey Chaucer's youngest son. Of Chaucer's two daughters, Elizabeth became a nun, while Agnes was a lady-in-waiting for the coronation of Henry IV in 1399. Public records indicate that Chaucer had no descendants living after the fifteenth century.

### 8.3 Summary

- The *Canterbury Tales* is a collection of stories written in Middle English by Geoffrey Chaucer at the end of the 14th century.
- The *Canterbury Tales* is at once one of the most famous and most frustrating works of literature ever written.
- The text of the *Tales* itself does not survive complete, but in ten fragments.

Notes

- Geoffrey Chaucer was the preeminent English poet, and he remains in the top tier of the English canon.
- Chaucer first appears in public records in 1357 as a member of the house of Elizabeth, Countess of Ulster.

### 8.4 Keywords

*Comptroller* : A controller used in the title of some financial officers.

*Magnum Opus* : A work of art, music or literature that is regarded as the most important or best work that an artist, composer or writer has produced.

*Pilgrim* : A person who journeys to a sacred place for religious reasons.

*Shrine* : A place regarded as holy because of its associations with a divinity or a scared person.

### 8.5 Review Questions

1. Describe the Introduction to the text, the Canterbury Tales.
2. Write an essay on the biography of Geoffrey Chaucer.

### **Answers: Self Assessment**

1. (a)
2. (c)
3. (d)
4. (b)
5. (c)

### 8.6 Further Readings



*Books*

- The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales — Geoffrey Chaucer  
The Canterbury Tales — Geoffrey Chaucer  
Geoffrey Chaucer — Harold Bloom



*Online links*

- <http://pinkmonkey.com/booknotes/barrons/cntrtal03.asp>  
<http://www.pinkmonkey.com/booknotes/monkeynotes/pmCanterbury12.asp>

## **Unit 9: The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales** **(Non-detailed Study): Discussion and Analysis-I**

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### **Objectives**

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Know general prologue of the Canterbury tales
- Explain the Knight's tale
- Explain the Miller's tale
- Describe briefly the analysis of general prologue, the Knight's tale and the Miller's tale.

### **Introduction**

The narrator opens the General Prologue with a description of the return of spring. He describes the April rains, the burgeoning flowers and leaves, and the chirping birds. Around this time of year, the narrator says, people begin to feel the desire to go on a pilgrimage. Many devout English pilgrims set off to visit shrines in distant holy lands, but even more choose to travel to Canterbury to visit the relics of Saint Thomas Becket in Canterbury Cathedral, where they thank the martyr for having helped them when they were in need. The narrator tells us that as he prepared to go on such a pilgrimage, staying at a tavern in Southwark called the Tabard Inn, a great company of twenty-nine travelers entered. The travelers were a diverse group who, like the narrator, were on their way to Canterbury. They happily agreed to let him join them. That night, the group slept at the Tabard, and woke up early the next morning to set off on their journey.

The narrator begins his character portraits with the Knight. In the narrator's eyes, the Knight is the noblest of the pilgrims, embodying military prowess, loyalty, honor, generosity, and good manners. The Knight conducts himself in a polite and mild fashion, never saying an unkind word about anyone.

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The Knight's son, who is about twenty years old, acts as his father's squire, or apprentice. The pilgrims applaud the Knight's Tale, and the pleased Host asks the Monk to match it. Before the Monk can utter a word, however, the Miller interrupts. Drunk and belligerent, he promises that he has a "noble" tale that will repay the Knight's. The Host tries to persuade the Miller to let some "bette" man tell the next tale. The narrator apologizes to us in advance for the tale's bawdiness, and warns that those who are easily offended should skip to another tale.

## 9.1 General Prologue

"When April comes with his sweet, fragrant showers, which pierce the dry ground of March, and bathe every root of every plant in sweet liquid, then people desire to go on pilgrimages." Thus begins the famous opening to *The Canterbury Tales*. The narrator (a constructed version of Chaucer himself) is first discovered staying at the Tabard Inn in Southwark (in London), when a company of twenty-nine people descend on the inn, preparing to go on a pilgrimage to Canterbury. After talking to them, he agrees to join them on their pilgrimage.

Yet before the narrator goes any further in the tale, he describes the circumstances and the social rank of each pilgrim. He describes each one in turn, starting with the highest status individuals.

The Knight is described first, as befits a 'worthy man' of high status. The Knight has fought in the Crusades in numerous countries, and always been honored for his worthiness and courtesy. Everywhere he went, the narrator tells us, he had a 'sovereyn prys' (which could mean either an 'outstanding reputation' or a price on his head for the fighting he has done). The Knight is dressed in a 'fustian' tunic, made of coarse cloth, which is stained by the rust from his coat of chainmail.

The Knight brings with him his son, The Squire, a lover and a lusty bachelor, only twenty years old. The Squire cuts a rather effeminate figure, his clothes embroidered with red and white flowers, and he is constantly singing or playing the flute. He is the only pilgrim (other than, of course, Chaucer himself) who explicitly has literary ambitions: he 'koude songes make and wel endite'.

The Yeoman (a freeborn servant) also travels along with the Knight's entourage, and is clad in coat and hood of green. The Yeoman is excellent at caring for arrows, and travels armed with a huge amount of weaponry: arrows, a bracer (arm guard), a sword, a buckler, and a dagger as sharp as a spear. He wears an image of St. Christopher on his breast.

Having now introduced the Knight (the highest ranking pilgrim socially), the narrator now moves on to the clergy, beginning with The Prioress, called 'Madame Eglantine' (or, in modern parlance, Mrs. Sweetbriar). She could sweetly sing religious services, speaks fluent French and has excellent table manners. She is so charitable and piteous, that she would weep if she saw a mouse caught in a trap, and she has two small dogs with her. She wears a brooch with the inscription 'Amor vincit omnia' ('Love conquers all'). The Prioress brings with her her 'chapeleyne' (secretary), the Second Nun.

The Monk is next, an extremely fine and handsome man who loves to hunt, and who follows modern customs rather than old traditions. This is no bookish monk, studying in a cloister, but a man who keeps greyhounds to hunt the hare. The Monk is well-fed, fat, and his eyes are bright, gleaming like a furnace in his head.

The Friar who follows him is also wanton and merry, and he is a 'lymytour' by trade (a friar licensed to beg in certain districts). He is extremely well beloved of franklins (landowners) and worthy woman all over the town. He hears confession and gives absolution, and is an excellent beggar, able to earn himself a farthing wherever he went. His name is Huberd.

The Merchant wears a forked beard, motley clothes and sat high upon his horse. He gives his opinion very solemnly, and does excellent business as a merchant, never being in any debt. But, the narrator ominously remarks, 'I noot how men hym calle' (I don't know how men call him, or think of him).

The Clerk follows the Merchant. A student of Oxford university, he would rather have twenty books by Aristotle than rich clothes or musical instruments, and thus is dressed in a threadbare short coat. He only has a little gold, which he tends to spend on books and learning, and takes huge care and attention of his studies. He never speaks a word more than is needed, and that is short, quick and full of sentence (the Middle-English word for 'meaningfulness' is a close relation of 'sententiousness').

The Man of Law (referred to here as 'A Sergeant of the Lawe') is a judicious and dignified man, or, at least, he seems so because of his wise words. He is a judge in the court of assizes, by letter of appointment from the king, and because of his high standing receives many grants. He can draw up a legal document, the narrator tells us, and no-one can find a flaw in his legal writings. Yet, despite all this money and social worth, the Man of Law rides only in a homely, multi-coloured coat.

A Franklin travels with the Man of Law. He has a beard as white as a daisy, and of the sanguine humour (dominated by his blood). The Franklin is a big eater, loving a piece of bread dipped in wine, and is described (though not literally!) as Epicurus' son: the Franklin lives for culinary delight. His house is always full of meat pie, fish and meat, so much so that it 'snewed in his hous of mete and drynke'. He changes his meats and drinks according to what foods are in season.

A Haberdasher and a Carpenter, a Weaver, a Dyer and a Tapycer (weaver of tapestries) are next described, all of them clothed in the same distinctive guildsman's dress. Note that none of these pilgrims, in the end, actually tell a tale.

A Cook had been brought along to boil the chicken up with marrow bones and spices, but this particular Cook knows a draught of ale very well indeed, according to the narrator. The Cook could roast and simmer and boil and fry, make stews and hashes and bake a pie well, but it was a great pity that, on his shin, he has an ulcer.

A Shipman from Dartmouth is next-tanned brown from the hot summer sun, riding upon a carthorse, and wearing a gown of coarse woolen cloth which reaches to his knees. The Shipman had, many times, drawn a secret draught of wine on board ship, while the merchant was asleep. The Shipman has weathered many storms, and knows his trade: he knows the locations of all the harbors from Gotland to Cape Finistere. His shape is called 'the Maudelayne'.

A Doctor of Medicine is the next pilgrim described, clad in red and blue, and no-one in the world can match him in speaking about medicine and surgery. He knows the cause of every illness, what humor engenders them, and how to cure them. He is a perfect practitioner of medicine, and he has apothecaries ready to send him drugs and mixtures. He is well-read in the standard medical authorities, from the Greeks right through to Chaucer's contemporary Gilbertus Anglicus. The Doctor, however, has not studied the Bible.

The Wife of Bath was 'somedel deaf' (a little deaf, as her tale will later expand upon) and that was a shame. The Wife of Bath is so adept at making cloth that she surpasses even the cloth-making capitals of Chaucer's world, Ypres and Ghent, and she wears coverchiefs (linen coverings for the head) which must (the narrator assumes) have 'weyeden ten pound'. She had had five husbands through the church door, and had been at Jerusalem, Rome and Boulogne on pilgrimage. She is also described as 'Gat-tothed' (traditionally denoting lasciviousness), and as keeping good company, she knows all the answers about love: 'for she koude of that art the olde daunce' (she knew the whole dance as far as love is concerned!).

A good religious man, A Parson of a Town, is next described, who, although poor in goods, is rich in holy thought and work. He's a learned man, who truly preaches Christ's gospel, and devoutly teaches his parishioners. He travels across his big parish to visit all of his parishioners, on his feet, carrying a staff in his hand. He is a noble example to his parishioners ('his sheep', as they are

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described) because he acts first, and preaches second (or, in Chaucer's phrase, 'first he wroughte, and afterward he taughte'). The narrator believes that there is no better priest to be found anywhere.

With the Parson travels a Plowman (who does not tell a tale), who has hauled many cartloads of dung in his time. He is a good, hard-working man, who lives in peace and charity, and treats his neighbor as he would be treated. He rides on a mare, and wears a tabard (a workman's loose garment).

A Miller comes next, in this final group of pilgrims (now at the bottom of the class scale!). He is big-boned and has big muscles, and always wins the prize in wrestling matches. There's not a door that he couldn't lift off its hinges, or break it by running at it head-first. He has black, wide nostrils, carries a sword and a buckler (shield) by his side, and has a mouth like a great furnace. He's good at stealing corn and taking payment for it three times. But then, Chaucer implies, there are no honest millers.

A noble Manciple (a business agent, purchaser of religious provisions) is the next pilgrim to be described, and a savvy financial operator. Though a common man, the Manciple can run rings round even a 'heep of lerned men'. The Manciple, his description ominously ends, 'sette hir aller cappe': deceived them all.

The Reeve, a slender, choleric man, long-legged and lean ("ylyk a staf"). He knows exactly how much grain he has, and is excellent at keeping his granary and his grain bin. There is no bailiff, herdsman or servant about whom the Reeve does not know something secret or treacherous; as a result, they are afraid of him 'as of the deeth'.

The Summoner is next, his face fire-red and pimpled, with narrow eyes. He has a skin disease across his black brows, and his beard (which has hair falling out of it) and he is extremely lecherous. There is, the narrator tells us, no ointment or cure, or help him to remove his pimples. He loves drinking wine which is as 'reed as blood', and eating leeks, onions and garlic. He knows how to trick someone.

Travelling with the Summoner is a noble Pardoner, his friend and his companion (in what sense Chaucer intends the word 'compeer', meaning companion, nobody knows) and the last pilgrim-teller to be described. He sings loudly 'Come hither, love to me', and has hair as yellow as wax, which hangs like flaxen from his head. He carries a wallet full of pardons in his lap, brimful of pardons come from Rome. The Pardoner is sexually ambiguous-he has a thin, boyish voice, and the narrator wonders whether he is a 'gelding or a mare' (a eunuch or a homosexual).

The narrator writes that he has told us now of the estate (the class), the array (the clothing), and the number of pilgrims assembled in this company. He then makes an important statement of intent for what is to come: he who repeats a tale told by another man, the narrator says, must repeat it as closely as he possibly can to the original teller - and thus, if the tellers use obscene language, it is not our narrator's fault.

The Host is the last member of the company described, a large man with bright, large eyes - and an extremely fair man. The Host welcomes everyone to the inn, and announces the pilgrimage to Canterbury, and decides that, on the way there, the company shall 'talen and pleye' (to tell stories and amuse themselves). Everyone consents to the Host's plan for the game, and he then goes on to set it out.

What the Host describes is a tale-telling game, in which each pilgrim shall tell two tales on the way to Canterbury, and two more on the way home; whoever tells the tale 'of best sentence and moost solas' shall have supper at the cost of all of the other pilgrims, back at the Inn, once the pilgrimage returns from Canterbury. The pilgrims agree to the Host's suggestion, and agree to accord to the Host's judgment as master of the tale-telling game. Everyone then goes to bed.

The next morning, the Host awakes, raises everyone up, and 'in a flok' the pilgrimage rides towards 'the Watering of Seint Thomas', a brook about two miles from London. The Host asks the pilgrims to draw lots to see who shall tell the first tale, the Knight being asked to 'draw cut' first and, whether

by 'aventure, or sort, or cas', the Knight draws the straw to tell the first tale. The pilgrims ride forward, and the Knight begins to tell his tale.

Notes

## Analysis

The General Prologue was probably written early in the composition of the Canterbury Tales, and offers an interesting comparison point to many of the individual tales itself. Of course, it does not match up to the tales as we have them in a number of ways: the Nun's Priest and the Second Nun are not described, and, most significantly, the work as we have it does not reflect the Host's plan. For starters, the pilgrimage only seems to go as far as Canterbury (for the Parson's Tale) and only the narrator tells two tales on the way there, with all the other pilgrims telling only a single tale (and some who are described in the General Prologue not telling a tale at all).

We must, therefore, view the General Prologue with some hesitation as a comparison point to the tales themselves: it offers useful or enlightening suggestions, but they are no means a complete, reliable guide to the tales and what they mean. What the General Prologue offers is a brief, often very visual description of each pilgrim, focusing on details of their background, as well as key details of their clothing, their food likes and dislikes, and their physical features. These descriptions fall within a common medieval tradition of portraits in words (which can be considered under the technical term ekphrasis), Chaucer's influence in this case most likely coming from *The Romaunt de la Rose*.

Immediately, our narrator insists that his pilgrims are to be described by 'degree'. By the fact that the Knight, the highest-ranking of the pilgrims, is selected as the first teller, we see the obvious social considerations of the tale. Still, all human life is here: characters of both sexes, and from walks of life from lordly knight, or godly parson down to oft-divorced wife or grimy cook.

Each pilgrim portrait within the prologue might be considered as an archetypal description. Many of the 'types' of characters featured would have been familiar stock characters to a medieval audience: the hypocritical friar, the rotund, food-loving monk, the rapacious miller are all familiar types from medieval estates satire (see Jill Mann's excellent book for more information). Larry D. Benson has pointed out the way in which the characters are paragons of their respective crafts or types - noting the number of times the words 'wel koude' and 'verray parfit' occur in describing characters.

Yet what is key about the information provided in the General Prologue about these characters, many of whom do appear to be archetypes, is that it is among the few pieces of objective information - that is, information spoken by our narrator that we are given throughout the Tales. The tales themselves (except for large passages of the prologues and epilogues) are largely told in the words of the tellers: as our narrator himself insists in the passage. The words stand for themselves: and we interpret them as if they come from the pilgrims' mouths. What this does - and this is a key thought for interpreting the tales as a whole - is to apparently strip them of writerly license, blurring the line between Chaucer and his characters.

Thus all of the information might be seen to operate on various levels. When, for example, we find out that the Prioress has excellent table manners, never allowing a morsel to fall on her breast, how are we to read it? Is this Geoffrey Chaucer 'the author of *The Canterbury Tales*' making a conscious literary comparison to *The Romaunt de la Rose*, which features a similar character description (as it happens, of a courtesan)? Is this 'Chaucer' our narrator, a character within the Tales providing observation entirely without subtext or writerly intention? Or are these observations - supposedly innocent within the Prologue - to be noted down so as to be compared later to the Prioress' Tale?

Chaucer's voice, in re-telling the tales as accurately as he can, entirely disappears into that of his characters, and thus the Tales operates almost like a drama. Where do Chaucer's writerly and narratorial voices end, and his characters' voices begin? This self-vanishing quality is key to the Tales, and perhaps explains why there is one pilgrim who is not described at all so far, but who is certainly on the pilgrimage - and he is the most fascinating, and the most important by far: a poet and statesman by the name of Geoffrey Chaucer.

Notes

## 9.2 The Knight's Tale

The Knight begins his tale with the story of Theseus, a prince, who married Hippolyta, the queen of Scythia, and brought her and her sister, Emelye, back to Athens with him after conquering her kingdom of Amazons. When Theseus returned home victorious, he became aware of a company of women clad in black who knelt at the side of the highway, shrieking. The oldest of the women asked Theseus for pity. She told him that she was once the wife of King Cappaneus who was destroyed at Thebes, and that all of the other women lost their husbands. Creon, the lord of the town, had simply tossed the dead bodies of the soldiers in a single pile and refused to burn or bury them.

Theseus swore vengeance upon Creon, and immediately ordered his armies toward Thebes. Theseus vanquished Creon, and when the soldiers were disposing of the bodies they found two young knights, Arcite and Palamon, two royal cousins, not quite dead. Theseus ordered that they be imprisoned in Athens for life. They passed their time imprisoned in a tower in Athens until they saw Emelye in a nearby garden. Both fell immediately in love with her. Palamon compared her to Venus, and prayed escape from the prison; similarly, Arcite claimed that he would rather be dead than not have Emelye. The two fight over her, each calling the other a traitor.

This happened on a day in which Pirithous, a prince and childhood friend of Theseus, had come to Athens. Pirithous had known Arcite at Thebes, and at his request, Theseus set Arcite free on the promise that Arcite would never again be seen in Theseus' kingdom. He now had his freedom, but not the ability to pursue Emelye, and lamented the cruelty of fate. Palamon, however, envied Arcite, since he did now have the option of raising an army against Theseus to conquer Athens. The Knight asks which of the nobles has it worse: Arcite, who has his freedom but not access to Emelye, or Palamon, who can see Emelye but remains a prisoner?

Two years passed. After spending two years in Thebes, one night Arcite dreamt that he saw the god Mercury standing before him, bidding him to be free of hope and care, and telling him to go to Athens to relieve his grief. Arcite decided to disguise himself, return to Athens and pass unknown.

Arriving at the court, Arcite offered his services, and took a post with Emelye's steward under the name of Philostratus. Arcite worked as a page in Emelye's house and was so well loved that Theseus soon made him squire of his chamber. Meanwhile Palamon had lived for seven years in his dungeon, before, eventually, he escaped from the tower and fled the city, with the intention of disguising himself and making toward Thebes. That morning Arcite went horseback riding. In the area outside of the city, he dismounted and began to speak to himself, lamenting life without Emelye. Palamon, overhearing, leapt out and revealed himself to Arcite. Since neither had weapons, they made a vow to meet in the same place tomorrow and fight to the death over Emelye.

They returned the next day armed for battle. At the same time, and in the same place, Theseus, Hippolyta and Emelye were out hunting, and, reaching the area where Arcite and Palamon were fighting, Theseus stopped the battle. Palamon told Theseus that Arcite is the man who was banished (and that he has returned, disguised as Philostratus), while he himself is the escaped prisoner. He also told Theseus that both men love Emelye. Theseus ordered the death of both, but the queen and Emelye took pity on the two men, and begged Theseus for mercy. Considering how much they loved Emelye to risk death by not escaping to Thebes, Theseus asked them to swear that they will never make war against any realm of his. Theseus then decided that the two will wage war on each other, each with one hundred knights, in order to decide whom Emelye will marry.

Theseus commissioned the building of a stadium a mile in circumference for the duel between Arcite and Palamon. This stadium was opulent, featuring carvings and portraits as well as temples honoring Mars, Diana and Venus. When the day of the duel approached, Palamon brought Lycurgus, the king of Thrace, to fight with him, while Arcite brought Emetreus, the king of India.

The night before the duel, Palamon prayed to Venus to solace his pains of love, asking Venus (goddess of love) to let Arcite murder him if Arcite will be the one to marry Emelye. The statue of Venus shook, an omen that the goddess was listening. Emelye prayed at the shrine to Diana, the goddess

of chastity. She prayed that she could remain a maiden all her life and not be a man's lover nor wife. She prayed, moreover, for peace and friendship between Arcite and Palamon. But if it was to be her destiny to marry one against her will, she asked to have the one who wants her most. The statue of Diana shed tears of blood, another omen. Then Diana herself appeared to Emelye and told her that she will marry one of the two. Arcite prayed to Mars. He prayed for victory in battle, and the statue of Mars whispered the word "victory" to him, the third omen. Mars and Venus thus waged war upon one another, but aged Saturn found a means to satisfy both of them. He told Venus that Palamon would have his lady, but Mars would help his servant.

Theseus set the rules of the battle between the two opposing factions. He ordered that, during the war between the two sides, nobody would suffer a mortal blow. If an opponent was overcome, he was to leave the battle. The people raised their voices in exultation. The two armies were equal in prowess, age and nobility, and Arcite pursued Palamon viciously, and Palamon returned with equal severity. But Emetreus seized Palamon and pierced him with his sword. In the attempt to rescue Palamon, King Lycurgus was struck down, and then Emetreus himself was wounded. Theseus declared that Arcite had won. Venus was disappointed at the outcome, but Saturn told her that Mars was now appeased and she would receive a similar appeasement. Suddenly, as Arcite was proclaimed victorious, there was an earthquake sent by Pluto that frightened Arcite's horse, which swerved and fell, throwing off Arcite and mortally wounding him. Before he died, Arcite tells Emelye that she could have no more worthy husband than Palamon. His last word before he died was her name. Theseus, in a very long speech referred to as the "First Mover" speech, then ordered Emelye to marry Palamon after a funeral ceremony honoring Arcite: and the Knight's story finishes on a happy note.

## Analysis

It is very likely that the Knight's Tale was written before the Canterbury Tales as a whole project was planned, and so it has the unusual status of being both a part of the tales as a whole, but also a separate work of literature in its own right (though the text has been adapted into the Tales—lines 875-92). It is a very free adaptation of a story by an Italian writer, Boccaccio, whom it seems clear Chaucer very much admired. Chaucer—as he regularly does – hugely compresses the story into the Tale, and adds material heavily influenced by his philosophical hero Boethius.

The Tale is undoubtedly a romance as Chaucer presents it, supposedly a true history of many hundreds of years ago told by an authoritative, high-status figure (in this case the Knight). Yet Chaucer never merely adopts a literary tradition without commenting on it, and the oddities of the Tale often lie in the way it over-stresses the traditional things expected of a romance of its genre.

For example, the question of status (raised at the end of the General Prologue when the Host—perhaps duplicitously—has the Knight picked as the first teller) and rank is immediately raised by the progression of the tale. The Knight begins not with the main characters of the tale, Arcite and Palamon, but instead, he begins at the apex of society, describing the exploits of Theseus of Athens, working downward until he reaches the less distinguished Theban soldiers.

Moreover, the tale is deeply improbable in all sorts of ways, and the situation and the moral questions it poses seem more important than the qualities of the individual characters. Characters, in fact, exist only to be moved by the events of the story: to be imprisoned and set free whenever the plot demands, or to fall in love at first sight when it is dramatically convenient. Even the characters acknowledge their lack of free will within the story. The two knights pray to Venus for a literal *deus ex machine*, for they are unable to control their own fate. The Knight's Tale very openly acknowledges the role of fate through the gods: Palamon leaves his fate to theology, blaming his fate on Venus, Juno and Saturn.

Arcite and Palamon as characters, then, without any real autonomy and speaking only formal, elegant laments, are virtually indistinguishable from each another. There is no information on which a reader may base an opinion on their respective virtues. Emelye is equally something of a cardboard-

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cutout, rather than a fully rounded character (compare her, for example, with the garrulous, fully-individualised Wife of Bath). The Knight describes her as a typical fairy-tale maiden—though there is an interesting inversion of the usual formula in that her suitors, not her, are the ones imprisoned in a tower. She even first appears in a garden, a pastoral symbol that balances both purity and fertility.

Emelye proves a problematic character in the scheme of the story. Arcite and Palamon are prepared to fight to the death for her love, despite the fact that neither have had any significant contact with her, nor have any idea whether she would love either man. Yet Theseus accepts this code of conduct and offers the queen's sister as a prize for the two men, whom he previously had imprisoned and had threatened with death only moments before.

The Knight's Tale adheres to traditional values of chivalric, knightly honor in which there are strict codes of behavior which one must follow. This code of chivalry is not necessarily polite and decent, and Chaucer is always keen to draw attention to how unheroic such behavior seems. Within the morality of the tale, for example, Theseus' sudden decision to ransack Thebes to right a wrong is perfectly acceptable as punishment for a transgression against the honor of the dead soldiers; modern and medieval readers alike might feel somewhat differently. Finding them fighting, Theseus condemns Arcite's and Palamon's actions not because they were fighting, but because they did not do so under the proper rules of a duel.



Task

What characteristics of Chivalry are evident in the story?

One interpretation of the tale might therefore see Chaucer as almost parodying—showing the ridiculousness of—such masculine, chivalric codes. Or is Chaucer rather parodying the genre—romance—in which such actions are endorsed? Immediately, in this first tale, the looming question of tone hangs over the tale. Where does the Knight's voice stop and Chaucer's begin? If there is parody involved in this tale, is it supposed to sit in Chaucer's mouth, or in the Knight's? The dramatic nature of the tales themselves makes it extremely difficult to pin them down to a single, univocal interpretation.

Emelye is also the first of a series of interesting portrayals of females in the Tales. Emelye is, almost, a stereotype of a female character: though, significantly, her will is laid out as entirely separate to her actions. She does not wish to marry either of the knights, preferring a life of chastity to marriage.

*Did u know?*

Emelye acknowledges her role as a pawn in the situation, and accepts the destiny proscribed to her by the goddess Diana and the mortal king Theseus.

The Knight, like the genre of the romance itself, has a tendency toward lush description, elaborate phrasing, and within his tale, things keep becoming displays of wealth and power. Each of the final events in the story is punctuated by great pageantry. Take, for example, the transformation of the simple duel between Arcite and Palamon into a gala event requiring the construction of a massive coliseum for two armies to wage war on one another, even bringing in the kings of two foreign nations. Other books tell the Knight's story "more playn" (1464), according to the tale, and we can quite believe it. Yet it is precisely the dressed-up chivalry of the Knight's tale that makes it very difficult to discern precisely what answer it is proposing to its key question: "What is this world? What asketh men to have?"

## 9.3 The Miller's Tale

### 9.3.1 The Miller's Prologue

After the Knight finishes telling his story, it meets with the approval of the whole company. The Host then moves to the Monk (another high-status teller) to tell "somewhat to quite with the Knyghtes tale". It is at this point that the Miller, extremely drunk, interrupts "in Pilates voys", proclaiming that he has a tale that will quit the Knight's.

The Host tries to dissuade the Miller, telling him "thou art a fool", and that he is drunk – a statement with which the Miller immediately agrees. The Miller starts to introduce a tale about how a clerk "set the cappe of" (made a fool out of) a carpenter and his wife, but is immediately interrupted by the Reeve (himself a carpenter) who tries to silence him. The Miller, though, refuses to be dissuaded by the Reeve's argument that tales should not be told about adulterous wives, claiming that

An housbonde shal nat been inquisityf  
Of Goddes pryvetee, nor of his wyf.

Yet before the Miller's Tale itself begins, our narrator makes another interruption to the story's flow, repeating a sentiment he already voiced in the General Prologue: that the tale he is about to repeat is not his own, but the Miller's. Our narrator has no evil intent in rehearsing such a tale, but he must repeat all the tales told—otherwise, he will be falsifying his material. Thus, should any readers find it offensive, they should turn over the leaf and choose another tale. Men, the prologue finishes, should not "maken ernest of game"; find a serious moral in trivial things.

### 9.3.2 The Miller's Tale Text

A rich carpenter lived at Oxford, with his wife and a clerk, an impoverished student of astrology and constellations: this clerk was called "hende" (crafty, or cunning) Nicholas. The carpenter had recently wedded a wife, only eighteen years old, who he protected fiercely—because, as she was young and he old, he knew he might well be cuckolded.

One day, while the carpenter was at Osney, Nicholas fell to playing and teasing with this young wife, Alison, and caught her "by the queynte", telling her that he'd die for love of her and holding her hard by the hip-bones. She sprang away from him, refusing to kiss him, but he followed her, crying mercy and speaking fairly: and eventually, she agreed to sleep with him. However, the wife worried, as her husband was so jealous and protective, it would be difficult to find an opportunity—Nicholas resolved to beguile his master, and the two agreed to wait for an opportunity.

Another clerk in the parish, Absolon, who had curly, golden hair, was also mad with desire for Alison, and used to sing at her window at night-time, wooing her until he was woebegone. But, of course, there was no point in Absolon's wooing: Alison was so in love with Nicholas, that Absolon might as well go and whistle.

Meanwhile, Nicholas had come up with a plan. Nicholas told Alison to tell John (the carpenter) that he was ill, and lay in his chamber all weekend, until—on Sunday night—the carpenter sent his slave to knock on the door on check that Nicholas was in health. The slave looked through the keyhole, and seeing Nicholas' eyes gaping upward as if possessed, called to the carpenter, who—seeing Nicholas—panicked, and attributed Nicholas' state to his interest in astrology.



*Notes* Nicholas, he thought, had seen the secrets of God, and gone mad. Having ordered his slave to knock down Nicholas' door, the carpenter awoke Nicholas from his "trance" and the two began to speak.

Notes

Nicholas (all going exactly to his plan) swore John to secrecy, and promised to tell him of Christ's counsel. John was aghast as Nicholas told him that, according to his reading of the moon, next Monday, a flood akin to Noah's flood would drown the world in less than an hour. With the carpenter terrified, Nicholas proceeded to the next stage of his plan: that, in the manner of Noah, John was to take large wooden troughs, one for each for Nicholas, Alison and John, and hang them up in the roof (full of supplies) so that no-one can see them, sit in them, and wait. Then, when the water arrives, all John would have to do is take an axe, cut the cord, break a hole in the gable, and float away with his wife and his clerk intact.

Moreover, Nicholas continued, God had requested that, lying in their troughs on the Monday in question, nobody spoke a word-and the carpenter's and his wife's troughs should be hung far apart. The credulous carpenter instantly assented, and went off to make preparations, finding troughs and stocking up food.

Monday arrived, and, as night drew in, the three climbed up to the roof. In their troughs, the three of them prayed, and then the carpenter (probably worn out from all his business setting up the troughs) fell fast asleep, snoring. Nicholas and Alison sped down the ladder, and "withouten words mo they goon to bedde", where they remain until the "laudes" bell (a bell for a church service before daybreak) rang.

Absolon, meanwhile had got some information about John the carpenter, and, thinking that John was away from his house, went to sing to Alison and woo her at a low, hinged window which only came up to his breast height. After a first, gentle song, Alison appeared at the window and gave him short shrift-telling him that she loved somebody else, and warning him that she would "caste a ston" unless he went away. Absolon promised to go away if she would kiss him, once.

Alison tells Nicholas to be quiet and watch her: she then unlocks the window, and, as Absolon leans in to give her a kiss, she puts her naked ass out of the window, which Absolon kisses "ful savourly", feeling, as he does it, something rough and long-haired. "Tehee!" says Alison, and slams the window, and Nicholas and her openly mock Absolon from behind the window. Absolon hears it, and resolves to "quyte" the lovers.

Absolon, moving away from the window, continually says "allas!", sometimes weeping like a beaten child. By the time he arrived at a blacksmith called don Gerveys, Absolon didn't care a bean for Alison, and persuaded his friend to lend him the hot poker in the chimney. Holding it by the cold steel, Absolon returns to the carpenter's window, and knocks again, promising Alison that he has brought her a ring which his mother gave him.

Nicholas had got up "to pisse", and thought he would make the joke even funnier-pulling up the window, he put his ass out of the window for Absolon to kiss. Absolon then asked Alison to speak, so he can see where she is, and Nicholas, at this moment, lets fly a fart "as greet as it had been a thunder-dent", so loud that it almost blinds Absolon. But Absolon was ready with his hot iron, and seized his chance, branding Nicholas' arse.

Nicholas, almost dying of his burning pain, cried out for "Water!", and that cry, awoke John the carpenter from his slumber; thinking Nicholas referred to the flood "Water!", John, sitting up "withouten wordes mo", cut the cord with the axe, bringing everything crashing down from the roof, through the floors, until finally landed on the cellar floor, knocked out.

Nicholas and Alison ran out into the street, crying for attention, and the neighbors ran into look at John, who still lay swooning on the floor, pale and white, his arm broken by the huge fall. And, when he opened his mouth to explain himself, he was shouted down by Nicholas and Alison, who claimed he was mad, being frightened of something as ridiculous as Noah's flood. People laughed at his fantasy, staring into the roof of his smashed house, and turning all of his hurt into a joke-and everything that John argued to preserve his dignity was ignored. Thus ends the Miller's Tale.

## Self Assessment

## Notes

Short Answer Type Questions:

1. How many pilgrims are making the journey to Canterbury?
2. How many of the tales did Chaucer actually complete?
3. What weaknesses within the church do the pilgrim clergy represent?
4. Why is it appropriate that the Knight should tell the first story?
5. Which features of the romance are evident in this tale?
6. How do Arcite and Palamon come to be imprisoned?
7. What is the theme of the Knight's Tale?
8. What does Chaucer seem to be saying about marriage?
9. What basic human need motivates each of the characters?
10. What is the theme of the Miller's Tale?

## Analysis

"Game" and "ernest" are two important concepts in reading the Tales representing respectively jokiness, frivolousness and fun, and seriousness, morality and meaningfulness. Yet one of the things the Miller's Tale makes clear is that it becomes very difficult to decide what is lighthearted fun and what is meaningful, moral telling. The story of John the carpenter is grounded in reality: the details of the story all make sense, and it appears to be set within a suburban, believable Oxford that Chaucer might have known. Yet the story itself is clearly a fabliau: and its sources confirm its debt to fabliau—a hugely elaborate trick, set up with huge care in the story, which snaps shut as the story ends. Immediately "realism" is juxtaposed with "fantasy".

The same problem is bequeathed directly to the reader at the end of the tale: when, after the glorious moment at which John comes crashing down through the roof, and our pleasure in Nicholas' elaborate trick stops, Chaucer suddenly focuses on John's pain. The result of the elaborate trick is an old man, lying unconscious, pale and wan, with a broken arm on his cellar floor—his house destroyed, his wife cuckolded. Is Chaucer doing precisely what the narrator tells us, at the end of the prologue, we musn't do, and making "ernest" of "game"? Maybe—and the Tales as a whole tread a careful, ambiguous line between the serious and the comic.

The same ambiguity of tone is applied to the Christian theme which runs throughout the tale. John the carpenter's plan involves floating up through the roof in his kneading tub when the flood comes; and yet the tale replaces his idealistic upward movement with a crashing downward movement, through his house to the cellar floor. Christian uplift is replaced with a rather damning fall. We might usefully compare this to the fall in discourse and in subject matter from the Knight's Tale to the Miller's Tale: a step downward for the tales themselves as a linear movement (as the Host seems to know full well) in Middle English class distinction—a noble knight to a churlish, drunken miller. Metaphorically speaking, John the carpenter isn't the only thing to come crashing down in this tale.

Is this, then, a blasphemous version of Christianity? Well, it all depends how seriously we read it. If we are offended by Absolon's devilish transformation at the end of the tale (into a blackened devil carrying a flaming iron), or if we recognise the alignment of Alison and Nicholas with Adam and Eve (and the respective falls from grace which follow), then perhaps we might view the tale as deliberately depicting sin. And yet, even though the tale itself is a comic delight—and there is a tremendous amount of pleasure to be had from reading it—the Miller's Tale is far from a negative, anti-type example of sinners in action.

## Notes



Task

How do all the pilgrims react to “The Knight’s Tale”? Which group especially thinks it is worth remembering?

It’s also instructive to note the pleasure of the trick in the Miller’s Tale, and the fabliau trick rules it demonstrates. The plot within the tale is hugely clever and elaborate, studded with religious imagery: indeed, when John the Carpenter is mentioned as regularly leaving the house, you wonder why the two didn’t just sleep together when he was out? The answer can only be because of the sheer pleasure in executing such a complex structure. The tale moves extremely quickly from plot point to plot point, and everyone (except - and this is significant-Alison) is outsmarted. Even ingenious Nicholas ends up wounded on the buttock. In fabliau, you are only as good as your last trick.

Language is also undergoing a fall from grace in the Miller’s Tale. Summarize the tale and note how little of its action depends on words or dialogue: unlike the long, protracted speeches of the Knight’s Tale, the drunken Miller deals in bodily noises. The mechanics of the tale itself twist on a series of non-verbal sounds, bodily noises and one-word exclamations: Absolon’s twice knocking at the window, Alison’s cry of “Tehee!” as she closes the window the first time, and Nicholas’ final, cumulative cry of “Water!”. “Withouten wordes mo” is a key phrase in the Canterbury Tales-marking moments at which action is more important than words. The courtly language of the Knight becomes furtive, silent stealing to bed without words in the Miller’s Tale.

The degradation—or the problematization—of the whole question of language is present throughout the tales, and draws our attention to the warning the narrator gives us before the Tale itself, that he is only “rehearsing” or repeating the words of the Miller. The narrator retells us the words of the Miller, who, telling his tale, repeats the “Tehee!” and “Water!” of Alison and Nicholas. What use—what poetry—what value have these second or third hand words? What do they signify? And most importantly, how far should we read them as belonging to the Miller, to the narrator, or to Chaucer himself?

#### 9.4 Summary

- The General Prologue was probably written early in the composition of the Canterbury Tales, and offers an interesting comparison point to many of the individual tales itself.
- It is very likely that the Knight’s Tale was written before the Canterbury Tales as a whole project was planned.
- The Tale is undoubtedly a romance as Chaucer presents it, supposedly a true history of many hundreds of years ago told by an authoritative, high-status figure.
- The Knight’s Tale adheres to traditional values of chivalric, knightly honor in which there are strict codes of behavior which one must follow.

#### 9.5 Keywords

**Crusade** : Any of a series of medieval military expeditions made by European to recover the Holy land of Muslims.

**Cuckold** : The husband of an adulteress regarded as an object of derision.

**Piteous** : Deserving.

**Wooing** : Try to gain the love of a woman.

## 9.6 Review Questions

1. How is each man released from prison?
2. Why is Arcite not recognized when he is employed in Emelye's household?
3. What happens to prevent the man who won Emelye's hand from marrying her?
4. Who does the Host ask to tell the next tale?
5. Who interrupts the Host's request?
6. How does the Miller respond when the Host tries to talk him out of interrupting?

## Answers: Self Assessment

1. There are 30 characters including Chaucer and the Host.
2. There are 23 tales, two of which are fragments.
3. The clergy represent corruption, greed and abuse of power in the church.
4. He is the highest ranking member of the group.
5. The romantic features of this tale are: noble characters, ideal love, romantic past as setting and trial by combat.
6. They are discovered, half-dead on the battle field at Thebes.
7. The theme of this tale is ideal love and chivalrous conduct.
8. Older men should know better than to marry young girls.
9. Sexual appetite is the motivational human need in this tale.
10. The theme of this tale is may be "youth and age are often at odds".

## 9.7 Further Readings



### Books

- |                                      |                    |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------|
| The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales | — Geoffrey Chaucer |
| The Canterbury Tales                 | — Geoffrey Chaucer |
| Geoffrey Chaucer                     | — Harold Bloom     |



### Online links

- <http://www.pinkmonkey.com/booknotes/monkeynotes/pmCanterbury02.asp>  
<http://www.bookrags.com/notes/ct/index.html>

## Unit 10: The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales

### (Non-detailed Study): Discussion and Analysis-II

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#### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Explain the Reeve's tale
- Explain the Cook's tale
- Describe briefly the analysis of the Reeve's and the Cook's tale.

#### Introduction

A miller named Symkyn lives on some property by a bridge not far from the town of Cambridge. (A miller is a person who grinds corn and grain into flour.) He likes to fight, carries multiple weapons, and enjoys wrestling. Most people in the town avoid conflict with him, even though the regularly cheats his customers by stealing corn from them or "padding" their sacks of flour with less-expensive substances. Symkyn has married the illegitimate daughter of a local cleric, a woman who's proud because of her expensive upbringing in a nunnery. When the maniple of a school in Canterbury that regularly grinds its corn and wheat with Symkyn gets sick, the miller takes the opportunity to cheat the school even more than usual. Two students there, Aleyne and John, ask their headmaster to allow them to go have the corn ground the next time it needs grinding, convinced they can prevent the miller from cheating them. The headmaster agrees, and the two set out on their journey by horseback. The Cook is mightily entertained by the story the Reeve told and wants to tell a funny story of his

own. However, the Host reminds the Cook, who is named Hodge of Ware, that he owes the company a good tale since food he prepares so often makes travelers ill. Good-naturedly, the Cook begins his story. Perkin the Reveler is apprenticed to a guild of food merchants. He is a wild and fun-loving youth, particularly fond of gambling and womanizing. Both vices require money which he lifts from his master's safe.

## **10.1 The Reeve's Tale**

### **10.1.1 The Reeve's Prologue**

The company laughs at the foolish story of Nicholas and Absolon. But the narrator notes that Oswald the Reeve alone is angry because he was a carpenter, like John, the butt of the joke in the Miller's Tale. The Reeve then speaks, claiming that, despite his age, he still cunning, and that the qualities of boasting, lying, anger and greed pertain particularly to the elderly. The Host interrupts this rather bitter monologue, pushing the Reeve to tell his tale if he is to speak at all. The Reeve then promises to "answere" and to some extent "sette the Miller's howve" ("set his hood"—make a fool out of him). The Miller has scornfully told a tale, the Reeve continues, about how a carpenter was tricked. The Reeve resolves to "quit" the Miller's Tale.

### **10.1.2 The Reeve's Tale Text**

At Trumpington, near Cambridge, there was a brook upon which stood a mill. The miller who lived there wore ostentatious clothing and could play the bagpipes, wrestle and fish. He also was heavily armed: carrying a "panade" (a cutlass) in his belt, a "joly popper" (small dagger) in his pouch, and a "Sheffeld thwitel" (a Sheffield knife) in his trousers. Bald as an ape, with a round face and flattened nose, this miller's name was Symkyn, and he was a dishonest thief, cheating money out of King's Hall, a Cambridge college, and stealing meal and corn.

His wife came from a noble family, and she was as haughty as ditch-water - "stinking with pride" as the OED has it. The couple had a twenty year-old daughter, and a son who was only six months old and lay in his cradle. The daughter was a large girl with a pug nose, broad buttocks and high, round breasts (though, the narrator is at pains to point out, she did have nice hair).

Two Cambridge students, John and Aleyn, received permission from the master of the college to see the corn ground at the mill-and resolved not to let the dishonest miller cheat them out of even half a grain of corn. The two clerks arrived at the mill, and greeted Symkyn, telling him they were there to grind their corn and take it back to the college. While they ground the corn in the mill, Symkyn crept outside, found the clerks' horse, and set it loose.

Their cornmeal ground and bagged into sacks, the clerks stepped outside to discover that their horse had run away; Aleyn, almost out of his mind with frustration, forgot all about the corn. The miller's wife claimed that the horse had run off to the fen with some wild horses, and the two gullible clerks ran off toward the fen. With them out of the picture, the miller took half a bushel of their flour, and told his wife to go and make a loaf of bread out of it, satisfied with himself for outwitting the clerks. Meanwhile, the two clerks ran up and down, spending hours chasing their horse, until, at almost night-time, they caught him in a ditch.

Returning, weary and wet, the two arrived at the mill, finding the miller sitting by the fire, and they begged for his help. Though my house is narrow, the miller joked, I'm sure you'll be able to make it seem bigger: because clerks can "by arguments make a place / A myle brood of twenty foot of space" (4123-4). Symkyn let the two clerks stay the night, providing ale and bread and a roast goose for dinner.

Symkyn then made them a bed up in his own room, only ten or twelve feet from his own bed. His daughter also had a bed in the same chamber. At midnight, the party had finished eating, and went

## Notes

to bed, the miller's head shining with the alcohol he had drunk. The miller and his wife got into bed, placing the baby's cradle at the foot of their bed, and the clerks and the daughter followed suit. Shortly, the miller began to snore. Before much longer, his wife and daughter were joining in, and the noise was such that you could have heard it two furlongs hence.

Aleyn, kept awake by the snoring, prodded John (next to him in the bed), and resolved to have sex with the miller's daughter, in revenge for the corn that he felt sure the miller had stolen from them. John warned him not to wake the miller—but Aleyn didn't care for his advice, and proceeded straight to the daughter's bed, where he very quickly achieved his aim: and continued to achieve it all night.

John, alone in his bed, felt jealous of Aleyn (still having sex with the miller's daughter) and decided to get some of the action for himself-taking the baby's cradle from the foot of the miller's bed and placing it at the foot of his own. Shortly after this, the miller's wife woke up to go "for a pisse" (4215), and, coming back into the bedroom, felt around in the dark for the cradle – of course, it wasn't at the foot of her bed, but at the foot of John's. As she climbed into the bed, John jumped on her, and gave her, "so myrie a fit ne hadde she nat ful yore" ("the sort of good time she hadn't had for ages"). The two clerks thus lay happily occupied until the third cock crew.

Leaving the bed as the morning dawned, Aleyn was told by the miller's daughter the location of the loaf of bread made from the corn the miller had stolen. Aleyn crept back to the bed, feeling for the cradle, and finding it with his hand. Thinking that the cradle signified the miller's bed, Aleyn thought he had the wrong bed, and so continued on toward the next bed, and, finding no cradle at its foot, crept in beside the miller. Taking him by the neck, he spoke to him softly - telling "John" to wake up and make ready to leave, as he had been copulating with the miller's daughter all night.



Task

What advantages does Symkyn's daughter have that make her a desirable bride?

"Ye, false harlot, hast?" said the miller, catching Alayn by his Adam's apple and punching him in the face, causing blood to run down Aleyn's chest. The two men rolled, fighting, on the floor like two pigs in a poke, up one minute and down the next, until the miller tripped on a stone and fell backwards onto his sleeping wife.

The miller's wife, thinking a devil had visited her, began to cry out in panic to God, and to her husband to wake up and help her, as she thought the two clerks were fighting. With that, John awoke, and tried to find a stick to help her—but the wife, who knew the room better than John, found it first. Seeing a "litel shymeryng of a light" reflecting the moon's light, and thinking it Aleyn's nightcap, the miller's wife brought down the staff hard onto the miller's bald skull. "Harrow! I dye" he cried, and fell down. The clerks gave him a beating, dressed themselves, took their horse, their corn and their loaf of bread, and escaped.



Notes

The Reeve makes a final proverb at the end of his tale, "One who does evil should not expect good", before concluding with God's blessing on the company, adding finally that he has now "quyt the Millere in my tale".

## Analysis

From the beginning of its prologue, The Reeve's Tale takes the idea of "quitting" and puts it center stage, changing altogether the dynamic of the first fragment. As the Knight's Tale was "repaid" and "replayed" in the Miller's Tale (both about two men in love with the same woman) on a different

status level, and as the Miller parodied and highlighted the idealized nature of the Knight's Tale by replacing its romance setting with gritty realism, so the Reeve's Tale performs a similar treatment on the Miller's.

It is clear from the moment that the angry Reeve quietly fumes among all the jollity after the Miller's Tale that he is of rather a severe disposition, and there is nothing of the warmth and good humor of the Miller's Tale: there is no sign of an elaborate, enjoyable fabliau trick like Nicholas' elaborate (and, when you consider that John the Miller goes out to the country regularly anyway, rather unnecessary) plan. What the Reeve narrates is brutal, animal, copulation:

Withinne a while this John the clerk up leep,  
And on this goode wyf he leith on soore.  
So myrie a fit ne hadde she nat ful yore;  
He priketh harde and depe as he were mad.

There is a harder, more vengeful quality to this "quitting" tale, and, again, our attention is drawn to the anger of the teller in the Canterbury framework—how far does the bile of the vengeful Reeve seep into the telling of the story as Chaucer repeats it to us? Larry Benson supposes the Reeve's Tale, like the Miller's, based directly on a French fabliau, since two surviving fabliaux offer close parallels to Chaucer's story, and yet the tone of the tale is quite different from that of the Miller's.

What the Reeve's Tale undoubtedly demonstrates is Seth Lerer's observation that language becomes gradually broken down, gradually devalued as the first fragment progresses. Where the Knight's courtly, formal language descended to the bodily noises of the Miller's Tale, language in the Reeve's Tale seems replaced altogether for the most part by action. Symkyn's wife and daughter are not persuaded into bed, or even seduced slightly, but just leapt upon. The denouement of the tale is a dumbshow played out in the dark: silent sex, moving cradles, and, eventually a brawl involving most of the participants on the floor. The graceful, formal, rhetoric of Theseus' "First Mover" speech already seems a long way away.

Note too that no-one—and this is different even to the Miller's Tale—actually does any verbal persuading in words in the Reeve's Tale. The plot of the tale consists largely of moving things around: beginning with the release of the clerks' horse, followed by the hiding of their loaf of bread by the Miller, and then, of course, the various movements of the cradle at the bottom of the bed. Instead of words, we have another form of signification, in which objects carry certain meanings. The cradle, for example, (a neat symbol, considering what happens in the bed it delineates!) is used to dictate which bed is the Miller's and which not. The meaning and the value of words and speaking is central to the Tales as a whole - and language in The Knight's Tale became verbal exclamations in The Miller's Tale, and, in The Reeve's Tale, is replaced by simple, physical signposts.

Note too that the two clerks speak in a Northern dialect of Middle English, which might be seen to disintegrate the formality of the language even further: Chaucer, of course, claiming to repeat exactly the words in which someone told the tale, meticulously transcribes the dialect into the direct speech of the clerks.

"The feend is on me falle" (4288) the Miller's wife cries out as the Miller trips and falls onto her, and the idea of a fall—from grace, from the ceiling in a kneading trough, or from a horse—is key to the final twists of each of the Canterbury Tales told thus far. In a more metaphorical sense, too, we can see that the idea of man's fall from paradise is replayed to some extent in the move from the romantic Knight's Tale to the bawdy, human tales of the Miller and Reeve: it is a post-lapsarian, "real" world we are presented with.

One final question is the question of justice. How far is the justice delivered on Symkyn deserved—how far is it funny, how far a necessary justice, and how far is it trickery gone too far? Symkyn is struck out cold by his wife at the end of the tale, and yet Chaucer carefully includes the detail of the clerks beating him even when he lies unconscious. Do we laugh at this, or recoil from it? Whose

**Notes**

side are we on? Deceivers will be deceived: bad people should not expect good things, the Reeve tells us as his moral. But this simplistic justice doesn't play out so simply within his tale: and the subversion and complication of ideas of justice will only continue through the Tales as a whole.

## **10.2 The Cook's Tale**

### **10.2.1 The Cook's Prologue**

Roger of Ware, the Cook, claps the Reeve on the back "for joye". Delighted with the way Symkyn the miller had received his comeuppance in the tale, the Cook then promises a tale of his own, despite the fact that he is only a "povre man" (a poor man). The Host answers, granting Roger the next tale. But he adds "looke that it be good", and comments on Roger's tendency to draw the gravy out of unsold pies, and resell pies that have already been reheated twice in his shop, full of flies.

The Host's conclusion incites Roger the Cook to tell a story "in game" (in jest, in fun).. Roger agrees, and, reminding Harry Bailly (the Host) not to be angry, particularly because his tale is about a "hostileer" (pub-owner, like the Host himself), he begins his tale.

### **Self Assessment**

Short Answer Type Questions:

1. How does the Miller, Symkyn, parallel the Miller on the pilgrimage?
2. How is Symkyn paid back by the clerics for his cheating?
3. What was the reaction of the other pilgrims to the tale told by the Miller?
4. What qualities does the Reeve say characterize old men?
5. How does the infant in the cradle function in this story?

### **10.2.2 The Cook's Tale Text**

Once an apprentice lived in "our city" (perhaps "Ware" in Hertfordshire – the town the Cook is from) and his craft was selling food. He was a short man, with a dark complexion and black hair—and he was an excellent dancer: so good, that people called him "Perkin Reveller" (to "revel" is to dance and have a good time).

He loved the tavern better than his shop, and, whenever there was a procession in Cheapside, he would run out of the shop to enjoy himself and dance, forgetting about work. He often stole from his master, with whom he lived until he had finished his apprenticeship. However, one day, his master sent for him, and quoting the proverb "It is better to take the rotten apple out of the bag than to have it rot all the other apples", decided to get rid of him.

Now this jolly apprentice had his leave, and could riot all night if he so pleased—and eventually, he found board with a companion of his own sort: who loved dice, and reveling, and pleasure. This companion had a wife who, for the sake of appearances only, kept a shop—and had sex for a living. Thus—abruptly—ends the Cook's Tale.

### **Analysis**

Thus ends the first fragment of the Canterbury Tales with a tale that breaks off before it has really gets anywhere - and the real question is whether the tale is deliberately left unfinished by Chaucer, whether he intended to return to it, or whether we have just lost some of the manuscript. There are no definite answers, unfortunately, and critics have argued for all three positions.

That said, there are a few interesting things about the tale as we have it. Firstly, Roger of Ware seems to have been a real person who lived at the same time as Chaucer. This lends a whole new aspect to the Canterbury Tales, if we consider that Chaucer might have populated his pilgrimage with real people, whom his audience might have recognized. The whole question, raised already in other tales, of reality versus fiction, takes on a deeper level when we consider that Chaucer is not the only pilgrim to have a dual existence-in the real world and within the fictional one.



*Did u know?* Might this tale be in some way a parody or a joke at the real Roger's expense? It's very possible, but impossible to prove.

Seth Lerer has persuasively argued that—like many other of Chaucer's works, including "The House of Fame", and "The Legend of Good Women"—there is a very real possibility that the Cook's Tale might have been left deliberately unfinished. It is, Professor Lerer argues, a tale which breaks off just at the point where we understand what sort of tale it is to be – a grim, gritty tale about a prostitute and a drunken, good-for-nothing apprentice. The trajectory from the formal, fictionalized, stylish romance of the Knight's Tale, down through the fabliaux of the Miller and Reeve hits rock-bottom with a realistic tale about a real Cook and animal copulation in exchange for money. We don't hear the Cook's Tale told: but we know all too well what sort of thing is to come next—and so language disintegrates completely at the end of the First Fragment. Formal language was replaced by bodily noises in the Miller's Tale, language was replaced by action in the Reeve's Tale, and now language stops altogether. The whole project of the Tales comes to a dead standstill.

### 10.3 Summary

- A miller named Symkyn lives on some property by a bridge not far from the town of Cambridge.
- The cook is mightily entertained by the story the Reeve told and wants to tell a funny story of his own.
- The miller's wife, thinking a devil had visited her, began to cry out in panic to God, and to her husband to wake up.
- The Reeve's Tale takes the idea of "quitting" and puts it center stage, changing altogether the dynamic of the first fragment.
- Symkyn's wife and daughter are not persuaded into bed, or even seduced slightly, but just leapt upon.
- Roger of Ware, the Cook, claps the Reeve on the back "for joye".

### 10.4 Keywords

**Illegitimate:** A child born of parents not lawfully married to each other.

**Vice** : A metal tool with movable jaws which are used to hold an object firmly in place while work is done on it.

**Vengeful** : Seeking to harm someone in return for a preceived injury.

**Dialect** : A form of a language which is peculiar to a specific region.

**Grim** : Very serious or gloomy.

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### 10.5 Review Questions

1. What features of human nature are exaggerated in the Reeve's tale?
2. What elements of the fabliau are present in the Reeve's tale?
3. How does the Reeve pay the Miller back with this story?
4. Why was the Miller's tale so offensive to the Reeve?
5. How does Perkin fund his partying?

### **Answers: Self Assessment**

1. The pilgrim Miller is loud and boastful, he is also dishonest. Symkyn has the same characteristics.
2. One of them has sex with his wife while the other sleeps with his virgin daughter.
3. They all find it very funny.
4. The Reeve says old men characterized by boasting, anger, lying and covetousness.
5. The infant in the cradle is used to confuse Symkyn's wife and ultimately confuses one of the young men, as well.

### 10.6 Further Readings



*Books*

- |                                      |                    |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------|
| The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales | — Geoffrey Chaucer |
| The Canterbury Tales                 | — Geoffrey Chaucer |
| Geoffrey Chaucer                     | — Harold Bloom     |



*Online links*

- <http://www.pinkmonkey.com/booknotes/monkeynotes/pmCanterbury02.asp>  
<http://www.bookrags.com/notes/ct/index.html>

## Unit 11: The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales (Non-detailed Study): Discussion and Analysis-III

Notes

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### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Explain the prologue and introduction to the man of law's tale
- Explain the prologue and text of the wife of bath's tale
- Describe briefly the analysis of the man of law's and wife of bath's tale.

### Introduction

In the prologue to *The Man of Law's* tale, there is a reference to stories Chaucer has already published in *The Legend of Good Women*. This leads to commentary about the nature of a story as something told rather than as something that happened. It also presents the medieval notion that stories are something like a commodity which can be used up. In other words, there is a limited number of plots and most of the good stories have already been told. Actually, Chaucer will contradict this notion in *The Canterbury Tales* by rearranging incidents and characters to create vigorously new stories. Because several elements of this prologue do not seem to fit what follows, many critics believe that the Man of

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Law was originally intended to be the first of the travelers to tell his story. This would account for the very literary nature of the prologue. The extreme wordiness and the rambling nature of the Man of Law's introduction certainly do fit the character who is described in the General Prologue as a very pompous and successful lawyer. It would be natural for such a man to use elaborate language and to talk in circles. By this time, the reader has noticed that many of *The Canterbury Tales* relate to themes examining the nature of love and the nature of marriage. This story of Constance continues in that vein, extolling the virtues of the good wife through extreme tribulation. Unlike the women in the fabliau tales, all of whom are sexually "easy," Constance is chaste and pure. The men who try to steal her virtue are all killed.

*The Wife of Bath* tells the travelers that she has buried five husbands and has lived in the married state since she was 12 years old. Furthermore, she is now looking for her sixth husband. For these reasons, she considers herself an expert on the subject of matrimony. Before telling her story, the Wife feels compelled to defend her numerous marriages. In a lengthy monologue, she counters the religious arguments against multiple marriages. For instance, she says, although God and St. Paul recommend chastity as a perfect state, neither of them expressly forbid marriage. Since she is not perfect and has no desire to be, she personally prefers being married as she has an enormous appetite for sexual activity. In any case, she says, God calls people to Him in many ways: He calls her to marriage. Continuing the argument, the Wife adds that God would not have given men and women sexual organs if He did not intend for them to be used. The good Wife has learned to use her sexual organs to their best advantage, which is, in her opinion, as instruments with which to control her husbands. The Pardoner interrupts to say that he was about to marry, but now that he has listened to the Wife of Bath, he is not so sure he wants to volunteer to be controlled in the way she is describing. The Wife tells him to keep listening.

## **11.1 The Man of Law's Tale**

### **11.1.1 Introduction to the Man of Law's Tale**

The Host, realizing that time is moving on, reminds the pilgrims that, while lost cattle can be found, lost time never returns. Addressing the Man of Law (a lawyer, in modern terms) in a mock-legal way, the Host asks him to tell the next tale, and "stonden in this cas at my juggement" (a joke, for the Host, of course, is to judge which tale is the best).

"Host", the Man of Law, replies, "To breke forward is nat myn entente", and reiterating that he does not break agreements, agrees to tell the tale. But, the Man of Law continues, "I kan right now no thrifty tale seyn" (I have no suitable tale now to tell [say]), because Chaucer—excellent at metre and at coming up with clever rhymes—has already told them all in one book or another. The Man of Law then recites a little list of Chaucer's (actual!) works so far: Ceyx and Alcione (in *The Book of the Duchess*), and the Legend of Good Women—noting that Chaucer has never told a tale about wicked Canacee, who sinfully had an incestuous relationship with her own brother. Nor will the Man of Law tell a tale about her either.

"I speke in prose", the Man of Law continues, juxtaposing himself with the poet, Chaucer, and then with a good cheer begins his tale.

### **11.1.2 Prologue of the Man of Law's Tale**

The Prologue begins by lamenting the condition of poverty; it makes a person steal, beg or borrow for money, it makes a person blame Christ, and it makes a person jealous of his neighbor. If you are poor, the Prologue continues, your brother hates you, and all your friends fly from your side. The Prologue then finally addresses "rich marchauntz", who are always happy, because they are always rich—before the Man of Law's personal voice seems to segue in, adding that he would be without a tale to tell, had he not heard a tale from a merchant, many years ago.

### 11.1.3 The Man of Law's Tale Text

### Notes

(I) In Syria there dwelt a company of wealthy traders who made a journey to Rome. After a certain time there, they heard of the beauty of Constance, the emperor's daughter, renowned equally for her virtue, her goodness and her beauty. When they had seen her themselves, the merchants returned to Syria, and reported to the sultan, who was immediately taken with lust and wonder for Constance.

The sultan met with his advisors and told them of his intent, but they could conceive of no way that he could marry Constance, for no Christian emperor would allow his daughter to marry a Muslim. "Rather than I lese / Custance, I wol be cristned" (Rather than I lose / Constance, I will be christened) answered the sultan, and, insisting that his baronage were christened with him, the sultan set about having his court christened.

The Roman Emperor heard of the sultan's desire, and agreed to it, organizing a huge amount of pomp and circumstance for the occasion. The day arrived for Constance to depart, and everyone prepared themselves. But Constance, overcome with sorrow, arose from bed and dressed to depart, knowing that there was no other way things could be.

It is no wonder, the narrator comments, that she wept, considering that she was being sent to a foreign country, away from her friends, to be married to someone she had never met. Constance then addressed her father, sad to leave him and go to the "Barbre nacioun" (pagan land), hoping that she would fulfill Christ's behest, continuing

I, wrecche woman, no fors though I spille! (I am just a wretched woman, and it doesn't matter if I die)

Wommen are born to thralldom and penance, (women are born to slavery and suffering)

And to been under mannes governance. (and to live under men's governing)

Constance was brought to the ship, and desperately trying to put on a brave face, sailed away.

Meanwhile, the Sultan's mother, "welle of vices" (a well of vice), who knew her son's intention, called her counsellors to her and told them that she would rather die than renounce Mohammed's law (and Islam). Each man swore to live and die with her, and she instructed them to be baptized as her son had ordered ("Cooold water shal nat greve us but a lite!")

The first part of the tale ends with a damning of the Sultanesse, the "roote of iniquitee", as the Sultan agrees to do her the honor of having the Christians to feast at her table.

(II) The Christians arrived in Syria with a great and solemn crowd, and, after many celebrations, the time came for all of the Christian folk, along with the Sultan's entourage, to feast at the Sultanesse's house. The tale breaks off to mourn "sodeyn wo, that evere art successour / To worldly blisse" (sudden woe, which is always the successor of worldly bliss) before revealing that every one of the Christians and the Sultan were knifed and cut to pieces at the table. There was now in Syria no-one who had converted to Christianity—only Constance survived.

The Sultanesse's men took Constance and put her in a ship without a rudder, bidding her to learn to sail out of Syria and back to Italy. She had a certain amount of treasure on board, and the men had supplied her with food and with clothes—and forth she sailed across the sea. Constance blessed herself and said a prayer to Christ's cross. At this point the story breaks back to narrative again, and the Man of Law (or Chaucer) raises the question of why Constance was not also killed at the feast—answering it with another question: who saved Daniel in the lion's den? Christian God is the answer to both.

The ship finally crashed on the shores of Northumberland. The warden of a nearby castle found Constance and gave her shelter, but she refused to reveal her identity. He and his wife, Dame Hermengyld, were pagans, but Constance soon secretly converted the wife to Christianity. In this heathen land, Christians could only practice their faith in secret. While walking on the beach,

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Constance, Hermengyld and her husband came upon a blind Christian, who identified her without his eyes. Although Hermengyld feared that her husband would reproach her for attempting the conversion, this miracle converted him too to Christianity.

The warden was not the lord of the castle. Instead, it was Alla, the king of Northumberland. A young knight, influenced by Satan, fell in love with Constance, but she would not return her favors. In an attempt to exact revenge upon her, he broke into the bedchamber where Constance and Dame Hermengyld slept, slit Hermengyld's throat and placed the knife beside Constance. Soon after the warden came home with Alla and found his wife murdered. Taking her before King Alla, who was told all the circumstances of Constance's arrival in Northumberland, the false knight (who killed Hermengyld) insisted that Constance had done the murder.

The people spoke out on her behalf, unable to believe that Constance had done the crime; and this provoked the king to inquire further into the circumstances of what had happened. Constance fell to her knees and prayed, looking around her for help. "Now hastily do fecche a book", King Alla commanded, deciding that, if the knight swore on the book that Constance was responsible, he would think carefully about his decision. A book was brought, and, the knight swore on it that Constance was guilty - at that time, a hand struck him down on the neck-bone, and he fell down like a stone, both of his eyes bursting out of his face.

Witnessing this miracle, the king—"and many another in that place"—was converted to Christianity., and decided to take Constance for his wife. But, who was upset about this wedding but Donegild, the knight's mother? She thought her heart had broken in two. In the meantime, the couple were wedded, and Constance gave birth to a boy, named Mauricius, while Alla was away in Scotland fighting. A messenger, taking the news to the king, was forestalled by the queen who insisted he stayed with her that night, and, while he was asleep, replaced his letters with forged ones. Her letters claimed that Constance's baby was foul and wicked; and when Alla wrote back that he vowed to love the child regardless, Donegild replaced his letter with an order to banish Constance and her child from the land on the same boat from which they came.

(III) When Alla returned home, he learned what had happened and murdered his mother for her cruelty, and for being a traitor. But Constance had already set sail, and washed up in another heathen land, where the warden's steward came on board her ship, telling her that he would be her lover whether she liked it or not. Her child cried, and Constance cried also; but the Virgin Mary came to her aid, and, in the struggle that ensued, the steward fell overboard and drowned in the sea.

Returning to Syria, the emperor of Rome had sent an army, hearing of the slaughter of Christians by the sultanness, and, having burnt, slain and avenged themselves on the heathen people, this army was now returning homeward to Rome. The senator in charge of the army met Constance in her ship, and, not knowing who she was, brought her home to Rome, where she stayed for a "longe tyme".

King Alla, having slain his mother, had come to Rome to receive his penance and seek Christ's forgiveness for the wickedness he had performed. The rumor spread through Rome of how Alla was to come in pilgrimage, and this senator came to do him reverence. Constance's son went in the entourage of the senator to feast with King Alla.

The child stood at the feast, looking into the king's face; Alla then asked the senator whose the child was. "A mooder he hath", replied the senator, "but fader hath he noon", and told him the story of how the child was found. Remembering Constance's face, and seeing the resemblance in her child's face, Alla sped from the table as soon as he could, debating with himself about the hallucination he thought he was having. But afterwards, the senator sent for Constance, and, when Alla saw his wife, he wept, because it had come true. Constance stood as dumb as a tree, stiff with emotion, when she remembered his unkindness: which he soon explained had not been of his doing. When all was explained, they kissed a hundred times, and were blissfully happy.

The Emperor had granted that King Alla could dine with him; and, as she saw her father in the street, Constance laid down at his needs, and explained to him who she was. There was such joy between the three of them that it cannot be described.

Later, Constance's child Maurice was made Emperor by the Pope, but, the narrator reiterates, "Of Custance is my tale specially". Constance and Alla came to England to live in joy and in peace, but sadly, only a year after they had been reunited, Death took King Alla from the world. Constance, at the very end of the tale, widowed, makes her way again to Rome, to find her father and praise God.

#### 11.1.4 Epilogue to the Man of Law's Tale

"This was a thrify tale for the nones!" proclaims the Host, happy with the Man of Law's tale, before turning to the "Parisshe Priest" to tell the next tale. The Parson then rebukes the Host for swearing blasphemously, only to be mocked in turn by the Host as a "Jankin" (a derisive name for a priest) and a "Lollard" (a heretic). The Host, announcing that the "Lollard" will do some preaching, is interrupted by the Shipman, who objects to the idea of the Parson glossing the gospel and teaching. He promises a tale which will "clynk" like a merry bell, and wake up all the company. But, the Shipman continues, there will be no philosophy or legal matters in his tale (unlike in the Man of Laws)—"ther is but litel Latyn in my mawe!" (there is only a little bit of Latin in my stomach").



Task State the moral of the Man of Law's tale.

#### Analysis

There's another moment at the very start of the Man of Law's Prologue, in which the boundary between fiction and reality once again seems extremely blurred: the "Geffrey Chaucer" who exists as a character on the Canterbury pilgrimage is ascribed the bibliography of the Chaucer we are reading by the Man of Law, who cites works we know that the "real" Chaucer actually wrote. Once again, the Tales pretend to a real, documentary status, as if they are dramatizing or merely reporting word for word true events, and real people—and our narrator, Chaucer, seems to elide the fictional world with the reader's world.

The Man of Law, then, a "lawyer" is someone concerned with the laws and rules that hold in place the real world, and—at least, so the General Prologue tells us—he knows by heart all the lines of the common law: "every statu koude he pleyn by rote". Carolyn Dinshaw, the excellent feminist critic, has written that the Man of Law is indeed "of law", made up of law, his head filled up with laws; and moreover, she reads the tale of Constance as asserting the status quo of Chaucer's world at the time the tale was written.

Women, Dinshaw argues, were a matter of business in the middle ages, and—particularly as the marriage of a daughter could produce a strong link between two merchants or families—children were an important financial asset. Constance, then, first appearing in the tale as a tale told by merchants, is effectively sold forth by her father; the marriage is actually dealt with as if it were a business deal. The Prologue to the tale tells us that the Man of Law even heard this tale from a merchant: and it is not a huge leap to make from the business of merchants, trading goods back and forward across the sea, to Constance, sent from Rome to Syria, to Northumberland, to another heathen land, and eventually back to Rome. Constance, in other words, serves as "goods", saleable, valuable, and whose value, appropriately, remains constant.

Dinshaw then relates the tale as a whole to that end of the Chaucer bibliography the Man of Law recites in the prologue: the final lines where he disdains to tell a tale concerning incest. The Man of Law's Tale is indeed full of contradictions: in Dinshaw's words.

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"He promises to tell a tale in prose, for example, but instead we get a poem in rime royal. The "poverty" Prologue seems to have only the barest, most expedient relation to the Tale itself... Most puzzling of them all is the Man of Law's specific insistence, on the one hand, that he will not tell a tale of incest, and his choice, on the other hand, of a narrative whose motivation in well-known analogues is, in fact, incest..."

The critic Margaret Schlauch has suggested persuasively that in all of the sources to the Man of Law's tale, Constance's father makes sexual demands upon his daughter, and Dinshaw wonders whether Constance might be escaping from a father with incestuous desires. What, we might ask, is the relevance of this incest theme to the idea of Constance as a mercantile pawn?

Levi-Strauss has the answer. If marriage (and the marital sex it makes permissible) is a pawn in a merchant's transaction, and the social order is maintained through trading women and trading marriage, then forbidding incest is the best way to maintain that order. For a daughter—a father's mercantile asset—is no longer an asset in circulation if the father sleeps with her himself.



*Did u know?* Incest breaks down the idea of a woman as something to be traded: breaks down, in short, the law.

Dinshaw's interpretation is a fascinating one, and one which ties together the prologue and the tale, as well as some of the key notions explored about female identity in the Tales: (i) the idea of the woman as something to be traded, as merchandise, (ii) the idea of a patriarchal society keen to keep women "in circulation", and (iii) the idea of the woman as duplicitous and evil, as presented by the two malicious mothers. What it misses, however, is the over-riding religious nature of the tale; and the good fortune visited on Constance (herself, literally a child of Rome) for maintaining her Christian faith.

Yet Constance is not simply merchandise. Chaucer's—and the Man of Law's tale—also keeps "Constance", (or "a Constance", in precisely the way that "Geffrey" is "a Chaucer") in circulation; within the context of the tale-telling game, it uses Constance's story as a potential avenue for profit. There is an interesting moment early in the first part of the tale when Constance is described as "pale", as if, pre-marriage, she is white, blank, hardly visible. The tale itself dresses Constance—clothes her, and makes her palatable to an audience in order to exchange her—and remember that "text", "textile" and "cloth" (a major piece of merchandise in the Middle Ages) have shared linguistic roots.

### Self Assessment

Short Answer Type Questions:

1. What concession does the Sultan of Syria make in order to obtain the hand of Constance in marriage?
2. How does Constance end up a widow landing on the coast of Britain?
3. What type of wife is Constance intended to represent?
4. How does this contrast with the wives in the preceding stories?
5. What device is employed extensively in the structure of the tale?

Perhaps part of the reason that the tale is the "Man of Law's" and not the "Lawyer's" is precisely to emphasize the fact that Constance, exchanged by men for profit within the tale, is also being exchanged by a **Man** within the tale-telling framework. The Man of Law and Chaucer, by writing

Constance's story, contribute to the way she is exchanged and re-presented as a feminine symbol within it. Writing a woman is to make her the creation of a man; an idea worth emphasizing before the next tale—the Wife of Bath's, which takes this idea several stages further—begins.

## **11.2 The Wife of Bath's Tale**

### **11.2.1 Prologue to the Wife of Bath's Tale**

"Experience", even if no written authorities existed in the world, "is right ynogh for me". Thus begins the voice of the Wife of Bath. She has certainly had "experience", and is keen to justify it against biblical authority. She has had five husbands and justifies it in scripture: Christ never taught that people should only be married once, the Bible says "go forth and multiply", and Solomon had more than one wife. The Wife's husbands, picked out by their "chestes" and "nether purs", have all been good men, and she is looking forward to the sixth. She also points out that Jesus never lays down a law about virginity, and essentially states that we have the parts for sex and should use them as such: "they were nat maad for noght".

Scripture, the Wife points out, can be interpreted "bothe up and down"—you can argue that genitals are for purgation of urine, or to tell the female from the male, and for nothing else. The Wife then states again that she will "use myn instrument" whenever her husband decides he wants to "paye his dette". Her husband, the Wife continues, shall be both her "dettour and my thral" (debtor and slave) and that she would mark it on his flesh.

At this point, the Pardoner interrupts, claiming he was about to marry a wife and that the Wife has put him off—and she advises him to listen to her tale before making a judgement, and looks like beginning it, before going off on another tangent, silencing the Pardoner altogether.

Three of the Wife's husbands were good, and two were bad: the three were good, rich and old (and impotent!) and they gave the Wife all their land, which resulted in her withholding sex from them in order to get exactly what she wanted. Women, the Wife continues, can lie and steal better than any man. She reveals her tactic for manipulating her husbands—deliberately attacking her husband with a whole fistful of complaints and several biblical glossing (for justification) and starting an argument, with the result of her getting what she wants. By accusing her husband of infidelity, the Wife disguised her own adultery—even calling her maid and Jankin in false witness to back her up.

The Wife also got money out of her husbands by claiming that, if she were to sell her "bele chose" (sexual favours), she would make more money than they lavished on her. Thus the Wife treated her first three husbands, the three, good, old, rich men. The Wife's fourth husband was a reveler and had a mistress as well as a wife. He was a match for the Wife of Bath, sharing some of her qualities, but he soon died.

The fifth husband was the most cruel to her: kind in bed but otherwise violent, beating her viciously. He could "glose" (gloss—persuade—flatter) her extremely well when he wanted to have sex, and she loved him best, because he played hard to get with her. He had been a student at Oxford, and came to be a boarder at the home of the Wife's best friend, Alison, while she was still married to husband number four. Soon after he died, she married Jankin (number five) who was, at twenty, exactly half the Wife's age.

Very regularly, Jankin read his book of "wikked wyves", a compilation volume of anti-feminist literature, containing works from Valerius and Theophrastus, St. Jerome, Tertullian, Solomon, and many others. The Wife interrupts herself to express her anger at the anti-feminist portrayals of women in books written by male clerks—and wishes that women "hadde written stories" like clerks have, in order to redress balance. Then, her story continues: Jankin was reading aloud from his book by the fire, and the Wife, fed up that he would never finish reading his "cursed book al nyght", tore out three pages, punching him in the face so that he fell backward into the fire. Jankin got up

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fast and hit her on the head with his fist, knocking her to the floor, where she lay as if dead. "Hastow slayn me, false thief?" the Wife bellow when she awoke, "and for my land thus hastow mordred me?" (Have you killed me, false thief? And have you murdered me to get my land?). Jankin, of course, then begged her forgiveness; and the Wife made him burn his book right there.

Having gained for herself all of the "maistrie" (mastery, control, dominance), Jankin then begged her to keep all of her own land, and—after that day—they never argued again. The Wife was true to him, and he to her, and she was extremely generous to him. At this point, the Wife announces again that she is to tell her tale.

### 11.2.2 The Words between the Summoner and the Friar

The Friar laughs to hear everything that the Wife has said, commenting that it is a "long preamble of a tale" (a long prologue to a tale)—and when the Summoner hears the Friar's voice, he attacks him, commenting that friars are notorious for their long-windedness, telling him to "go sit down!".



*Notes* The Friar promises, in revenge, to tell a tale about a summoner to make everyone laugh. The Host quiets them down, and encourages the Wife to tell her tale.

### 11.2.3 The Wife of Bath's Tale Text

The Wife of Bath's Tale tells a story from a distant time, when King Arthur ruled the nation and when elves used to run around impregnating women. However, the Wife immediately digresses: now friars have taken the place of elves—they are now the copulating, evil spirits.

King Arthur had a knight who, when riding home one day from hawking, found a maiden walking alone and raped her. This crime usually held the penalty of death, but, in court, the queen intervened and begged her husband to spare the knight, promising the knight that she would grant his life if he could answer the question "What do women most desire?" She gave him one year to find the answer.

The knight went on a journey but could find no satisfactory answer; some said wealth, others jollity, some status, others a good lover in bed. Despondent that he might not find his answer, the knight was mournful, when, riding beside a forest on his way back to his home, he saw a dance of twenty-four ladies. Approaching them, they vanished, and in their place, the knight found a hideous old woman, the "lothly lady", to whom he put his question. She agreed to give the answer and assured him that it was the right one, but would only tell him the answer if he would do the next thing that she required of him. When the knight agreed, she whispered in his ear.

When they arrived at court, the knight faced the queen again, and told her that women desired to have sovereignty and "to been in maistrie" (to be in mastery) above their husbands. The lothly lady then spoke up before the court, announcing the knight's pledge, and asking him to take her for his wife. The knight, although now pardoned, was miserable that he had to marry such an old crone, but there was no way for him to get out of it.

Privately, the knight wedded the lothly lady the next day, and the two of them lay in bed. She realized his unhappiness, and confronted him about it. He criticized her for not only being old and ugly, but low-born. She scoffed at his snobbery as a definition and defended her poverty as irrelevant to God. She then gave him a choice, making him see both sides of the argument. Either he could have her as an old and ugly wife who would be entirely faithful to him; or he could have her as a young and fair wife, who would probably cuckold him.



*Task* How does the ending of the story reconcile with the wife's philosophy?

The knight sighed sorely, and thought, but finally told his wife to choose herself whichever option would bring most honor to the two of them. “Thanne have I gete of yow maistrie” (In that case, I’ve got mastery over you) she said – and the knight agreed that she had. The lothly lady asked him to kiss her and “cast up the curtyn” (lift up the curtain) to look on her face—she had transformed into a young and beautiful woman. They lived happily ever after: and, the Wife concludes, let Christ grant all women submissive husbands who sexually satisfy their wives, and let Christ kill all men who will not be governed by their wives.

## Analysis

The Wife of Bath is one of Chaucer’s most enduring characters, and rightly, one of the most famous of any of the Canterbury pilgrims. Her voice is extremely distinctive—loud, self-promoting, extremely aggressive – and her lengthy prologue silences the Pardoner and the Friar (who is then parodied at the start of the Tale) for daring to interrupt her. One of the key issues for interpreting the Wife’s tale historically has been the relationship between prologue and tale: some critics have found in the Wife’s fairy-tale ending a wistful, saddened dreaminess from an elderly woman whose hopes for a sixth husband might turn out to be futile. Other critics have treated the tale as a matter of “maistrie” and control, arguing that the Wife’s tale, starting as it does with a rape (a man physically dominating a woman), is deeply ambiguous at its close about precisely whose desire is being fulfilled. Surely there is little point in the woman having the maistrie if all she is to do with it is to please her husband?

Yet it seems to me that the Wife’s tale and prologue can be treated as one lengthy monologue, and it is the voice we attribute that monologue too which proves impossible to precisely define. The Wife’s tale inherits the issue of the woman as literary text (Constance, in the Man of Law’s tale, was “pale”, like paper waiting to be written on, and used as an exchangeable currency by the merchants and— perhaps—by the Man of Law) and develops it.

Text and the interpretation of text is absolutely central to the Wife of Bath’s Tale. The General Prologue describes her as being swathed in textile, and, of course, “textere”, the Latin verb meaning “to weave” is the key to a close relationship between “cloth” and “text” in the Middle Ages. For the Wife, as well as being excellent at spinning a tale, is also excellent at spinning cloth – and is surrounded, problematically in text in just the way the Prologue has her covered in cloth. When, at the very end of her tale, the lothly lady implores her husband to “cast up the curtyn” and see her as she really is, she highlights one of the key problems in the tale: it is very difficult to ascertain precisely where fiction stops and reality begins.

The Wife claims to represent female voices—and her tale consists of a set of women representing each other. The raped maiden is represented by the queen, who in turn is represented by the lothly lady, who in turn becomes a beautiful lady: the image which precedes her appearance is, appropriately, twenty four ladies apparently vanishing into one. The Wife speaks on behalf of women everywhere: and against the male clerks who have written the antifeminist literature that Jankin reads in his book of wikked wyves.

It is odd then, that the Wife, who claims to stand for “experience”, spends much of her prologue dealing with written “authority”, glossing the Bible in precisely the manner she criticizes the clerks for doing. The Wife is against text, but expert in text; against clerks, but particularly clerical; and, of course, venomous about anti-feminist literature, but also made up of anti-feminist literature. When the Wife throws Jankin’s book in the fire, she is in fact burning her own sources which constitute a bizarre act of literary self-orphanage. It is as if she burns her own birth certificate.

## Self Assessment

Short Answer Type Questions:

6. At what age was the wife of bath first married?
7. What ongoing argument begins in this prologue?

## Notes

8. What type of tale does the wife tell?
9. For what crime is the young knight being punished?
10. Why is it fitting that this tale should be told by the wife of bath?

When we notice too that the Wife (whose name is Alison) has as her only confidant another woman called Alison, there is an unusual sense that she might be talking only to herself. Add to that her almost uninterrupted monologue of tale and prologue – and the almost-uninterrupted monologues of Jankin (reading from the book of wives) and the lothly lady’s lengthy monologue on poverty and gentillesse – and we see that, in fact, the voice of the Wife does indeed take the “maistrie” in the tale itself. It entirely dominates the tale.

The Wife, then, is a far more complicated figure than simply a proto-feminist. She asks the key question herself: “Who peynted the leon, tel me who?”, referring to the old myth that, a lion, seeing the picture of a man triumphing over a lion, asked the rhetorical question which pointed out that the portrayal was biased as it had been painted by a man, not a lion. If the Wife’s tale is a depiction of a woman triumphing over a man (and even that is not easy to decide) can it be similarly dismissed?

Perhaps, but of course, for all the Wife decries the clerical tradition and the clerks who leave out the good deeds of woman, she herself as a text is another example of a lecherous, lying, manipulative woman. She falls into the anti-feminist tradition she represents. This is even before you mention that the Wife is being written, at the very least ventriloquised, by Geoffrey Chaucer, a clerk and a man. Is this Chaucer’s opinion of proto-feminism and a disavowal of the anti-feminist tradition? Or is Chaucer endorsing the anti-feminist tradition by giving it a mouthpiece which, in arguing against it, demonstrates all of its stereotypical arguments as fact?

Who painted the lion? Whose voice is the Wife’s? Is she worthy of—as she does—speaking for women everywhere?

These are all huge, open, fascinating questions that demonstrate why the tale itself is so complex, and interesting to interpret. The key fact not to forget is that you can’t have a Wife without a Husband. Whether married to Chaucer, whether Chaucer in drag, or whether a feminist persona all of her own, it’s important to view the apparently proto-feminist Wife of Bath from a point of view which understands her strong links to the men in her fictional—and literary—lives.

### 11.3 Summary

- “Host”, the Man of Law, replies, “To breke forward is nat myn entente”, and reiterating that he does not break agreements, agrees to tell the tale.
- The Prologue begins by lamenting the condition of poverty; it makes a person steal, beg or borrow for money, it makes a person blame Christ.
- The warden of a nearby castle found Constance and gave her shelter, but she refused to reveal her identity.
- The Wife of Bath’s Tale tells a story from a distant time, when King Arthur ruled the nation and when elves used to run around impregnating women.
- The knight sighed sorely, and thought, but finally told his wife to choose herself whichever option would bring most honor to the two of them.

### 11.4 Keywords

*Chaste* : Abstaining from extramarital.

*Ramble* : Walk for pleasure in the countryside.

*Vanishing* : Disappear suddenly and completely.

*Thrift* : The quality of being careful and not wasteful with money and other resources.

*Fist* : A person’s hand when the fingers are bent in towards the palm and held there tightly.

## 11.5 Review Questions

Notes

1. How does constance come to wed king Aella?
2. Describe the underlying theological theme of the Man of Law's tale.
3. Describe the events that lead constance from joy to despair to joy and so on.
4. Name two arguments that the wife uses in her defense of the married state.
5. In what way her fourth and fifth husbands different from first three?

## Answers: Self Assessment

1. He agrees to become a Christian.
2. The Sultan is murdered by his mother who also casts constance off in a rudderless ship.
3. The virtuous wife who endures all tribulations and trials.
4. Those women were sexually very lax while constance is chaste and virtuous.
5. Repetition is employed extensively.
6. The wife of bath was 12, when she first married.
7. The feud between the Friar and the Summoner.
8. A cross between a folktale and a romance.
9. He has ravished (rape) a young maiden.
10. It concerns a young man marrying an old woman.

## 11.6 Further Readings



Books

The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales — Geoffrey Chaucer  
The Canterbury Tales — Geoffrey Chaucer  
Geoffrey Chaucer — Harold Bloom



Online links

<http://www.pinkmonkey.com/booknotes/monkeynotes/pmCanterbury02.asp>  
<http://www.bookrags.com/notes/ct/index.html>

## Unit 12: The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales (Non-detailed Study): Discussion and Analysis-IV

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### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Explain the prologue and text of the Friar's tale
- Explain the prologue and text of the Summoner's tale
- Describe briefly the analysis of the Friar's and the Summoner's tale.

### Introduction

The Friar insults the Summoner, continuing the feud the two began earlier. He then uses his tale to intensify the insult. In his tale are all the elements of the fabliau: the plot unfolds scene by scene; it turns on trickery; and the ease with which a stupid man is outsmarted. The Friar's Tale also has elements of the exemplum, a perfect story of terrible behavior with a moral ending. This story of the Summoner meeting the devil is found in earlier Latin and German versions and had also been told in English. This problem with an exploitive clergy was an ancient one, and it is somewhat ironic that while the story is intended to condemn the Summoner, it actually condemns all extortioners, many of whom were Friars. Nevertheless, the theme is unmistakable: the relationship between avarice and the devil is extremely close and will land its practitioners in hell very quickly. The tale is concluded with the Squire's serving boy offering a solution to the division problem for the price of a new suit. The insult is never addressed, Thomas goes unpunished, and the pageboy gets a new suit.

The Summoner comments immediately on the close relationship between avarice and the devil by telling a wicked joke. His tale, which follows continues the insult in the form of a fabliau. It turns on trickery, deception, and the ease with which the evil man, in this case the Friar of the story, is outwitted. Unlike the other fabliaux in the *Tales*, however, The Summoner's Tale is truly base and obscene, revealing him to be of a purient nature. There appear to be no models for this story; it is presented rather as a parody of sincere religious stories which preachers used in those days to teach their listeners moral lessons. By the end of this particular story, friendly professional rivalry between the Summoner and the Friar has degenerated into open quarrelling through stories in which each man has damned his opponent to hell.

## **12.1 The Friar's Tale Text**

### **12.1.1 Prologue to the Friar's Tale**

The Friar commends the Wife of Bath for her tale, and then says, in line with his promise between the Wife's Prologue and Tale, that he will tell a tale about a summoner. He does not wish to offend the Summoner who travels with them, but insists that summoners are known for fornication and lewd behavior. The Summoner, on the surface at least, does not take offense, but does indicate that he will "quit" the Friar in turn. The job of a summoner, to which the Friar objects, is to issue summons from the church against sinners who, under penalty of excommunication, pay indulgences for their sins to the church, a sum which illicit summoners often pocket. The Host quiets the argument down, and the Friar's Tale begins.

### **12.1.2 The Friar's Tale Text**

The Friar's Tale tells of an archdeacon who boldly carried out the Church's laws against fornication, witchcraft and lechery. Lechers received the greatest punishment, forced to pay significant tithes to the church. The archdeacon had a summoner who was quite adept at discovering lechers, even though he himself was immoral. Friars, the Friar says, are out of the jurisdiction of summoners, and at this point, the Summoner interrupts the Friar's Tale, disagreeing.



*Notes* The Host allows the Friar to continue his tale, and he immediately continues to attack summoners.

The summoner of the Friar's Tale would only summon those who had enough money to pay the church, and would take half the charge himself: he was a thief, and a bawd, enlisting the help of prostitutes who would reveal their customers to the summoner in exchange for their own safety (and offer of sexual services).

One day, the summoner was traveling to issue a summons to an old widow, when he met a yeoman on the way, dressed in a green jacket. The summoner claimed to be a bailiff, knowing that his actual profession was so detested. The yeoman offered hospitality to the summoner. The two travelled together, and the summoner asked where the yeoman lived, intending to later rob him of the gold and silver he claimed to possess. The summoner asks the yeoman how he makes money at his job, and the yeoman admits that he lives by extortion and theft; and the summoner admits that he does the same.

The two reveal to each other their villainy, until the yeoman finally declares that he is a fiend whose dwelling is in hell. The summoner asks the yeoman (the devil) why he has a human shape, and he

**Notes**

replies that he assumes one whenever on earth. The summoner asks him why he is on earth, receiving the reply that sometimes devils are God's instruments. The devil claims that the summoner will meet him again someday and have better evidence of hell than Dante or Virgil.



*Did u know?* The summoner suggests that the two continue on their way and go about their business, each taking their share.

On their travels they found a carter whose wagon, loaded with hay, was stuck in the mud. "The devel have al, bothe hors and cart and hey!" cursed the carter, and the summoner, taking the carter literally, implored the devil to take all of the carter's belongings. The devil comments that, although that is what he is literally saying, that is not what the carter means: "the carl spak oo thing, but he thoghte another". On the devil's encouragement, the carter prays to God, and, lo and behold, the horses pull the wagon from the mud.

**Self Assessment**

Short Answer Type Questions:

1. How does the pilgrim Summoner respond to the insult?
2. In what way might a sinner in the tale have the charges of the Summoner dismissed?
3. Who does the stranger he meets say he is?
4. What is the real identity of the stranger?
5. Why do the curses of the old woman have the result of sending the Summoner to hell?

The summoner suggests that they visit the widow he was originally visiting. On arriving, the summoner gives her a notice to appear before the archdeacon on the penalty of excommunication, but she claims that she is sick and cannot travel there. She asks if she can pay the summoner to represent her to the archdeacon, and he demands twelve pence, a sum that she thinks is too great, for, she claims, she is guiltless of sin. The summoner then demands her new pan from her, claiming that he paid her fine for making her husband a cuckold (an accusation which she expressly denies). She curses the summoner, saying that she gives his body to the devil. The devil hears this and tells the summoner that he shall be in hell tonight. Upon these words, the summoner and the devil disappeared into hell, the realm where summoners truly belong.

**Analysis**

The pattern of reciprocity and "quitting", as seen in the Miller's and Reeve's tale in the First Fragment, is reintroduced with the Friar's and Summoner's tale. These two would likely be, to Chaucer's readers, easily recognizable characters, and the rapacious clergyman was very much a stock figure for Middle English readers and listeners.

The Friar's Tale, like the Reeve's Tale, seems to exist for a single purpose: the humiliation and degradation of members of a certain profession. The Tale begins by exposing the means by which summoners blackmail and extort persons, but does not attack the church system that allows this to happen, but rather the men who represent this system and exploit these workings of the church. Yet the Friar's Tale surpasses the Reeve's Tale in its vitriol for its main character. While Symkyn, the immoral miller of the Reeve's tale, is hardly an exemplary character and exists only for ridicule, he at least is given a proper name that separates him from his profession. The main character of the Friar's Tale is an impersonal representation of all summoners and the fate they deserve.

The comic twist to the Friar's Tale is that, when he meets the devil, the summoner is neither shocked nor overcome with fear. Rather, the summoner regards the devil as a curious colleague, and is almost impressed. In fact, the narrator too seems to hold a higher opinion of the devil than of the summoner. When the devil leaves the summoner, the devil tells him that they shall hold company together until he forsakes him. This may be a chance for redemption that the devil offers the summoner, just before he visits the old crone, but he does not take it.



Task

What genres are combined in the Friar's tale?

Of course, as well as preaching against hypocrisy, the Friar's Tale turns it into a plot feature. How can we know, the tale asks, who we meet on the road: a yeoman or a devil? A religious, pious summoner or a downright crook? Moreover, there is nothing very ambiguous about the ending to the tale: the summoner is taken to hell. A metaphorical hell, like the furnace of Gervase the smith in the Miller's Tale, is a far more distant representation, but when the summoner disappears, with Satan, it is simply, unmetaphorically, to hell. What in the Miller's tale was comedy, when stated literally by the Friar, starts to look a little like blasphemy, and one wonders how easily Chaucer's original readers would have related to it.

Penn R. Szittyta has written, in his essay "The Green Yeoman as Loathly Lady: The Friar's Parody of the Wife of Bath's Tale", that the Friar's Tale might actually be a parody of the Wife of Bath's tale. Szittyta notes such pertinent details as the appearance of the Friar riding "under a forest syde"-in precisely the same phrase that the Wife uses in her tale - and argues that the Wife's fairytale forest, and the Friar's real one in some way elide. It is difficult however to be entirely persuaded by Szittyta's argument, and see the Friar's tale as a closer relation to the Wife's than it is to the Summoner's.

Simply put, the Friar's tale is also a reminder to watch what you wish for, and not to speak without thinking. The devil, it seems, takes words literally - and whether you mean them or not, can decide to act upon them as he pleases, as long as they have been uttered (note the way the widow's curse is made reality by the devil as the tale resolves). As Chaucer's Tales look perilously close to potential blasphemy, the Friar's Tale's warning that anything said can be used against the sayer seems doubly pertinent; and the issue of blasphemy in the Tales, present here, runs right through the work to Chaucer's final Retraction.

## **12.2 The Summoner's Tale**

### **12.2.1 Prologue to the Summoner's Tale**

The Summoner was enraged by the tale that the Friar told, quaking in anger. Since, he says, you have all listened to the Friar lie, please do listen to my tale. The Summoner claims that friars and fiends are one and the same. He tells a short anecdote in his prologue. One day, a friar was brought to hell and led up and down by angel, and was surprised to see no friars there. Are friars so graceful, he asked, that they never come to hell? The angel told him that many millions of friars came to hell, and led him directly to Satan. Satan had a tail as broad as a sailing ship, and the angel called to Satan to lift up his tail. Satan did, and twenty thousand friars swarmed out of his arse like bees from a hive.

### **12.2.2 The Summoner's Tale Text**

A friar went to preach and beg in a marshy region of Yorkshire called Holderness. In his sermons he begged for donations for the church and afterward he begged for charity from the local residents. The Friar interrupts, calling the Summoner a liar, but is silenced by the Host.

## Notes

Along went this friar, house by house, until he came to the house of Thomas, a local resident who normally indulged him, and found him ill. The friar spoke of the sermon he had given that day, commenting on the excellent way he had glossed the biblical text-and essentially ordered a meal from Thomas's wife.

She told the friar that her child died not more than two weeks before. The friar claimed that he had a revelation that her child had died and entered heaven. He claimed that his fellow friars had a similar vision, for they are more privy to God's messages than laymen, who live richly on earth, as opposed to spiritual riches. The friar claimed that, among the clergy, only friars remain impoverished and thus are closest to God; and told Thomas that his illness persists because he had given so little to the church.

Thomas claimed that he had indeed given "ful many a pound" to various friars, but never fared the better for it. The friar, characteristically, is irritated that Thomas is not giving all of his money solely to him, and points out to him that a "ferthyng" (a farthing) is not worth anything if split into twelve. Continuing to lecture Thomas, the friar began a long sermon against anger ("ire"), telling the tale of an angry king who sentenced a knight to death, because, as he returned without his partner, the king automatically assumed that the knight had murdered him. When a third knight took the condemned knight to his death, they found the knight that he had supposedly murdered. When they returned to the king to have the sentenced reversed, the king sentenced all three to death: the first because he had originally declared it so, the second because he was the cause of the first's death, and the third because he did not obey the king.

Another ireful king, Cambyses, was a drunk. When one of his knights claimed that drunkenness caused people to lose their coordination, Cambyses drew his bow and arrow and shot the knight's son to prove that he still had control of his reflexes. The friar then told of Cyrus, the Persian king who had the river Gyndes destroyed because one of his horses had drowned in it.

At the close of this sermon, the friar asked Thomas for money to build the brothers' cloister. Thomas, annoyed by the friar's hypocrisy, told the friar that he had a gift for him that he was sitting on, but that he would only receive it if he promised to split it up equally between each of the friars.



Task

What distracts the lord of the shire from dealing with the insult?

The friar readily agreed, and put his hand down behind Thomas' back, groping round – and Thomas let out a fart louder than a horse could make. The friar became immediately angry, and promised to repay Thomas for his fart, but, before he could, the servants of the house chased the friar out.

The enraged friar found the lord of the village and told him of the embarrassment he suffered, angrily wondering how he was supposed to divide a fart into twelve. The lord's squire spoke up with a suggestion, in return for a "gowne-clooth" from his master: take a cartwheel, and tell each of twelve friars to lay his nose at the end of a spoke. Then the friar of the tale could sit in the centre of the wheel and fart, and each of the spokes would carry the smell along to the rim—and therefore, divide it up between each of the friars.

### Analysis

Chaucer carefully shows us the Summoner, quaking with anger, after hearing the Friar's Tale, and those pious readers who might have thought that the Friar's Tale veered close to the line of blasphemous sin would likely have been straight out offended by the Summoner's. It is a bilious, aggressive tale which does not even consider pulling its punches, and the Friar's contempt is roundly "quyt" with a full-on, unrelenting attack from the Summoner.

Analogy is a key ingredient in the tale, potentially a reference to the possible interpretation of the General Prologue which argues that the Summoner and Pardoner are engaged in a homosexual

relationship. Regardless of whether this reading is accepted, the prologue begins with a journey into the devil's arse, and the tale finds its resolution with the division of a fart, first from Thomas' arse, and then from the friar's.

This journey from arse to arse is only one of several ways in which the Summoner's Tale mechanically closes in on itself, in precisely the way that the friar within it manages to bring about his own humiliation. There is a neat irony in the way that the friar, after a lengthy lecture about anger management and doing away with "ire" (anger) then becomes absolutely furious, looking as if he were "a wilde boor".



*Did u know?* The structure of the tale has a "quitting"-like circularity to it.

This circularity also features in individual words: The Summoner's Tale operates on a series of clever puns. At the end of the tale, the division of the fart is a challenge, the lord remarks, in "ars-metrike"—in the art of measurement, but, as Seth Lerer, points out, a challenge too in the metrics of the arse. Moreover, Jankin's vision of the friars gathered at the spokes of a huge wheel is actually a parody of the Pentecost: the day where the twelve apostles receive the Holy Spirit as Christ ascends to heaven. It is, one might suggest, a reworking of religion entirely appropriate to the piety of the friar (and even the Summoner!) in question.

## Self Assessment

Short Answer Type Questions:

6. What is the reaction of the Summoner to the Friar's Tale?
7. What happened to the prayers that were supposed to be offered for all who donated to the Friars?
8. What new donation does Thomas make by way of response to the Friar's sermon?
9. To whom does the Friar take his case against Thomas?
10. Who finally solves the problem of dividing the "gift"?

The most significant pun, however, is the most interesting. The friar in the tale berates Thomas, telling him that a "ferthyng" (a farthing coin) is not worth anything split into twelve; and, then, of course, he is paid for the tales he then tells with a farting, which he must split into twelve. The two words were likely homonyms in Middle English, and the punning extends the idea of quitting—which structures this tale and the Friar's as a pair—down into the fabric of the tale itself.

Yet there is another question, which raises a serious point. Is religious advice actually worth people's money? Is the Summoner (or the Friar, or any of the pilgrims) actually telling the company anything which could be valued more highly than a fart? Perhaps Chaucer, aware of the level of potential offense contained within his tale, poses its key question deliberately to those inclined to take it too seriously: isn't tale telling, like farting, just a lot of hot air?

## 12.3 Summary

- The Friar's Tale tells of an archdeacon who boldly carried out the Church's laws against fornication, witchcraft and lechery.
- The summoner suggests that they visit the widow he was originally visiting.
- The Friar's Tale, like the Reeve's Tale, seems to exist for a single purpose: the humiliation and degradation of members of a certain profession.
- The Summoner was enraged by the tale that the Friar told, quaking in anger.
- Thomas claimed that he had indeed given "ful many a pound" to various friars, but never fared the better for it.

Notes

### 12.4 Keywords

- Pageboy* : A woman's hairstyle consisting of a shoulder-length bob with the ends rolled under.  
*Privy* : A person having a part or interest in any action.  
*Furious* : Extremely angry.  
*Elide* : Join together.

### 12.5 Review Questions

1. What insulting remark about Summoners is made by the Friar in his prologue?
2. What causes the Summoner in the tale to declare eternal brotherhood for the stranger?
3. Why don't the farmer's curses send his animal to hell?
4. What happen in the Summoner's joke about the Friars?
5. Why is Thomas so angry with the Friar?
6. How does the Friar try to calm his benefactor's anger?

### **Answers: Self Assessment**

1. He say he will pay the Friar back when he tells his own tale.
2. He could give the Summoner money.
3. He say he is a bailiff.
4. He is a demon from hell.
5. The old woman's curses are totally sincere.
6. He is infuriated.
7. All the names of those who donate are erased so the prayers never get offered.
8. He gives the Friar a fart.
9. The Friar goes to the overlord of the district.
10. The young squire of the lord concocts an outlandish solution.

### 12.6 Further Readings



*Books*

- |                                      |                    |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------|
| The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales | — Geoffrey Chaucer |
| The Canterbury Tales                 | — Geoffrey Chaucer |
| Geoffrey Chaucer                     | — Harold Bloom     |



*Online links*

- <http://www.pinkmonkey.com/booknotes/monkeynotes/pmCanterbury02.asp>  
<http://www.bookrags.com/notes/ct/index.html>

## Unit 13: The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales (Non-detailed Study): Discussion and Analysis-V

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- 13.4 Keywords
- 13.5 Review Questions
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### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Explain the prologue and text of the clerk's tale
- Know about Lenvoy de Chaucer
- Explain the prologue and text of the Merchant's tale
- Describe briefly the analysis of the Clerk's and the Merchant's tale.

### Introduction

The jovial Host teases the young Clerk for his quiet, demure behavior, but begs him to tell them a gay story with no preaching and no rhetoric. This gentler clergyman, in contrast with the two who precede. As might be expected of a scholar, the Clerk uses his prologue to express his devotion to Petrarch, most famous of the medieval Italian poets and one with whom Chaucer was very familiar. The Clerk is speaking for Chaucer in his enthusiastic admiration. Many elements of the story of Griselda come from Petrarch and much of it is modelled from a tale in Boccaccio's Decameron. Chaucer's version of this

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Italian story, however, combines elements of the romance (joyful ending, noble characters) with the promise, the magic, and the testing which characterize a folktale. However, the tale is probably intended to be considered an exemplum with its strong moral lesson and its perfect character, Griselda. The hearer is to marvel at Griselda's faithfulness but is never expected to imitate it; rather, he is at all costs to avoid behaving as Walter did in applying cruel and irrational tests to the loyalty of those he loves.

*The Merchant's Tale* is another example of fabliau with its deceiving, tricking, and making a fool of a foolish man. The elements of the romance (*i.e.*, the knight, the rituals, the gardens, the palace) are inserted to add humor and contrast to the tale of an earthy young woman who determines to enjoy her young lover and gets away with it. As with many of the tales, the material for this story is drawn from many sources: Italian, German, and French literature, as well as English oral tradition. The theme of blindness dominates this tale. January is too blind to see his foolishness in marrying such a young woman. After the marriage, his love and his desire to be happy blind him to May's infidelity. His physical blindness reinforces the theme.

### **13.1 The Clerk's Tale**

#### **13.1.1 Prologue to the Clerk's Tale**

The Host remarks that the Clerk of Oxford sits as coyly and quietly as a new-married bride, and tells him to be more cheerful: "Telle us som myrie tale!" ("tell us a merry tale"). The Host continues to argue that, when someone is entered into a game, they have to play by the rules of that game; and adds that he doesn't want a tale told in "heigh style", but spoken "pleyn".

The clerk replies kindly that the Host has the "governance" over the company (is "in charge" of the company) and says that he will tell a tale which he learned from a worthy clerk, Francis Petrarch, who is now dead and nailed into his coffin. He then praises the renowned Petrarch for his sweet rhetoric and poetry; though warns the company, before he begins, that Petrarch wrote a poem in a "high style" exalting the Italian landscape.

#### **13.1.2 The Clerk's Tale Text**

(I) The tale begins with the description of Saluzzo, a region at the base of Mount Viso in Italy. There was once a marquis of this region named Walter. He was wise, noble and honorable, but his mind was always on seeking immediate pleasures—turning aside more worthy pastime, and even refusing to marry.

The people of his realm confronted him about his steadfast refusal, pleading with him to take a wife, so that his lineage could continue (and so that his son could continue his work in the event of his death). They offer to choose for him the most noble woman in the realm for his wife. He agrees to marry, but makes this one condition: he will marry whomever he chooses, regardless of birth, and his wife shall be treated with the respect accorded to an emperor's daughter, no matter her origin.

He set the day on which he would be married; his people thanked him on their knees, and returned home.

(II) Not far from the marquis' honorable palace, among the poor people, lived a man named Janicula, who had a daughter Griselde, who was exceedingly virtuous, courageous and charitable. While hunting, the marquis caught sight of Griselde and, recognizing her virtue, immediately decided that this exemplary woman should be his wife.

On the day of the wedding, Walter had not revealed to the public the woman he would marry, and the populace wondered whether he might, in fact, not marry at all. Walter had, however, already

prepared rich garments and jewelery in Griselde's size. That morning, the marquis came to Janicula's home and asked him for his permission to marry his daughter. Janicula was so astonished, he turned red, and could not speak—but did manage eventually to assent to the marriage.

Walter, however, wanted Griselde herself to assent before he married her, and, the two men went into her chamber. Walter asked her hand in marriage, and asked her to be ready to do whatever he said, whenever he said it, but never to resent him; if she agreed to this, he said, he would swear to marry her. Griselde swore never to disobey him—and he took her outside to introduce her to his populace as his new wife.

The marquis' servants took Griselde and dressed her in all new, expensive clothes for the wedding; she appeared as if she had been born as nobility, not from her actual humble origin. Her virtue and excellence became renowned throughout Saluzzo, and in many other regions, for she was essentially a perfect wife – she appeared as “from hevene sent”. Soon she gave birth to a baby girl, although she would have preferred a son to be his father's heir.

(III) Soon after his daughter was born, the marquis decided to test his wife. The narrator, at this stage, explicitly expresses doubt about why the marquis would test his wife: “as for me” he says, I think it sits “yvele” (“evilly”) “to assaye a wyf whan that it is no need” (“to test a wife when there is no need to”).

The marquis told her that although she was dear to him, to the rest of the nobility she was not. They, he said, objected to her new daughter, and wanted her to be taken away from Griselde and put to death. Griselde received this news without grievance, and answered that she and her child would do anything that pleased her husband. Rather than putting the child to death (though allowing Griselde to believe her child was dead), the marquis instead sent the child away with one of his sergeants to be raised by his sister, the husband of the Earl of Panago, in Bologna. Walter did pity his wife, who remained steadfast and dedicated to him, silently accepting her fate and that of her child whom she believed dead. Griselde never spoke of her daughter, nor even mentioned her name.

(IV) Four years passed, and Griselde had another child, a boy, and, when it was two years old, Walter repeated the same test. The people, Walter argued, did not want the low blood of Janicula to succeed him as marquis. She accepted this, and told Walter that she realized she was of low birth and would consent to die if it pleased him. However, she did point out that she had had no benefits of motherhood, only the pain of childbirth and a continued pain of losing her children. The same sergeant came to take away her son, and Griselde kissed her child goodbye.

The people came to loathe Walter, thinking that he had murdered his children. Walter, unruffled by their disapproval, devised his next test: organizing the court of Rome to send a counterfeit papal bull which ordered Walter to divorce Griselde and take another wife. Upon hearing this, Griselde remained steadfast.

However, the marquis had written a secret letter to Bologna, ordering the Earl of Panago to return home his children with huge pomp and circumstance, but without telling them whose children they were. Indeed, the Earl was to pretend that the daughter was to marry the marquis himself.

(V) Walter told Griselde of the papal bull, returned her dowry to her, and sent her back to her father's house. She was stoic upon hearing this, and, though she reiterated her love for Walter, she did not repent for loving him. She only asks that she not be sent naked from the palace, but will be given the simple smock, just the like the ones she used to wear in poverty, to wear to spare her from suffering the indignity of returning home completely unclothed. Walter granted this request, and in, stripping herself of all of her riches, Griselde returned home to her father in her poor clothes once more.

The people followed her home, weeping for her bad fortune, but Griselde herself did not shed a tear, and, as she approached the house, her father ran out to cover her with his old coat. The narrator, at the end of this part, compares the suffering Griselde has endured to that of the biblical Job.

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(VI) The Countess of Panago arrived at Saluzzo from Bologna with Griselde's two children. Walter sent a message to Griselde that he would be married soon and wished for Griselde to plan the ceremony; patiently, Griselde agreed and began to make the arrangements. When the people saw the new wife, they thought, for the first time, seeing her riches and the stately procession, that Walter was right to change his wife.

As the party sat down to dinner, Walter called Griselde into the hall. When he introduced Griselde to his new wife, she pleaded with him not to treat the new wife as unkindly as he did her (not to "prikke with no tormentynge / This tender maiden") but meant no malice in her words.

### Self Assessment

Short Answer Type Questions:

1. On which two Italian classics is the Clerk's tale based?
2. Which two genres are represented in this story?
3. How does Walter use public opinion to persuade the pope to grant nullification of his marriage?
4. Why does Walter not allow the people to select his wife for him?
5. How is the hearer intended to respond to this tale?

At that, Walter kissed Griselde and claimed that she had always been his wife. Griselde stood, astonished, like someone who had woken from a sleep. Walter then revealed to her the actual fate of her two children - the supposed new wife was actually Griselde's daughter. Griselde fell down in a swoon, and, on awaking, called her children to her, where she kissed them and held them so tightly that they could not tear the children from her arms. The ladies took her into her chamber, and took her out of her poor clothing, replacing it with a "clooth of gold that brighte shoon", and a coronet on her head. The two lived happily ever after, and, eventually, the son succeeded his father after his father's death, and was kind in marriage.

This story, the Clerk then continues, is not told so that wives should follow Griselde's example in humility-it is impossible that they would. Every person, however, should try to be constant in adversity and in the face of God, like Griselde was to Walter: this is why Petrarch wrote the story.



*Notes* People under God must live in virtuous patience, accepting whatever will God serves on them.

However, the Clerk continues, it were very difficult to find even two or three Griseldes out of a whole town of people nowadays. If you put them to the test, their "gold" has been so mixed in with "brass" that the coin would snap rather than withstand the pressure. For which reason, for the love of the Wife of Bath (whose sect God maintain "in heigh maistrie"), the Clerk continues, I will now sing a song to gladden you.

### 13.1.3 Lenvoy de Chaucer

Griselde is dead and her patience is too, and both of them are buried in Italy. No wedded man should try his wife's patience in trying to find Griselde: he will fail. The Envoy continues to address "O noble wyves", advising them not to nail down their tongues in humility, or Chichevache will swallow them whole. Follow Echo, that held no silence, and take on the governance yourself, the Envoy continues, and use the arrows of your eloquence to pierce your husband's armor.



*Did u know?* The conclusion of the Envoy tells fair women to show off their good looks, and ugly women to spend all of their husband's money!

### 13.1.4 The Words of the Host

When the Clerk had finished his tale, the Host swore "By Goddes bones" that he would rather lose a barrel of ale than his wife had—even once—heard this tale. It is a noble tale, he continues—before advising the company not to ask why he'd rather not have his wife hear it.

#### Analysis

That the Clerk, in a typically clerical touch, gets his tale from a very worthy literary source is not a fiction of Chaucer's. The tale does indeed come from a tale of Petrarch's; yet what the Clerk fails to mention in his citation is that Petrarch himself took it from Boccaccio's Decameron (a fact which Chaucer certainly knew). Another thing, surely known to the clerks in Chaucer's audience, that the Clerk omits to mention is that even Petrarch had difficulty interpreting the tale as he found it in Boccaccio. The key problem, in fact, to reading the Clerk's Tale is interpretation.

The tale itself is simple enough: woman of low birth is horribly tested by her noble husband, made to suffer extremely, and eventually, is restored to good fortune. But what does the tale mean? Not, according to the Clerk, at least, what it seems to mean at first reading: that women should patiently submit themselves to their husbands will. This sentiment, of course, is deeply at odds with the Wife of Bath (herself explicitly acknowledged and praised by the Clerk in the tale) and her tale only a little earlier—and the Clerk endorses the Wife's desire for female maistrie.



*Task* What promise does Griselde make to Walter before accepting his offer of marriage?

Yet why is the tale not to be read as endorsing female subjugation to the husband? Perhaps because the Clerk (as he implies) wholeheartedly endorses the maistrie-seeking of the Wife of Bath, but also, as is twice said in the tale, because there are no Griseldes left in the world today. Is this lack of patient Griseldes a sign of progress, or something to be mourned? If the story is a celebration of Griselde's fortitude, the Clerk accurately judges that it would be impossible for any woman to legitimately withstand the suffering that Griselde faced with such resignation; and indeed, her extreme behavior might not even be read as commendable, for she allows her husband to murder her two children without struggle. The Clerk indicates that women should strive toward the example that Griselde sets, but not necessarily follow her example in such an extreme form. Where does one draw the line? The tale could be read as supporting either pro-feminist or anti-feminist sentiments.

Petrarch's solution to the problem is also voiced by the tale: that the tale is not, in fact, about men and women at all, but how men in general should relate to God. This is a perfectly reasonable interpretation, but as presented by Chaucer, Walter—cruel, testing for no obvious reason, and extremely self-satisfied—does not make for a particularly attractive representative of God. Petrarch's interpretation of his own story is not an absolute one: and nor is Chaucer's (it is important to note that the envoy at the very end of the tale is attributed "de Chaucer" and not to the Clerk—perhaps something more significant than a simple print-setting error). For the envoy advises wives not to nail down their tongues, but to attack their husbands and be shrews—a sentiment which the tale does not reflect at all, particularly when you consider that it is Griselde's strength of character and humility which justify her eventual reward and reunion with her children.

Chaucer, Petrarch, and the Wife of Bath—each have separate lines of interpretation for a single tale, and each of them are potentially justified in the text. Yet the Clerk's presentation does not invite the reading of the tale as simply a fable—there is little heightened or distanced in the presentation. In

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fact, the telling strives to arouse our displeasure at Walter's conduct, and our sympathy for Griselde-Chaucer, in fact, studs the narrative with deeply humanizing, sympathetic details (for example, the way Griselde, reunited with her children, cannot bear to release them from her embrace) which make an allegorical reading of the tale even more difficult. It is difficult to believe that this tale is simply an allegory of man's relationship with God, when the allegory is written with such focused, emotional detail.

One might note too that Griselde is stripped and dressed in new clothes as her status changes from low, to high, back to low, and eventually back to high. The idea of the woman dressed in cloth (cloth, as we noted in the Wife of Bath's tale, is a symbol for text) reflects the unknowability of a woman's heart and mind, as well as the way Griselde herself can be interpreted and reinterpreted (as peasant and as noble wife) in precisely the way that her tale can.

Petrarch is dead and nailed in his coffin, the Clerk emphasizes at the start of the tale—and so is Griselde, he tells us at the end. How either of them felt about the subject matter of the Clerk's Tale is no longer of any relevance; and the complexity and problematic nature of this apparently simply-structured tale depends on just that incitement – how an audience, hearing the tale now, interprets and understands it in the context of their own (medieval or modern) attitudes to gender and marriage.

## **13.2 The Merchant's Tale**

### **13.2.1 Prologue to the Merchant's Tale**

Following the Clerk's pronouncement on marriage, the merchant claims that he knows all about weeping and wailing as a result of marriage—and so, he thinks, do many people who are married. Even if his wife were to marry the devil, the merchant claims, she would overmatch him. Having been married two months, and having loathed every minute of it, the merchant sees a “long and large difference” between Griselde's patience and his wife's cruelty. The Host asks the merchant to tell a tale of his horrid wife; and, though “for soory herte” (for sorry heart) the merchant claims he cannot tell of his own sorrow, he will tell another tale.

### **13.2.2 The Merchant's Tale Text**

Once there was, dwelling in Lombardy, a worthy knight who had lived nobly for sixty years without a wife. However when this knight, January, had turned sixty, whether out of devotion or dotage, he decided to finally be married. He searched for prospects, now convinced that the married life was a paradise on earth, particularly keen to take a young, beautiful wife.

The narrator then defies Theophrastus, the author of a tract attacking marriage, arguing that a wife is God's gift, which will last longer than any other gift of Fortune. There follows a lengthy passage extolling the virtues of a wife, and the virtue of marriage, citing many biblical examples.

January one day sent for all of his friends, telling them of his intent to marry, explaining that he was ill and old, and wanted a wife no older than twenty, which he could mold like warm wax in his hands. Various men gave him various advice about marriage, some praising it, some arguing against it, and the altercation continued all day. The core of the argument was between Placebo and Justinus. Placebo cited Solomon, advising January that it would be excellent to marry a young wife, and telling him to do exactly as he pleased. Justinus cited Seneca, arguing that January should be more careful and more thoughtful before taking a wife, warning that a young wife was like to cuckold an old husband.

“Straw for thy Senek!” January responds, agreeing with Placebo's response that only a “cursed man” would argue against marriage; and with that word, they all arose and January began to prepare for his wedding. Fair women and fair bodies passed through January's head like images reflected on a mirror set up in a market-place—but eventually, January selected one woman from the many available to him.

Calling his friends to him again, January asked them not to make any arguments against what he had resolved to do, and voiced his only concern - that a man who finds perfect happiness on earth,

as he would with his wife, would never find a similar happiness in heaven, for one must choose between one perfect happiness and another. Justinus, furious with January's foolishness, advised him that God sent a married man more reason to repent than a single man, and so, married, he might be more likely to get to heaven—even suggesting that marriage might be January's purgatory.

The narrator then, by way of an occupatio leaves out the wedding ceremony, but tells us that January married his intended, May, in a lavish and joyous ceremony. Venus, the goddess of love, laughed at all of the guests, as January had become one of her knights: when tender youth has wedded stooping age, the narrator continues, there is such mirth that it cannot be written.

At the end of the feast, the men cast spices around the wedding house, and everyone was full of joy—except for Damian, the knight's squire, who was so in love with the lady May that he was almost mad. The men rode home, and said their farewells and thanks to January, who then decided he would go to bed. He drank strong spiced and sweetened wines, and many a medical mixture, before taking his fresh wife in his arms, rocking her and kissing her often, his bristly beard scratching her tender skin. January made an apology for the offense he was about to do her, but reminding her that legally, he could do whatever he liked to her body. The two then had sex until the day began to dawn, at which point January awoke, drank some bread in wine, and sang loudly, sitting upright in his bed. Quite what May thought of all this, only God knows, the narrator comments—though she thought his sexual exploits absolutely useless.

However, Damian, had written a love letter to May that he pinned in a silk purse next to his heart. One day, Damian was not attending January, and to cover for him the other squires told January that Damian was sick. May and January sat at dinner, and January decided to send May to visit Damian, to tell him that January would soon visit soon, after he had rested. May went straight to Damian, and, secretly, Damian slipped his letter into her hand: knowing that she could not afford to have it discovered, May hid the letter in her bosom. Reading it later, she tore it up and cast it in the toilet so as not to have it discovered.

May had already decided to return Damian's advances, and replied to his letter telling as much—taking her letter to his bedroom, putting it under his pillow and giving him a secret handshake. Damian awoke the next morning, his sickness all vanished, and returned to serve January humbly. January's house had a garden so magnificent, the narrator now continues, that even he who wrote Romance of the Rose could not describe its beauty, nor could Priapus accurately describe its art. January loved this garden so much that only he possessed the key to it. In the summer he would go there with May and have sex. January had also, in this time, become blind and became increasingly possessive of his wife, which caused Damian great grief—and May too wept very often, for January was always in her company. However, May and Damian kept in touch via letter, and by various secret signs.

May imprinted January's key to the garden in warm wax, and Damian made a secret copy of the key. The eighth of June came round, and January decided, thanks to the incitement of his wife, to go and have sex in his beautiful garden. He sang a beautiful song to awake his wife and tempt her to the garden, and eventually, January, blind as a stone, and May, unlocked the gate and stepped into the garden.

Damian had already entered the garden, as May had made signs to him to do so, and now she signaled to him to climb up a nearby tree, full of fruit. At this point, the narrator makes an unusual departure from the supposed realism of January's story to narrate the descent of Pluto and Proserpina into the garden, who have a long argument about marriage, citing various classical sources. Pluto, feeling pity for January, wants to restore January's sight so that he can see the villainy about to be done behind his back; Proserpina rejects his argument, telling him that the classical sources which proclaim the evil of women missed out the evil performed by men.



*Did u know?* Proserpina wants May to have sex with Damian; Pluto wants to restore his sight to prevent it—and Proserpina forcibly ends the argument.

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Damian sat high in the pear tree, and May told her husband she longed to pick and eat one of the pears. January bent over so that May could stand on his back to climb the tree—she grabbed a branch, and climbed up into the tree with Damian, who pulled up her dress and began to have sex with her. But, when Pluto saw this, he restored January’s sight—and January, seeing his cuckoldry, let out a huge roar and asked his wife what she was doing.

Without missing a beat, May responds that she had been told that the best way to restore January’s eyesight was to “struggle” with a man in a tree; January responds that she was not struggling, but having full penetrative sex. In that case, May continues, her medicine is false—January clearly isn’t seeing clearly, she argues. And when January asserts that he can see perfectly, May rejoices that she has restored her sight, and persuades January that he did not see her having sex with Damian. January is delighted, kisses her and hugs her, and strokes her on her stomach, leading her home to this house.

### 13.2.3 Epilogue to the Merchant’s Tale

“Goddess mercy!” said the Host, praying God to keep him from such a wife, and noting that clever wives easily deceive foolish men by ducking away from the truth. “I have a wyf”, the Host continues, who, though she is poor, is a shrew, always blabbing—and she has several other vices too! The Host then cuts himself off again from discussing his wife, as he worries that someone in the company will report his doing so back to his wife. He is, he claims, clever enough not to reveal everything, and therefore his tale is done.

#### Analysis

There is a real sense in this tale of goodness slightly gone bad, ripeness becoming slightly rotten. This starts, perhaps, with the opening paean to marriage and the description of January as a worthy, noble knight. It is only as we read on that we realize that, in fact, this apparent positivism is flecked with a bitter irony. January, the noble knight, is also portrayed in unforgiving detail, even down to the scratchy bristles on his neck, and the loose skin on his aged body. We, like May, recoil at the description—there is nothing, for example, of the comfortable, stylized presentation of (for example) the Nun’s Priest’s Tale here. The narrator is unstinting when he wants to focus our attentions on something unpleasant.

The authorial condemnation of May also departs from the other fabliaux of the Canterbury Tales. Like Alison of the Miller’s Tale, she is crafty, but May is also wicked. She escapes without punishment from her husband, but unlike the Miller’s Tale this is not a satisfactory conclusion. While the Miller’s Tale prized cunning and crafty behavior, the Merchant’s Tale adheres to more traditional values. Therefore, May’s escape from punishment is a dissonant element of the story, for she behaves contrary to the established values that the Merchant has set for his tale.

May, unlike her husband, largely escapes from the spotlight of the tale – it does not have access to her thoughts (only God knows, at one point, what she thought of her husband) nor does it really describe her body in anything like the detail it lavishes on her husband’s. What we see of May is largely a matter of her secret signs and cunning behavior: and the only lengthy description of her, significantly, is given in the context of presenting her as a good option for January to marry. What appears beautiful on the visible outside is clearly rotten in the middle.



Task

Why is it appropriate that this tale be told by the Merchant?

This too is represented in the strand of Biblical imagery throughout the tale. It is rather obvious, perhaps, to see May’s infidelity with Damian (whose very name, some critics argue, means “snake”) as a version of Eve’s transgression with the snake—both, indeed, take place in a beautiful garden, though the Bible’s Adam does not share the physical disgust of January. Characteristic of the

Merchant's apparent bitterness, perhaps, is the remark which follows January's really rather beautiful pastiche (calling May to awake and come into the garden) of the Song of Songs: it refers to them in a blunt, dismissive phrase as "olde, lewed words".

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*Notes* In Merchant's tale, beautiful women are really venomous, malicious tricksters-beautiful, lyrical poetry is really only old, obscene words.

May, however, despite her low blood, proves herself hugely more intelligent than her noble husband: we might also find analogues for this (at least in sympathy, if not in intelligence) in Griselde of the Clerk's Tale. There is nothing of the indulgent, joyful trickery of the Miller's Tale in the Merchant's Tale, but instead a return to the signification of the Reeve's Tale - the moment of sexual intercourse is presented with the same unflinching, uneuphemistic detail, and the preceding action between the illicit lovers in both tales is largely a matter of signs.

Secret signs are everywhere in the Merchant's Tale: things which, like the mirror in the common marketplace (the metaphor for January's pre-wedding fanciful mind), leave a certain impression on the mind. From the letter that May reads and then casts into the privy, to the secret handshake between May and Damien, to the impression of January's key which allows Damien into the garden, this tale is focused on tricky actions rather than words, secret, illicit events rather than open actions.

## Self Assessment

Short Answer Type Questions:

6. What is the literary genre of the Merchant's tale?
7. What is the theme of the Merchant's tale?
8. What is this story saying about marriage?
9. What does the Merchant reveal about his own marriage in his prologue?
10. Who sympathizes with him?

The bitterness of the Merchant, trapped in his unhappy marriage, can be felt, then, coursing through the veins of the Merchant's Tale at various points; but particularly in its bitterly unhappy (happy) ending, in which blind January is entirely gulled into believing that he has not been made a fool of. Moreover, when we consider that January happily strokes his wife on her "wombe" ("stomach", but also "womb") at the end of the tale, the Merchant might even leave us with a taste of what would happen next: has May just become pregnant with Damien's baby? The suggestion is not as ridiculous as it initially sounds-particularly when you consider that the pear (it is a pear tree in which the couple have sex) was a well-known remedy to help fertility in Chaucer's day. Perhaps May-at the end of this tale-has actually got something (someone!) rotten growing inside her.

## 13.3 Summary

- Walter, however, wanted Griselde herself to assent before he married her, and, the two men went into her chamber.
- The marquis told her that although she was dear to him, to the rest of the nobility she was not.
- The people came to loathe Walter, thinking that he had murdered his children.
- The narrator then defies Theophrastus, the author of a tract attacking marriage, arguing that a wife is God's gift, which will last longer than any other gift of Fortune.
- The authorial condemnation of May also departs from the other fabliaux of the Canterbury Tales.

Notes

### 13.4 Keywords

*Incitement* : Persuade to act in a violent or unlawful way.

*Villa* : A large country house in its own grounds.

*Stoic* : A member of the ancient philosophical school of stoicism.

*Pomp* : Ceremony and splendid display.

### 13.5 Review Questions

1. Name each of the tests Walter applies to test Griselde's loyalty.
2. Does Walter ever relent in his testing of his wife?
3. What does "Chaucer's Envoy" add?
4. What is the significance of the names of the husband and wife in the Merchant's tale?
5. Describe the trickery and deception used to dupe January.
6. What is function of the advisors to the old Knight?

### Answers: Self Assessment

1. This tale is based on the writing of Petrarch and Boccaccio's Decameron.
2. It combines the elements of the romance and the exemplum.
3. He persuades the Pope that his people are turning against Griselde since she is lowborn.
4. He thinks his peasants are not wise enough to choose his bride.
5. The hearer is intended to avoid behaving as Walter did while still admiring Griselde.
6. It is a fabliau.
7. Men are easily manipulated and made fools of by their wives.
8. Old men should not marry extremely young women.
9. He is very unhappily married.
10. The host sympathizes with him.

### 13.6 Further Readings



*Books*

The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales — Geoffrey Chaucer

The Canterbury Tales — Geoffrey Chaucer

Geoffrey Chaucer — Harold Bloom



*Online links*

<http://www.pinkmonkey.com/booknotes/monkeynotes/pmCanterbury02.asp>

<http://www.bookrags.com/notes/ct/index.html>

## Unit 14: The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales (Non-detailed Study): Discussion and Analysis-VI

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14.7 Further Readings

### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Explain the text and analysis of Squire's tale
- Explain the prologue and text of Franklin's tale and Physician's tale
- Describe briefly the analysis of Franklin's and Physician's tale.

### Introduction

The prologue to *The Squire's Tale* refers back to the deceitful nature of women and looks ahead to a tale of pure and ideal love. Though it is incomplete. The Squire's Tale is obviously going to be a romance. All indications are that it would have been an intricate one with several plot threads and several important characters. The interesting device of setting a story within a story is used with the falcon's tale of an unfaithful lover. This insertion is probably meant either to foreshadow or to contrast with the love story planned for Canace. Like others of the tales Chaucer invented, this one has roots in both French and English literature, but unlike any other of Chaucer's stories. The Squire's Tale reveals considerable Oriental influence. This adds an exotic quality absent in the other tales. There is little mystery, however, as regards the theme of this narration. It strongly promises to deal with wonders, constancy in love, and virtuous character. Ideal love will no doubt triumph in the end.

Notes

At the end of *The Squire's Tale*, the Franklin effusively praises the Squire's scholarship and affected language. He is revealed to be an imitator of the nobility so it is no wonder that he introduces his tale by apologizing for not having had the education of a noble. His lack of training requires him to speak in plain language. Actually, the Franklin displays extensive learning in this introduction, citing numerous classical references and attempting a clumsy rhetorical pun. The Franklin tells a tale which he hopes might have been told by a noble, as romances were supposed to be confined in circulation to the nobility. His romance centers on ideal love, the virtuous woman, and the capacity of Man to be supremely generous and to behave according to the knightly ideal. Further confirming his tale as a romance, the Franklin includes noble characters, a classical setting, and elements of magic which give a hint of the mysterious and otherworldly.

The rash promise made without reflection and possibly, without intent to fulfill, are further features of the romance. Just as the Franklin relates, one of Chaucer's sources for this story is the Breton lais. He has also borrowed from the writings of St. Jerome; from Boccaccio's *Decameron*; and from the French *Le Roman de la Rose*. Like most of the tales, the Franklin's Tale concentrates on the relationship between husbands, wives, and lovers, exposing the vices and virtues of men and women. All of the characters in this particular story are virtuous, unlike those presented in the fabliaux. There is nothing crass about Aurelius and Dorigen, for although both of them err, all are shown in the end to be capable of great honor, loyalty, and generosity. The sanctity of marriage is upheld and respected in *The Franklin's Tale*.

## **14.1 The Squire's Tale**

### **14.1.1 Introduction to the Squire's Tale**

The Host asks the Squire to draw near and tell the next tale.

### **14.1.2 The Squire's Tale Text**

(I) The Squire tells the tale of Cambyuskan, the king of Sarai in Tartary. With his wife Elpheta he had two sons, Algarsyf and Cambalo, and a daughter Canacee. In the twentieth year of his reign, on the Ides of March, his subjects celebrated his nativity. During the great feast with the king and his knights, a strange knight came into the hall on a brass horse, carrying a broad mirror of glass, wearing a gold ring on his thumb and carrying a naked sword by his side.

This knight saluted the king and queen, and all the lords, in order, so reverently and nobly that even Gawain could not have bettered him. The narrator apologizes for not being able to reproduce the nobility of his elocution, punning that he could not climb "over so heigh a style", and resolving only to reproduce the meaning, not the expression, of what the knight said.

This knight had been sent from the king of Arabia and India, to bring Cambyuskan a steed of brass that could, within twenty-four hours, transport a person safely anywhere on the globe. He also presented to Canacee a mirror that foresaw impending mischance and could determine the character of friends and foes, and a ring that enabled the wearer to understand the language of any bird, and the healing properties of all herbs. His final gift was the sword, whose edge would bite through any armor but whose flat would cure any wounds inflicted by the edge.

Having told his tale, the knight rode out of the hall, leaving his steed standing in the court, and was led to his chamber. The presents were carried into the tower, and the ring given to Canacee, but the brass steed would not move until the knight taught people how to move it. The horse was a source of wonder for the people, compared alternately to the Pegasus and the Trojan horse. All one had to do to move the brass horse was to twirl a peg in its ear, according to the knight.

## Notes

(II) After the revelry of the night before, the next morning everybody but Canacee remained asleep until late. She had dreamt of the mirror and the ring and thus had her first satisfying rest in a very long time. As she went out walking that morning with her maids, she came across a bleeding peregrine falcon that cried out in anguish. It had maimed itself. Canacee picked up the falcon and spoke to it, a power she had gained from the ring the knight had given her. The falcon told her a tale of a handsome tercelet as treasonous and false as he was beautiful, who fell in love with a kite as well as with the falcon, and left the falcon to love the kite. Canacee healed the bird with herbs which she dug out of the ground, and carried it to a box, covered in blue velvets, with a painted meadow inside it, which she laid by her bedside.

The narrator then leaves Canacee, promising to return to the story of her ring and show how the falcon regained her love, thanks to the mediation of Cambalo, the king's son. First, the narrator says, he will tell of Cambyuskan, and how he won his cities, and after that of Algarsyf, and how he won his wife (for whom he would have been in great peril, were it not for the brass horse) and after that of Cambalo, who fought with the brothers in order to win Canacee, and then—after all that—the narrator intends to pick up where he left off.

(III) The narrator has just begun to set the scene, when he is interrupted...

### The words of the Franklin to the Squire and the words of the Host to the Franklin

The Franklin tells the Squire that he has served himself well, praising his wit, and asserting that no one in the company is as eloquent as the Squire. The Franklin then comments that he would give twenty pounds worth of land if his own son were a man of such discretion as the Squire—who needs possessions, if he is virtuous! The Franklin continues that he has often rebuked his own son for not listening to virtuous people—the Franklin's son only plays at dice and spends money, and would rather talk with a page than a nobleman.

At this point, the Host interrupts—"Straw for youre gentillesse!" ("Straw to your nobility!")—reminding the Franklin that what he is saying is irrelevant, and that each pilgrim must tell at least a tale or two, or break his vow. The Franklin reassures the Host that he is aware of this, even if he is taking a moment to speak to the Squire, and—as instructed by the host—tells his tale, commenting that, if it pleases the Host, his tale will certainly be a good one.

## Analysis

Since the Squire's Tale exists only in a fragmentary form, it is difficult to determine precisely how we are supposed to read it. The tale may be a fragment because Chaucer never finished the tale or because the later section of the tale was lost in the manuscripts from which the Canterbury Tales were taken. And yet, the Franklin's interruption comes at a point which suggests that the Squire's Tale might be one of Chaucer's many trick interrupted-endings.

For the moment at which the Franklin interrupts comes only two lines after the Squire has outlined his plans—extremely lengthy plans—for the rest of his tale, giving as the last plot point to be covered in his telling Cambalo's fight for the hand of Canacee. There seems nothing very unusual about that, until we remember that, at the start of the tale, we are clearly told that Canacee and Cambalo are brother and sister. And this is where the tale becomes interesting. Canacee, of course, is the person discussed in the Man of Law's Prologue—Chaucer, the Man of Law claims, will not tell her story, and nor will he.

## Self Assessment

Short Answer Type Questions:

1. What element is inserted in the Squire's tale that is not present in any of the others?
2. What is the probable theme of the Squire's tale?
3. What type of tale is the Falcon's story intended to imitate?
4. Who has sent the strange knight?

**Notes**

Yet here is Chaucer, in the mouth of the Squire, promising to tell the story of incestuous Canacee. It is certainly true that the Squire's plan for the rest of his tale looks as if it might take four pilgrimages of its own to complete—the Squire, the son of the Knight, certainly inherited his father's long-windedness—and some critics have argued that the Franklin breaks off the tale (either with irony or with faux modesty and compliments) only to prevent the pilgrimage from having to endure all of it. Yet critics—who have paid scant attention to the Squire's Tale, often disregarding it as unfinished—have yet to come up with a fully persuasive explanation of why it is the promise of incest which seems to motivate the abrupt termination of the Squire's Tale.



*Notes* William Kamowski has also pointed out that the abridgement of the Squire's Tale precedes an abridgement of the Host's original tale-telling plan.

In fact, at the very moment when the Squire breaks off, an apparent reshaping of the grand plan for the Canterbury Tales also takes place. Harry Bailly reminds the Franklin, "wel thou woost / That ech of yow moot tellen atte leste / A tale or two, or breken his biheste" (696-98). Evidently the Host's original plan for four tales apiece will not be realized. It seems more than coincidence that the Host trims his own colossal ambition so soon after the aborting of the Squire's grand plan, which is too large to be realized within the framework of either the Host's storytelling contest or Chaucer's frame narrative.



*Task* What elements of the romance are present in this fragment?

There are lots of interesting avenues for exploration and interpretation with the Squire's Tale, yet it only seems fair to conclude that the critical work on the Tale remains, like the Tale itself, frustratingly inconclusive.

## **14.2 The Franklin's Tale**

### **14.2.1 Prologue to the Franklin's Tale**

The old Bretons, in their time, made songs, and the Franklin's Tale, the narrator says, is to be one of those songs. However, the Franklin begs the indulgence of the company because he is a "burel man" (an unlearned man) and simple in his speech. He has, he says, never learned rhetoric, and he speaks simply and plainly—the colors he knows are not colors of rhetoric, but colors of the meadow.

### **14.2.2 The Franklin's Tale Text**

The Franklin's Tale begins with the courtship of the Breton knight Arviragus and Dorigen, who came to be married happily. Their marriage was one of equality, in which neither of the two was master or servant; and the narrator comments specifically that when "maistrie" (the desire of the Wife of Bath and the women in her tale) enters into a marriage, love flaps its wings and flies away.

However, soon after their marriage, Arviragus was sent away to Britain to work for two years. Dorigen wept for his absence, despite the letters that he sent home to her. Her friends would often take her on walks where they would pass the cliffs overlooking the ocean and watch ships enter the port, hoping that one of them would bring home her husband. However, although her friends' comforting eventually started to work, Dorigen remained distressed by the grisly, black rocks visible from the cliff-side, near to the shore. She asked God why he would create "this werk unresonable"

(this unreasonable work), whose only purpose was to kill people. Her friends, seeing how terribly Dorigen feared that whatever ship brought her husband home would crash on these rocks and sink, provided further distractions.

One day, her friends had organized a party and a dance in a beautiful garden. It was at this dance that Aurelius, a squire, danced in front of Dorigen, who was as fresh and well-dressed as the month of May. His singing and dancing were better than any man's, and he was one of the most handsome men alive. Unbeknownst to Dorigen, Aurelius had been in love with her for two years, but had never dared tell her how he felt. It was during the dancing, then, that Aurelius addressed Dorigen, wishing that he, and not her husband, had been sent across the sea, before begging her to have mercy on him and revealing his love.

Dorigen responded by sternly rebuking Aurelius, telling him that she would never be an untrue wife, and had no intention of cuckolding her husband. And then, "in pley" (playfully, flirtily, in fun), Dorigen added that she would be Aurelius' love on the day that all of the rocks were removed from the coast. This made Aurelius sigh heavily: "Madame", he said "this were an impossible!" (an impossibility). The dance ended and the guests went home, except for poor, sorrowful Aurelius, who fell to his knees, and holding his hands to heaven, prayed to the gods for mercy.

Arviragus then returned from abroad, and Dorigen was delighted to have him back. Two years passed, and Aurelius lay in torment, and without comfort—except, that is for his brother, a clerk, who suggested that he meet a student of law at Orleans who was versed in the sciences of illusion and "magyk". Heading toward Orleans, the two came across a young clerk, roaming by himself, who greeted them in Latin, and claimed to know why they came. And before they went a step further, he told them exactly what they were travelling to achieve.



*Task* What is the theme of the Franklin's tale?

Aurelius leapt down from his horse, and went with this man to his house, where he fed them and showed them wondrous illusions of various kinds. The man eventually agreed to remove the rocks from the coast for a thousand pounds; "Fy on a thousand pound!" responded Aurelius, "This wyde world... I wolde it yeve" ("Never mind a thousand pounds! I'd give you the wide world!"), and promised to pay the man.

The next morning, having stayed at the man's house, they travelled to Brittany, where, by illusion, the man made it so that, for a week or two, it would appear that the rocks had vanished. Aurelius, who now knew that there was no obstacle to his deal with Dorigen, said grateful prayers, and eventually came to his lady and explained to her, in courtly, formal terms, how he had fulfilled their bargain. She stood astonished, entirely white, never thinking that such an occasion could arise, and went home, despairing.

Arviragus was out of town, and Dorigen was overcome with grief, realizing that she must forfeit either her body or her reputation. She thought about the numerous instances in which a faithful wife or a maiden destroyed herself rather than submitting herself to another. She cited the maidens of Lacedaemon who chose to be slain rather than defiled, Hasdrubal's wife, who committed suicide during the siege of Carthage, and Lucrece, who did the same when Tarquin took her by force.

When Arviragus returned home and Dorigen told him the truth of what had happened, he told that he will bear the shame of her actions, and that adhering to her promise is the most important thing. He therefore sent her to submit to Aurelius. When Aurelius learned how well Arviragus had accepted his wife's promise, Aurelius decided to let Dorigen's promise go unfulfilled, refusing to break the married couple's "trouthe". He claimed that a squire can indeed be as honorable as a knight. Aurelius then went to pay the law student, even though his affair remained unconsummated, and the man forgave Aurelius' debt, proving himself honorable. The narrator ends the tale by posing the question to the assembled company "Which was the mooste fre, as thynketh yow?" "Who was the most generous/noble, do you think?"

## Notes

**Analysis**

The Franklin's Tale is, as the narrator acknowledges at the start, a Breton lay, a brief romance supposedly descending from Celtic origins, and usually dealing with themes of romance, love and usually containing some sort of supernatural ingredient. Chaucer took the story from Boccaccio's Decameron though the tale weaves well into many of the other Tales, including the Merchant's Tale, which is echoed in many of the Franklin's descriptions.

The tale seems to offer the solution to the problem raised and complicated in the other "Marriage Group" tales in its initial comments that "maistrie" has no place in love. Dorigen and Arviragus are among the few happy couples in Chaucer's Tales, and yet one suspects that the problem of "maistrie" is sidelined so as to focus on an entirely different problem, and one close to the heart of the Tales: the problem of language, words, and keeping one's word.

"Trouthe" is a central word in the tale, meaning "fidelity", and "truth", as well as "keeping one's word", and the idea of pledging troth (an Elizabethanism)—giving one's word as a binding promise—is central to the agreements between Dorigen and Aurelius. What the Franklin's Tale shows us is not dissimilar from the Friar's Tale—that we have to watch what we say because, like Dorigen's promise made "in pley", we never quite know how things are going to work out. The word becomes the marker of the deed, and, not to break her word, Dorigen is almost forced to perform the deed. In a work so concerned with stories and tale-telling, it is significant that Chaucer (as in the Friar's and Manciple's Tales) takes time to remind us of the value of each individual word we speak, and write.

The tale itself, of course, also bequeaths a word to both of its audiences (that is, the pilgrim audience of characters and the real-world audience reading or listening to Chaucer) and asks us to evaluate it in relation to what we have heard. "Fre", the root of our modern word "free", can mean generous (*i.e.* to give freely) but also has overtones of nobleness, "good behavior". Who, then, is the most generous and noble at the end of the tale?

**Self Assessment**

Short Answer Type Questions:

5. In what literary genre is this story written?
6. What is the effect on Aurelius when Dorigen rebuffs him?
7. Who stands by Aurelius during all of his trials?
8. What does the magician do in response?

Arviragus, Jill Mann argues, by being noble enough to become a cuckold to preserve his wife's reputation, sparks off a chain of passivity, which she thinks is an extremely positive thing. Arviragus giving up his rights in Dorigen leads to Aurelius giving up his which in turn leads to the law student giving up his. When one person backs down, Mann interprets, so will the rest of the world.

Mann's is an interesting reading, but it does not quash entirely the thought that Arviragus' priorities might be in the wrong order—is it really more important that his wife holds to a bargain (made only in jest) rather than she sleeps with someone she does not want to sleep with?

Or at least, so she says. It is worth noting that, on Aurelius' first appearance, the tale stresses his good looks and charm, and one wonders precisely what motivates Dorigen, even in jest (and Freud has much to say about the meaning of jokes) to make the bargain. For surely Dorigen is the person who, were the bargain to go ahead, gets the best deal—not only is her husband safely home (and the rocks, for the moment, vanished) but she gets to sleep with both (extremely handsome, so the tale says) men. How, in fact, has Dorigen been generous or free at all?

Is Aurelius perhaps the most generous: willingly giving up the thing he most desired? Perhaps — but we might perhaps also argue that the thing he gave up, he had no real right to have anyway, considering that the "thing" was sex with another man's wife. The same might be said of the law

student, who foregoes only money: a lot of money, but still only money. The question of nobility and generousness completely depends from which perspective you read the tale.

Interestingly, we are never told that Dorigen goes to check whether the rocks have in fact vanished or not. Of course, they only exist as a plot twist within a tale—though one of the things the tale’s final question reminds us of is that an existence in words, like the rash promise that Dorigen made, is an existence we dismiss at our peril.

## 14.3 The Physician’s Tale

### 14.3.1 The Physician’s Tale Text

As Titus Livius tells us, there was once a knight called Virginius who had many friends, much wealth, and a loving wife and daughter. The daughter possessed a beauty so great that even Pygmalion could not have created her equal. She was also humble in speech and avoided events which might compromise her virtue. The narrator then breaks off to address governesses and parents, telling them to bring up their children to be virtuous.

The maid one day went into the town, toward a temple, with her mother, where a judge who governed the town, saw the knight’s daughter, and lusted after her. He was so caught by the maid’s beauty that he concluded “This mayde shal be myn”. At that, the devil ran into his heart, and taught him how he, by trickery, could have the maid for his own. He sent after a churl, who he knew was clever and brave, and told him the plan, giving him precious, expensive gifts for his complicity.

The judge’s name was Appius, the narrator now tells us, before asserting “So was his name, for this is no fable”, but a “historial thyng notable” (a notable historical event). The false churl, Claudius, made a complaint against Virginius, and the judge summoned him to hear the charge against him. Claudius, in short, claimed that Virginius was holding one of his servants, a beautiful young girl, against his will, and pretending she was his daughter.



*Did u know?* The judge did not listen to Virginius’ argument in his own defense, but ordered that the girl be taken as a ward of the court.

Virginius returned home, and called his daughter, with an ashen face. He explained to her that now there were only two avenues open to her: either death or shame. Virginius decided, in a long, mournful speech to his daughter, to kill her, and, although she begged for mercy and another solution, eventually she asked for a little leisure to contemplate her death. She then fell into a swoon, and when she awoke, she blessed God that she could die a virgin. Virginius then took his sword and cut off her head, and took it to the judge.

When the judge saw the head, he tried to escape and hang himself, but soon a thousand people thrust in, knowing of the false iniquity, took Appius and threw him into prison. Claudius was sentenced to be hanged upon a tree—except that Virginius pleaded on his behalf, succeeding in reducing the sentence to exile.

Here, the narrator says, may men see that sin has no reward – even if it is so private that no-one knows of it other than God and the sinner. The last counsel the tale presents us with: “Forsaketh synne, er synne yow forsake”.



*Task* On what source is the Physician’s tale based?

Notes

## Analysis

After the Physician's Tale has finished, in the prologue to the Pardoner's Tale, the Host claims that he has almost "caught a cardynacle" – almost had a heart attack, and it is not difficult to see why. This is a tale which takes no prisoners: with no prologue to ease us in, this brutal, harsh, violent and uncompromising tale refuses to be read as a fable ("this is no fable") or allegory, but insists that we view its cruel and unpleasant events as things which happen in the real world. One rather wonders why the Physician thinks it will win him the prize at the end of the tale-telling.

Moreover, the tale rushes towards its unpleasant conclusion, even at the expense of plausibility. Why doesn't Virginius try to argue with the judge, or call upon the mob of thousand people who, only a little later, burst through the doors to deliver justice? Why doesn't Virginius hide his daughter, or jump on his knightly steed and escape to another land? Again, as in the Knight's Tale and the Franklin's Tale, there seems to be some interrogation of ideas of chivalry: this is a man who, without any need for reflection, would rather preserve his daughter's nobility and honor than keep her alive. Chaucer again casts a negative light across the codes of honor to which men adhere.

## Self Assessment

Short Answer Type Questions:

9. How does Virginia, though pagan, fit into the medieval christian concept of virtuous womanhood?
10. What is the theme of the Physician's tale?

Critics have not devoted much attention to the tale, except to say that it provides, perhaps, the first significant "death's head" in the Canterbury Tales: what hitherto has been a fun, "game"-some party, a well-meaning competition, despite its squabbles, is suddenly presented with a tale entirely without good-naturedness or comedy. It is the beginning of a turn toward darkness which entirely changes the tone and tenor of the Tales as a whole, and—although in its criticism of hypocrisy, defense of religion and beauty, and painful, final justice, it has much in common thematically with some of the other tales—it is a tale which seems decidedly set apart from its predecessors.

## 14.4 Summary

- This knight saluted the king and queen, and all the lords, in order, so reverently and nobly that even Gawain could not have bettered him.
- Since the Squire's Tale exists only in a fragmentary form, it is difficult to determine precisely how we are supposed to read it.
- The old Bretons, in their time, made songs, and the Franklin's Tale, the narrator says, is to be one of those songs.
- The Franklin's Tale begins with the courtship of the Breton knight Arviragus and Dorigen, who came to be married happily.
- Arviragus was out of town, and Dorigen was overcome with grief, realizing that she must forfeit either her body or her reputation.

## 14.5 Keywords

- Anguish* : Severe mental or physical pain.  
*Colossal* : Extremely large.

*Foe* : An enemy.

Notes

*Fidelity* : Continuing loyalty to a person.

## 14.6 Review Questions

1. Describe the magical properties of each of the gifts.
2. Why does the Host invite the squire to tell a love story?
3. From what sources did Chaucer borrow in creating the Franklin's tale?
4. In what way does virginus represent true justice and how does Appius represent justice corrupted?
5. What trumped up charges put Virginia under the control of the evil judge?

## **Answers: Self Assessment**

1. This tale has oriental or exotic qualities.
2. Ideal love prevails.
3. The Falcon's story imitates a beast fable.
4. The king of Arabia and India has sent the knight.
5. Romance is this tale's genre.
6. He falls desperately ill for two years.
7. His brother takes care of Aurelius.
8. He cancels Aurelius debt.
9. She accepts death rather than sexual soiling.
10. She is accused of being a runaway slave girl belonging to the judge's co-conspirator.

## 14.7 Further Readings



*Books*

The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales — Geoffrey Chaucer  
The Canterbury Tales — Geoffrey Chaucer  
Geoffrey Chaucer — Harold Bloom



*Online links*

<http://www.pinkmonkey.com/booknotes/monkeynotes/pmCanterbury02.asp>  
<http://www.bookrags.com/notes/ct/index.html>

## Unit 15: The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales (Non-detailed Study): Discussion and Analysis-VII

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15.2.1 The Shipman's Tale Text

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### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Explain the prologue and text of the Pardoner's and Shipman's tale
- Describe briefly the analysis of the tales.

### Introduction

The wicked practices of the pardoner were, unfortunately, widespread in the medieval Catholic Church. However, the Pardoner is so openly and gleefully and unashamedly wicked that he himself serves a sermon against these practices. His tale is totally in keeping with his character. The form of The Pardoner's Tale, an allegory, is one with which medieval audiences would have been completely familiar. In an allegory, the characters personify abstract qualities; the plot is meant to teach a moral lesson. In this case, Avarice, Gluttony, and Sloth meet Death at their own hands, in other words, these vices lead invariably to spiritual death. This particular allegory had many versions in Eastern and in Western literature and was frequently enacted as a morality play. Therefore, it is not attributed to any single source. Chaucer's version is the one that has survived. It has become one of the most widely read and best loved of *The Canterbury Tales*.

The Shipman is clearly bored with morality. He wants nothing of a sermonizing nature in his tale; its only purpose is to entertain. His tale is another example of fabliau, with its emphasis on trickery and sex. Like many of the other tales, this one centers on a theme of marriage. The beautiful wife in this story manages both her husband and Don John by bestowing her sexual favors with enthusiasm to

achieve her own ends. Because so much of this story is presented from a female perspective, and because the Wife of Bath was said to be so skilled in all the arts of love, many critics believe that Chaucer originally intended for this tale to be told by the earthy Wife of Bath. However, The Shipman is a very worldly and a very nonreligious man, thus having him tell the story is not out of keeping with his character as it is described in the General Prologue.

## 15.1 The Pardoner's Tale

### 15.1.1 Introduction to the Pardoner's Tale

Following the Physician's Tale, the Host began to swear as if he were mad, wishing a shameful death on the judge and his advocates, and concluding that the cause of the maiden's death was her "beautee". The Host pronounced the tale a piteous one to listen to, and prayed to God that he protect the Physician's body.

The Host, concluding that he has almost "caught a cardynacle" (had a heart attack) after the brutality of the Physician's Tale, decides that he must have medicine in the form of a merry tale, in order to restore his heart. Turning to the Pardoner, he asks for some "myrthe or japes right anon", and the Pardoner agrees, though, before he begins, he stops at an alehouse to "drynke and eten of a cake".



*Did u know?* The company protests that the Pardoner not be allowed to tell them a ribald tale, but insists instead on "som moral thyng" - a request which the Pardoner also grants.

### 15.1.2 The Pardoner's Prologue

Radix malorum est Cupiditas (Greed is the root of all evil)

The Pardoner begins by addressing the company, explaining to them that, when he preaches in churches, his voice booms out impressively like a bell, and his theme is always that greed is the root of all evil. First, the Pardoner says, he explains where has come from, and shows his papal bulls, indulgences, and glass cases crammed full of rags and bones, which he claims (to the congregation, at least) are holy relics with magical properties.

Then, the Pardoner invites anyone who has sinned to come and offer money to his relics, and therefore to be absolved by the Pardoner's power. This trick, the Pardoner says, has earned him at least a hundred marks since he was made a pardoner-and when the "lewd people" are seated, he continues to tell them false trickeries and lies. His intention, he says, is simply "for to wynne" (to profit), and "nothyng for correccioun of synne" (and nothing to do with the correction of sin); the Pardoner doesn't care whether, after burial, his congregation's souls go blackberry picking. Thus, the Pardoner says, he spits out his venom under the pretense of holiness, seeming holy, pious, and "trewe". "Greed is the root of all evils", the Pardoner quotes again, explaining that he preaches against the same vice which he himself is guilty of. Yet, although he knows he is guilty of the sin, he can still make other people turn away from it.

Next, the Pardoner tells the company how he tells his congregation "olde stories" from long ago, "for lewed people loven tales olde". He will not, he says, work with hands and make baskets, but get money, wool, cheese and wheat for himself, even if it is from the poorest page or poorest widow in a village. He will drink "licour of the vyne", and have a "joly wenche" in every town. "Now hold your pees!" he shouts to the company, and begins his tale.

## Notes

## 15.1.3 The Pardoner's Tale Text

There once lived in Flanders a company of three rioters who did nothing but engage in irresponsible and sinful behavior. At this point, the narrator interrupts the tale itself to launch a lengthy diatribe against drunkenness-mentioning Herod, Seneca, Adam, Sampson, Attila the Hun and St. Paul as either sources or famed drunkards. This in turn oddly becomes a diatribe against people whose stomachs are their gods (their end, we are told, is death), and then a diatribe against the stomach, called, at one point a "stynkyng cod, fulfilled of dong and of corrupcioun" (a stinking bag, full of dung and decayed matter). This distraction from the story itself ends with an attack on dice-playing (dice here called "bicched bones", or cursed dice).

The three drunkards were in a tavern one night, and, hearing a bell ring, looked outside to see men carrying a corpse to its grave. One of them called to his slave to go and ask who the corpse was: he was told by a boy that the corpse was an old fellow whose heart was smashed in two by a secret thief called Death. This drunkard agreed, and discussed with his companions how this "Death" had indeed slain many people, of all ranks, of both sexes, that very year. The three then made a vow (by "Goddes digne bones") to find Death and slay him.

When they had gone not even half a mile, they met an old, poor man at a stile, who greeted them courteously. The proudest of the drunkards responded rudely, asking the man why he was still alive at such a ripe age. The old man answered that he was alive, because he could not find anyone who would exchange their youth for his age-and, although he knocked on the ground, begging it to let him in, he still did not die. Moreover, the old man added, it was not courteous of the drunkards to speak so rudely to an old man.

One of the other drunkards responded still more rudely that the old man was to tell them where Death was, or regret not telling them dearly. The old man, still polite, told the drunkards they could find Death up the crooked way and underneath an oak tree.

The drunkards ran until they came to the tree, and, underneath it, they found eight bushels of gold coins. The worst one of them spoke first, arguing that Fortune had given them the treasure to live their life in happiness-but realizing that they could not carry the gold home without people seeing them and thinking them thieves. Therefore, he suggested, they should draw lots, and one of them should run back to the town to fetch bread and wine, while the other two protected the treasure. Then, at night, they could agree where to take the treasure and carry it safely. This was agreed, and lots were drawn: the youngest of them was picked to go to the town.

However, as soon as he had gone to the town, the two remaining drunkards plotted amongst themselves to stab him upon his return, and then split the gold between them. While he was in the town, the youngest thought of the beauty of the gold coins, and decided to buy some poison in order to kill the other two, keeping the gold for himself. Thus, he went to an apothecary, bought some "strong and violent" poison, poured it into two of three wine bottles (the third was for him to drink from), topped them up with wine, and returned to his fellows.



*Task* How does the youngest die?

Exactly as the other two had planned it, it befell. They killed him on his return, and sat down to enjoy the wine before burying his body-and, as it happened, drank the poison and died. The tale ends with a short sermon against sin, asking God to forgive the trespass of good men, and warning them against the sin of avarice, before (this, we can presume narrated in the Pardoner's voice) inviting the congregation to "come up" and offer their wool in return for pardons.

The tale finished, the Pardoner suddenly remembers that he has forgotten one thing - that he is carrying relics and pardons in his "male" (pouch, bag) and begins to invite the pilgrims forward to

receive pardon, inciting the Host to be the first to receive his pardon. "Unbokele anon thy purs", he says to the Host, who responds that the Pardoner is trying to make him kiss "thyn old breech" (your old pants), swearing it is a relic, when actually it is just painted with his shit. I wish, the Host says, I had your "coillons" (testicles) in my hand, to shrine them in a hog's turd.

Notes



*Notes* The Pardoner is so angry with this response, he cannot speak a word, and, just in time, the Knight steps in, bringing the Pardoner and the Host together and making them again friends. This done, the company continues on its way.

## Analysis

The Pardoner has—in recent years—become one of the most critically discussed of the Canterbury pilgrims. His tale is in many ways the exemplar of the contradiction which the structure of the Tales themselves can so easily exploit, and a good touchstone for highlighting precisely how Chaucer can complicate an issue without ever giving his own opinion.

Thus the Pardoner embodies precisely the textual conundrum of the Tales themselves—he utters words which have absolutely no correlation with his actions. His voice, in other words, is entirely at odds with his behavior. The Pardoner's voice, at the beginning of his tale, rings out "as round as gooth a belle", summoning his congregation: and yet his church is one of extreme bad faith. There is a genuine issue here about whether the Pardoner's tale, being told by the Pardoner, can actually be the "moral" tale it claims to be. For, while the tale does indeed demonstrate that money is the root of all evil, does it still count when he is preaching "agayn that same vice / Which that I use, and that is avarice" (against the very vice I commit: avarice"). How far, in other words, can the teller negate his own moral?

Yet the real problem is that the Pardoner is a successful preacher, and his profits point to several people who do learn from his speeches and repent their sin. His Tale too is an accurate demonstration of the way greed and avarice lead to evil. Hollow execution nevertheless, the Pardoner is an excellent preacher against greed. His voice, in short, operates regardless of his actions. Hollow sentiments produce real results.

This is also reflected in the imagery of the tale itself. The Pardoner hates full stomachs, preferring empty vessels, and, though his "wallet" may well be "bretful of pardoun comen from Rome" but the moral worth of this paper is nil: the wallet, therefore, is full and empty at the same time—exactly like the Pardoner's sermon.

In just the same way Chaucer himself in the Tales can ventriloquize the sentiments of the pilgrim—the Reeve, the Pardoner, and the Merchant—and so on, without actually committing to it. Because the Tales themselves, in supposedly reproducing the "telling" of a certain pilgrim, actually do enact precisely the disembodied voice which the Pardoner represents. The moral paradox of the Pardoner himself is precisely the paradox of the Tales and their series of Chaucer-ventriloquized disembodied voices.

There is a doubleness, a shifting evasiveness, about the Pardoner's double audience: the imaginary congregation he describes, and the assembled company to whom he preaches, and tells his "lewed tales", even calling them forth to pardon at the end. The point is clear: even though they know it is insincere, the Pardoner's shtick might still work on the assembled company.

The imagery of the Pardoner's Tale also reflects this fundamental hollowness. The tale itself is strewn with bones, whether in the oath sworn "by Goddes digne bones", whether in the word for cursed dice ("bones") or whether in the bones which the Pardoner stuffs into his glass cases, pretending

**Notes**

they are relics. The literary landscape is strewn with body parts, and missing, absent bodies: beginning with the anonymous corpse carried past at the beginning of his tale. Bones, stomachs, coillons—words for body parts cover the page, almost as a grim reminder of the omnipresence of death in this tale.

The General Prologue, suggesting that the Pardoner resembles a “gelding or a mare”, hints that the Pardoner may be a congenital eunuch or, taken less literally, a homosexual, and, as the Host seems to suggest at the end, might well be without his “coillons”, a Middle English word meaning both “relics” and “testicles”. All of the “relics” in this Tale, including the Pardoner’s, evade the grasp of the hand. The Pardoner thus can be categorized along with the other bizarrely feminized males in the Tales, including Absolon, Sir Thopas, and, if we believe the Host, Chaucer (the character).

And of course, at the center of the tale, there is a search for somebody called “Death” which, naturally, does not find the person “Death”, but death itself. It is a successful—but ultimately unsuccessful—search. All that is left over at the center of the Tales is the bushels of gold, sitting under a tree unclaimed. The root of the tale, as its moral similarly suggests about the root of evil, is money: and money was, to a medieval reader, known to be a spiritual “death”. Notably, moreover, in the tale, both “gold” and “death” shift from metaphor to reality and back again; a neat reminder of the ability of the Tales to evade our grasp, raising difficult questions without ever answering them.

## **15.2 The Shipman’s Tale**

### **15.2.1 The Shipman’s Tale Text**

A rich merchant, who lived at St. Denis, foolishly took a beautiful woman for his wife. She drained his income by demanding clothes and other fine array to make her appear even more beautiful. There was also a fair, bold young monk, perhaps only thirty years old, who was always at the merchant’s house. Indeed, he was as welcome there as it is possible for any friend to be. The monk was generous with his money, and always brought gifts for his lord and for the servants, according to their degree.

One day, as he was going to make a journey to Bruges, the merchant invited John to visit him and his wife before he departed. The monk and the merchant had a merry time together, eating and drinking for two days. On the third day, on which the merchant was ready to depart for Bruges, he awoke early and went to his counting-house to balance his books. John was also awake early and went into the garden to pray. The wife went into the garden, worried that something was bothering the monk. He in turn worries about her; he thinks that she did not sleep well, for the merchant kept her up all night having sex—and she admits, in turn, that in fact she has no lust for her husband. John realizes that there is more to this, and promises to keep everything she tells him secret.

The wife complains that her husband is the “worste man that ever was sith that the world bigan” (the worst man ever to have existed since the world began”). She also tells him that she owes a debt of one hundred franks, which, if she does not pay (and her husband finds out about it) will disgrace her. The wife begs the monk to lend her the money.

The noble monk tells the wife that he pities her, and promises to “deliver” the wife “out of this care”, and bring her one hundred franks. With that, he caught her by the thighs, embraced her hard, and kissed her many times. The two then parted, and the wife went to her husband in his counting-house, begging him to leave his accounts. The merchant refused, explaining to her that it was essential that he managed his business carefully, as many merchants went bankrupt.

The three dined together that evenings, and after dinner, the monk took the merchant to one side, and asked him to lend him one hundred franks—and the merchant humbly and generously agreed, telling him to pay it again when he could afford to. He fetched the sum and took it to the monk, and no-one in the world but the two of them knew of the loan. That evening, the monk returned to the abbey, and, the next morning, the merchant travelled to Bruges to conduct his business.

The next Sunday, the monk returned to St. Denis, with head and beard all clean and freshly shaved, and—to get to the point—the wife agreed with the monk that, in exchange for the hundred franks, the monk could have sex with the wife all night, a promise which the two of them eagerly fulfilled. The next morning, the monk rode home to his abbey, or wherever pleased him.

The merchant returned home, and, delighted to see his wife, told her about his business transactions—and, when he came into town, he went straight to see his friend, the monk. The monk was delighted to see him, and, after talking about his business trip, the monk told the merchant that he had left his thousand franks with his wife. The merchant went home happy, and his wife met him at the gates—and the two of them had a happy night in bed, until the wife waylaid him, teasing him wantonly. Finally, the merchant told her he was a little angry with her because she had not told him she had received his money from the monk.

However, the wife was not frightened or taken aback by this, but said quickly and boldly that she had indeed received gold from the monk. The wife then argued that she should be allowed to keep the gold, to pay for good hospitality and to do with as she pleased; and, in return for him giving her his money, she would give him her body: “I wol nat paye yow but abedde”. And the merchant saw that there was no other option but to agree.

#### **The merry words of the Host to the Shipman and to the lady Prioress**

“Wel seyð”, the Host compliments the Shipman, cursing the monk, and warning the men in the company to beware of similar tricks. The monk, the Host interprets, tricked both the man and his wife. Moving forward, the Host then looks for the next tale-teller, and courteously asks the Prioress whether she might tell the next tale: “Gladly”, she assents, and begins her tale.

### **Analysis**

Despite its relative brevity, the Shipman’s Tale interrogates and complicates several key issues raised in earlier tales. After the darker reaches of the Physician’s and Pardoner’s Tales, the Shipman’s Tale returns to fabliau origins, presenting a reasonably simple “trick” story, complicated by Chaucer in the telling.

Primarily, the tale continues the idea, previously raised in The Wife of Bath’s tale, that money, sex, and women are closely inter-connected. It is interesting that, in the second fragment, the Shipman promises to tell his tale, mentioning his “joly body” (attractive figure). Scholars have argued that, in fact, the lines about the Shipman’s “joly body” were intended to be adapted into the mouth of the Wife of Bath, and it is the Wife of Bath’s Tale which immediately follows the Shipman’s promise.



*Notes* The bawdy fabliau of the Shipman’s Tale is usually assumed to have been intended to be The Wife of Bath’s tale before the version we currently have was composed.

Moreover, the Shipman’s would not be an unlikely tale for the Wife to have told. At the end, when the Host concludes that the monk tricked both the merchant and his wife, he seems not to have realized the victor at the very end of the tale. Rather like in the Miller’s and the Franklin’s Tales, we are asked to consider each of the participants at the very close of the tale, and decide who we think has come off best. It is clearly not the merchant, though he has made huge profits in his business dealings, and had his loan repaid, and, though (as the Host argues) the monk has had sex with the wife, remained friends with the merchant, and got off scot-free, it is the wife herself who seems to triumph. Not only has she had enjoyable sex with both the merchant and the monk, but she is one hundred franks better off; and she coerces her husband into agreeing to “pay” in return for sleeping with her.

## Notes



Task

What makes the monk Don John unattractive as a person?

Like the Wife of Bath, this wife has realized the inherent value of her sexual attractiveness: and in a way that seems to a modern reader uncomfortably close to prostitution, she bears out the Wife's dictum that the "bele chose" is in fact an excellent bargaining tool for women to get what they want from men. As the Man of Law's Tale suggested, the female is a pawn in business transactions, and yet, what the Wives (of bath, and of the Merchant in this tale) realize that Constance never even considers, is their own potential profitability. If women's bodies are valuable, these two women seem to say, then why shouldn't we be the ones to profit from our bodies?

### Self Assessment

Short Answer Type Questions:

1. How do the youngest reveler plan to kill the other two?
2. What characteristics does the Pardoner reveal in his prologue?
3. How is Don John's loan actually repaid and by whom?
4. Does the Merchant learn of the arrangement between his wife and Don John?
5. Does the husband, who is a Merchant, appear to be miserly or just careful?

One also notices the importance attached in these business dealings to giving one's word, to agreements sealed with kisses and with handshakes, and of one thing being verbally exchanged for another before the words become actions—a reminder, perhaps, of the issues of contracts raised by the Franklin's Tale.

Chaucer ties up these concerns, as so often, in a single pun: "taillynge", which means "credit" (and which the narrator wishes upon the company at the end of the tale) is a close relation to "telling" (*i.e.* telling a tale) but also punningly relates to "tail", Middle English slang for the female genitals. A woman's "tail" becomes an endless credit note: she will pay her husband, she says, in bed. Women, in this tale, and in the Wife of Bath's are playing by patriarchal rules in order to beat the men; and the fact that they do beat the men might have been an uncomfortable shift of powers to many of Chaucer's medieval readers.

### 15.3 Summary

- The Host pronounced the tale a piteous one to listen to, and prayed to God that he protect the Physician's body.
- The company protests that the Pardoner not be allowed to tell them a ribald tale, but insists instead on "som moral thyng" - a request which the Pardoner also grants.
- Next, the Pardoner tells the company how he tells his congregation "olde stories" from long ago, "for lewed peple loven tales olde".
- The Pardoner has—in recent years—become one of the most critically discussed of the Canterbury pilgrims.
- The monk was generous with his money, and always brought gifts for his lord and for the servants, according to their degree.
- Despite its relative brevity, the Shipman's Tale interrogates and complicates several key issues raised in earlier tales.

## 15.4 Keywords

*Piteous* : Arousing pity.

*Vow* : A solemn promise.

*Relic* : An object of interest surviving from an earlier time.

*Genital* : Relating to the human or animal reproductive organs.

## 15.5 Review Questions

1. What is an allegory?
2. Why would medieval audience have been familiar with the Pardoner's tale?
3. What is the moral lesson of the Pardoner's tale?

## **Answers: Self Assessment**

1. He poisons the wine that he buys for them to drink.
2. He himself is totally motivated by greed and seems to have no virtue at all.
3. The wife spends the night making love to Don John. That is the repayment.
4. The Merchant never learns nor suspects the arrangement.
5. He is care ful.

## 15.6 Further Readings



### *Books*

- |                                      |                    |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------|
| The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales | — Geoffrey Chaucer |
| The Canterbury Tales                 | — Geoffrey Chaucer |
| Geoffrey Chaucer                     | — Harold Bloom     |



### *Online links*

- <http://www.pinkmonkey.com/booknotes/monkeynotes/pmCanterbury02.asp>  
<http://www.bookrags.com/notes/ct/index.html>

## Unit 16: The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales (Non-detailed Study): Discussion and Analysis-VIII

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### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Explain the text and prologue of the Prioress's and Sir Thopas tale
- Describe briefly the analysis of the tales.

### Introduction

After jesting rather coarsely about the monk in the Shipman's Tale—and monks in general—the Host switches to a tone of exaggerated politeness in inviting the Prioress to tell her tale. A very young schoolboy learns a difficult Latin hymn of praise to the Virgin Mary because of his deep devotion to her. Every day, on the way to school and on the way home, he passes through the Jewish ghetto of the town singing the hymn.

True to her perfectionist, sentimental nature, the Prioress begins with a long apologetic prayer to the Virgin Mary. Her story of the martyred child resembles popular saints' stories of the day. It has a very preachy and morbid tone. Though they appear to the modern reader as very negative aspects of this story, her reverence for chastity and her harsh judgment of the Jews are both reflections of common

medieval Catholic beliefs. The violent nature of the events in the story seem to be in contradiction to a personality as sensitive as the Prioress's is supposed to be, suggesting that she may be much tougher than she wishes to reveal. She is, after all, in a position of great authority over others. After the sobering miracle story, the Host calls on the Narrator to give a lively, amusing story. Apologetically, with tongue in cheek, the Narrator says he knows only one old story in rhyme-doggerel. Chaucer's two stories are actually a joke on the Host with his impossible pretensions to being a literary critic. The Tale of Sir Thopas, which Harry Bailley totally rejects, is actually a brilliant parody of the popular courtly romances. Sir Thopas, vain and empty-headed, is going off to slay a dragon in response to his love longing and not in defense of any ladylove. He is behaving in exaggerated knightly fashion, but the absence of any ideals makes him completely ludicrous.

The literal-minded Host cannot see this; he is merely disgusted by the use of such a low form of versification for what is supposed to be a courtly story. Harry is not disappointed, however, by the narrator's long, ponderous telling of a rather boring and highly moralistic story. Harry fully approves when the Narrator deliberately loads the narrative with proverbs, maxims, clichés and literary allusions, tripling its length in the process. To the Host, this makes the story of Melibeus properly serious. The Narrator's joke escapes him completely.

## **16.1 The Prioress' Tale**

### **16.1.1 Prologue of the Prioress' Tale**

The Prioress' prologue is simply a prayer to the Virgin Mary, worshipping God, and asking her to help the narrator properly to tell of God's reverence and to guide the tale as it is told.

### **16.1.2 The Prioress' Tale Text**

Once in an Asian town, there was a Jewish ghetto at the end of a street, in which usury and other things hateful to Christ occurred. The Christian minority in the town opened a school for their children in this city at the other end of the same street. Among the children attending this school was a widow's son, an angelic seven year old who was, even at his young age, deeply devoted to his faith. At school he learned songs in Latin, and could sing his Ave Marie and Alma redemptoris, a song giving praise to the Virgin Mary, and pay due reverence to Christ.

As he was walking home from school one day singing his Alma redemptoris, he provoked the anger of the Jews of the city, whose hearts were wasps' nests made by Satan. They hired a murderer who slit the boy's throat and threw the body into a cesspit.

The widow searched all night for her missing child, begging the Jews to tell her where her child might be found, but they refused to help her or give her any information. Jesus, however, gave her the idea to sing in the place where her son had been cast into the pit: and as she called out to him, the child, although his throat was slit, began to sing his Alma redemptoris. The other Christians of the city ran to the pit, amazed at what was happening, and sent for the provost.

The provost praised Christ and his mother, Mary, and had the Jews tied up. The child was taken up and carried, in a great and honorable procession to the nearest abbey, his corpse singing all the while. The local provost cursed the Jews, and ordered their death by hanging. Before the child was buried, holy water was sprinkled onto him, and he began to speak. The abbot of the abbey questioned him as to how he could sing, and the child answered that the Virgin Mary had placed a grain on his tongue that allowed him to speak. The abbot took this grain from his tongue, allowing him to die, and finally pass on to heaven. The child was buried in a marble tomb as a martyr, and the tale ends with a lament for the young child, but also for "Hugh of Lyncoln" (a real child martyr, allegedly slain by Jews in Chaucer's day).

## Notes

**Analysis**

The Prioress' Tale is overtly a "Miracle of the Virgin", a reasonably common Christian genre of literature which represents a tale centered around Christian principles and a devotion to the Virgin Mary, but within the warm affection that the Prioress shows for her Christian faith is a disquieting anti-Semitism immediately obvious to the modern reader in our post-Holocaust times.

The tale is an unabashed celebration of motherhood, and an unapologetic argument for the virtue of Christianity over Judaism, and in most critics' readings, it partly serves as a grim reminder that anti-Semitism by no means began with Hitler in the Second World War. The guiding figure of the tale is the Virgin Mary, addressed directly in its prologue, who serves both as the exemplar for Christian values and as the intervening spirit who sustains the murdered child before he passes on to heaven. Her mortal parallel is the mother of the murdered boy, who dearly loves her son and struggles to find the boy when he is lost.

The Tale itself, as Seth Lerer has pointed out is "a nightmare of performance..." which "dramatizes just what happens when a performer faces a hostile audience". The little clergeoun of the tale (the child) is an unsuspecting victim, murdered solely because of his eagerness to sing: one of many tales which seems to take as its theme the danger of speaking, the potential danger of words and language, and a warning about what happens to people who open their mouths at the wrong moment (other such tales include those of the Manciple and the Nun's Priest).



Task

What miraculous circumstance attends the findings of the murdered boy?

**Self Assessment**

Short Answer Type Questions:

1. Who is the central character in the Prioress's tale?
2. What is his special mark of devotion to the Virgin Mary?
3. Describe the grim nature of the boy murder.
4. How do the catholics interpret the child amazing singing?
5. What happen to the Jews in the Prioress's tale?

Despite its interest in song and performance, the key question still seems to be whether we are to read the tale as an outdated example of anti-Semitism, acceptable to a medieval audience but acceptable no longer or whether there is another option. If there is, it probably lies in the sentimental presentation of the Prioress' Tale, and the juxtaposition of the extremely angelic singing seven year old, and the extremely cruel and horrible Jews (who even go to the lengths of throwing the child's corpse into a cesspit). If we remember that the Prioress is a woman so sentimental that she even cries over a dead mouse, it's quite a contrast in her personality that she expends such vitriol over the Jews. Perhaps there is some sort of contrast; perhaps the Prioress is intended to be held at arm's length from Chaucer. The bottom line with this tale is that it entirely depends on your reading of the details.

**16.2 Chaucer's Tale of Sir Thopas****16.2.1 Prologue to the Sir Thopas**

When the Prioress' Tale was done, every man in the company looks serious, having heard of the miracle she described. Until the Host, beginning to joke, turns to Chaucer himself ("he looked upon me") and asks him what sort of man he is, as he is always looking at the ground. "Looke up murily", the Host tells Chaucer, calling him a doll ("popet") and describing him as elvish-faced.



*Did u know?* The Host then demands that Chaucer tells a “tale of myrthe”, and “that anon” (do it soon). Chaucer replies to the Host that he only knows one tale: a rhyme that he learned many years before.

Notes

### 16.2.2 The Tale of Sir Thopas Text

(I) Asking the “lords” to listen, the tale announces itself as being “of myrthe and of solas” (fun and seriousness). It then introduces Thopas, a fair knight with a white face, rose-red lips, blond hair and beard, and a seemly nose. Thopas was very well dressed and he could hunt for deer, go hawking, and he was a good archer. Many maidens were brought in for him to sleep with, but he was chaste, and no lecher.

One day Thopas went out riding on his gray horse, carrying a launcegay and a longsword, and passed through a forest which had many wild beasts in it (buck as well as hares). Thopas heard the birdsong and fell into a love-sickness, and rode so fast that his horse sweated. Thopas therefore lay down to give him and his horse a rest, deciding that he would be in love with an elf-queen.

Thopas then climbed back into his saddle to find an elf-queen, but he came across a great giant called “Sire Olifaunt”, who threatened Thopas that, if he left his territory, he would kill his horse. Thopas (described as “the child”) said that he would meet with the giant tomorrow, as he had forgotten his armor, and travelled in the opposite direction very fast. This giant threw stones at him, but he got away.

(II) “Yet listeth” (keep listening) to my tale, the narrator continues, because Thopas has again come to town. He commanded his merry men, as he had to fight a giant with three heads. They gave him sweet wine and gingerbread and licorice, and then Thopas got dressed in his armour. The end of this fit tells the company that if they “wol any moore of it” (want to hear any more) then the narrator will try to oblige them.

(III) “Now holde youre mouth, par charitee” (Now shut up, for charity’s sake) begins the third fit, before explaining that Thopas is of royal chivalry. Thopas drank water from the well with the knight Sir Percivel, until one day...

#### Here the Host “stynteth” [stops] Chaucer’s Tale of Thopas

No more of this, for God’s sake, says the Host, criticizing the “rym dogerel” which Chaucer uses. Chaucer asks why he has had his tale stopped when it is the best rhyme he knows – and the Host replies that his crappy rhymes are not worth a turd, advising him rather to tell something in prose. Chaucer obliges, promising “a litel thyng in prose”, finally asking the Host to let him tell “al my tale, I preye”.

### Analysis

Sir Thopas offers up one of the funniest moments in the Canterbury Tales. Written in ridiculously bouncy tail rhyme, the poem is a hilarious parody of Middle English verse romances packed full of bizarre pastoral details. Thopas, for example, is hugely effeminized, well-dressed, and with a girl’s name (Thopas was usually a woman’s name in the medieval period). Thopas falls in love, in the manner of the courtly knight, before he has decided who he will be in love with (an elf-queen, in the end) and runs away from his climactic battle at the end of the first fit because he has forgotten his armour.

In the Ellesmere manuscript, the setting of Sir Thopas has the tale ever vanishing into the margin, and close readers will note the way each fit is half the length of its predecessor - there is, as well as

## Notes

its “doggerel” parody of verse romance, a definite sense that Chaucer the character has definitely run out of things to say. Note the number of times Chaucer has to ask the company to listen or to be quiet (implying perhaps the jeers and responses of a less-than-impressed pilgrim audience) and note too the way that details from the prologue seem to echo in the Tales: an effeminized, antisocial Chaucer becomes an effeminized, entirely chaste Thopas, the Host’s comment that Chaucer looks like he would find a “hare” becomes a forest with hares for wild beasts, an “elvish” looking-Chaucer inspires the “elf-queen who is to be Thopas’ lover. To that, we might add, a storyteller Chaucer reluctant to tell a tale (but pushed into the spotlight) becomes a knightly Thopas desperate to escape knightly combat. The apparent purposelessness of the narrative, packed with pointless details, might well reflect a narrator who is making the tale up as he goes along.

There are several interpretable jokes hidden in the fabric of the tale. Chaucer is parodying his own endless inventiveness, celebrating his own skill at creating varied voices, by presenting himself as someone who cannot even come up with a single bearable story – and, silenced by his own characters, the abortion of Chaucer’s tale actually points to a remark about the strength of his characterization. Chaucer’s characters, it seems, are so well written that they give advice about tale-telling to their writer. Sir Thopas, vanishing fit by fit as it does, also demonstrates Chaucer’s awareness of his own elusiveness, the self-vanishing quality which enacts the invisibility of the writer’s point of view – which we have already mentioned in several other tales. The Chaucer sent into the fiction to represent the author is, we and he know all too well, a poor imitation of the real thing - but it is the nearest thing to an omniscient author we are going to get.

## Self Assessment

Short Answer Type Questions:

6. On what ancient form of literature is the tale of Melibee based?
7. Why does he approve of the tale of Melibee?
8. What kind of wife is prudence in the story of Melibee?
9. What does the Narrator call the divisions in the tale of Sir Thopas?
10. What is rhyme-doggerel?

## 16.3 Chaucer’s Tale of Melibee

### 16.3.1 The Tale of Melibee Text

There was once a young man named Melibee, mighty and rich, who had with his wife Prudence, a daughter called Sophie. One day he took a walk into the fields, leaving his wife and daughter inside his house, with the doors shut fast. Three of his old enemies saw it, and, setting ladders to the wall of his house, entered, beating his wife, and giving his daughter mortal wounds in five places: “in hir feet, in hire handes, in hir erys, in hir nose, and in hir mouth”.

When Melibee returned and saw what had happened, he was like a madman, tearing his clothes, weeping and crying. Prudence, his wife, stopped his tears, and gave him some useful advice from various authorities. Prudence eventually advised him to call a group of people to come to him, to explain to them what had happened, and listen to their counsel.

As per his wife’s instructions, Melibee took counsel from “the grete congregacioun of folk”, and the advice falls into two camps. The surgeons, physicians, lawyers, and the old urge caution, and a considered reaction, but his neighbors and “yonge folk” urge war.

Melibee wants to wage war, and Prudence urges haste-there follows an argument about who should prevail, and Prudence, eventually, triumphs. She tells Melibee that he should choose his counselors carefully, and to set their advice against their-apparent and hidden - motives. Prudence then, at length, goes through all of the advice that Melibee has been given and shows him that open war is not a good option, for a variety of moral, ethical, and practical reasons.



*Notes* Prudence interprets the attack on Sophie as the damage done to her because of man's vulnerability to the World, the Flesh, and the Devil. Her remedy: negotiate peace and leave all to God's grace and forgiveness.

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The three enemies who have performed the deed are found and brought before Prudence, who suggests forgiving them; Melibee again argues for a fine, which she again argues him out of. Melibee forgives them, and, delighted with himself, praises at length his own generosity.

## Analysis

Don't worry if you've never read Melibee in full—a very famous academic (who I shall leave nameless) studying at one of the world's most renowned universities once admitted to me that she'd never made it right through either. Melibee, first and foremost, seems to be a punishment for cutting Chaucer off mid-flight with Sir Thopas; before beginning it, he promises a "litel thyng in prose", asks that he is not interrupted, and then delivers a hugely lengthy tale of almost unsurpassed dullness. If one saw in Thopas running from the giant the figure of Chaucer trying to escape the Host's demand, Melibee seems to represent him coming back with the armor.

Some critics have also argued that an omission Chaucer deliberately makes from its source, Renaud de Louens' *Livre de Melibee et de Dame Prudence* [after 1336] (itself a translation of Albertanus of Brescia, *Liber consolationis et consilii* [1246]) points to Melibee as a separate composition intended for the recently-crowned Richard II. Among Melibee's many pieces of advice, Chaucer omits, significantly for a child-king, "Woe to the land that has a child as king". Is this, perhaps a manual for a king?

Melibee is also rather self-consciously a construction; a patchwork of proverbs, sayings and wise words, some of which have already appeared in the tales, and none of which are likely to be entirely original. Part of the reason for its length is that its characters constantly cite authority after authority to justify their opinion—and this academic arguing inflates the thin plot of the tale into page after page of citation and quotation. So keen is everyone to get their favorite authority into the argument that we never even find out what happens to mortally-wounded Sophie.

Melibee is, like Thopas (improvised from its situation), a text made up of text – and it proves (particularly if the Parson's tale, the only other tale in prose, was a late addition to the Canterbury project) Chaucer's mastery of genre, if nothing else. Prose tracts, full of academic discussion rather than dramatic, narrative progression, are not without of his ability.

Within the tale itself, Prudence is another example of the patient and long-suffering wife who demonstrates her virtue through stoicism, and, like Constance, her name is an obvious signifier of one of her prominent qualities (Sophie, the daughter, has a name meaning "wisdom"). Her role in the story is not as an active agent, she is a passive influence on the other characters; and she is a good example to consider in examining the issue of "female counsel", raised hitherto but particularly in the Nun's Priest's Tale. Melibee suggests, above all, that women are worthy counselors and interpreters, and, although the tale celebrates Prudence, its title is apt - it points to Melibee himself, a man able to learn from his wife, whose name means "sweet learning" or "sweet knowledge".

## 16.4 Summary

- The Christian minority in the town opened a school for their children in this city at the other end of the same street.
- The provost praised Christ and his mother, Mary, and had the Jews tied up.

Notes

- Sir Thopas offers up one of the funniest moments in the Canterbury Tales.
- Prudence, his wife, stopped his tears, and gave him some useful advice from various authorities.
- Melibee is also rather self-consciously a construction; a patchwork of proverbs, sayings and wise words.

### 16.5 Keywords

- Usury* : Interest at such rates.  
*Maxims* : A short statement expressing a general truth.  
*Apologetic* : Constituting a formal justification of a theory.  
*Miracle* : A remarkable and very welcome occurrence.

### 16.6 Review Questions

1. Why do the Jews in the story hate the boy so much?
2. How is the abbot able to release the boy's soul?
3. What lead the reader to understand that the story is a parody?
4. What causes Harry Bailley to disapprove of the tale of Sir Thopas?
5. Explain how the tale of Sir Thopas is a joke on the Host.

### **Answers: Self Assessment**

1. The protagonist is a very young school boy.
2. He sings a hymn to the Blessed Virgin.
3. His throat is slit and his body is thrown on a dung heap.
4. The singing represent a miracle.
5. The Jews are tortured and killed.
6. The tale of Melibee is based upon ancient Greek and Roman myths.
7. It is sober, serious and long.
8. Prudence is wise and patient.
9. He calls them "fits".
10. A low, base form of poetry with forced rhyme.

### 16.7 Further Readings



*Books*

- |                                      |                    |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------|
| The Prologue to The Canterbury Tales | — Geoffrey Chaucer |
| The Canterbury Tales                 | — Geoffrey Chaucer |
| Geoffrey Chaucer                     | — Harold Bloom     |



*Online links*

- <http://www.pinkmonkey.com/booknotes/monkeynotes/pmCanterbury02.asp>  
<http://www.bookrags.com/notes/ct/index.html>

## Unit 17: The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales (Non-detailed Study): Discussion and Analysis-IX

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### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Explain the prologue and text of the Monk's tale
- Explain the prologue and text of the Nun's Priest tale
- Explain the prologue and text of the Second Nun's tale
- Describe briefly the analysis of all tales.

### Introduction

The Host's scorn for the clergy is evident in this prologue. He is not really eager to increase the population by having the clergy marry; he is rather implying that all monks are lecherous scoundrels. The Monk's Tale contradicts the Host's lewd jests. It is very serious and sorrowful and gives a typical clerical admonition that Man must not trust fame and fortune, for they are fleeting and temporal.

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The Host is greatly relieved when the Monk is prevented by the Knight from recounting any more of his ponderous recital. When the Priest agrees to tell a merry tale, the entire company is delighted. The Nun's Priest's Tale of Chanticleer is one of the finest beast fables in the English language. In this format, beasts personify humans and exaggerate Man's characteristics, usually for the purpose of teaching a lesson. The characters, as in this case with Chanticleer, often make use of classical learning to solidify their moral instruction. The tale is suitable to the teller when one considers the position of the Nun's Priest. He is the servant of the Prioress who appears to be silly and sentimental. His work forces him to live in a community of women drawn by her to the convent; it is likely that they are as silly as their mistress, in which case, the Priest would naturally have a somewhat low opinion of women. In the Epilogue to the tale, the Host is once again in high good humor and full of bawdy teasing for the Priest. He next invites the Wife of Bath to tell her story.

There are no conversational links either before or after The Second Nun's Tale, a possible indication that this narrative is intended to be taken with complete seriousness. The tale itself is exactly what it appears to be, the life of a saint. It is taken directly from a former work by Chaucer, The Legend of Good Women. The listeners are getting the straight "facts" as they are related by an anonymous sister whose reverence for St. Cecilia is completely appropriate to one of her station.

## **17.1 The Monk's Tale**

### **17.1.1 Prologue to the Monk's Tale**

When Chaucer's tale of Melibee has finished, the Host says (for the second time) that he wishes his wife could hear the tale of Prudence and her patience and wise counsel: his wife, he goes on to extrapolate, is an ill-tempered shrew. Turning to address the Monk, he bids him be 'myrie of cheere', and asks whether his name is John, Thomas or Albon, asking which house he is of. Admiring the Monk's skin and stature, the Host jokes that he could be a good breeding fowl, if only he were allowed to breed! Religion, the Host goes on, has taken up all the best breeding people, and left just the puny creatures to populate the world.

The Monk takes all this joking well, and promises a tale (or two, or three) of the life of Edward the Confessor, but first, announces he will tell some tragedies, of which he has a hundred stored up. Tragedy, as the Monk defines it, is a story from an old book of someone who fell from high degree and great prosperity into misery, and ended wretchedly; tragedies are also usually presented in hexameters, he thinks.

### **17.1.2 The Monk's Tale Text**

The Monk's tale is a collection of tragedies, designed to advise men not to trust in blind prosperity but be aware that Fortune is fickle and ever-changing.

Lucifer is the first tragedy told, who fell from an angelic heaven down to Hell. Adam is next, the one man not born of original sin, who was driven from Paradise.

Samson's tale is told at greater length, explaining how he fell from grace when he admitted his secret to his wife, who betrayed it to his enemies and then took another lover. The story is that Samson slew one thousand men with an ass's jawbone, then prayed for God to quench his thirst. From the jawbone's tooth sprung a well. He would have conquered the world if he had not told Delilah that his strength came from his refusal to cut his hair. Without this strength his enemies cut out Samson's eyes and imprisoned him. In the temple where Samson was kept he knocked down two of the pillars, killing himself and everyone else in the temple.



*Notes* Hercules' tragedy is next. Hercules' strength was unparalleled, but he was finally defeated when Deianera sent Hercules a poisoned shirt made by Nessus.

Nabugodonosor, was the king of Babylon who had twice defeated Israel. The proud king constructed a large gold statue that he demanded his subjects pray to or else be cast into a pit of flames. Yet when Daniel disobeyed the king, Nebuchadnezzar lost all dignity, acting like a great beast until God relieved him of his insanity.

The next tragedy is about Balthasar, the son of Nebuchadnezzar, who also worshipped false idols. He had a feast for a thousand lords in which they drank wine out of sacred vessels, but during his feast he saw an armless hand writing on a wall. Daniel warned Balthasar of his father's fate. Daniel warned him that his kingdom would be divided by Medes and the Persians. Balthasar, according to the Monk, exemplifies the way that Fortune makes friends with people before making enemies with them.

Cenobia or Zenobia, who was beautiful and victorious in war, is the next tragic hero of the tale. The queen of Palmyra refused the duties of women and refused to marry, until she was forced to wed Odenathus. She permitted him to have sex with her only so that she could get pregnant, but no more. Yet the proud woman, once Odenathus was dead, was defeated by the Romans and paraded through Rome bound in chains.

King Pedro of Spain, subject of the next story, was cast from his kingdom by his brother. When attempting to regain his throne, Pedro was murdered by this brother.

Peter, King of Cyprus, is the next subject; he brought ruin on his kingdom and was thus murdered.

Other tragedies include Bernabo Visconti, who wrongly imprisoned his nephew. Ugolino of Pisa, a count, was imprisoned in a tower in Pisa with his three young children after Ruggieri, the bishop of Pisa, had led a rebellion against him. His youngest son died of starvation, and out of his misery Ugolini gnawed on his own arms. The two children that remained thought that Ugolini was chewing himself out of hunger, and offered themselves as meals for him. They all eventually starved. Nero did nothing but satisfy his own lusts and even cut open his own mother to see the womb from which he came. He had Seneca murdered for stating that an emperor should be virtuous. When it appeared that Nero would be assassinated for his cruelty, he killed himself. Holofernes ordered his subjects to renounce every law and worship Nebuchadnezzar. For this sin Judith cut off Holofernes' head as he was sleeping.

The Monk next tells of Antiochus Epiphanes, who was punished by God for attacks on the Jews. God made Antiochus infested with loathsome maggots. The Monk then admits that most have heard of Alexander the Great, poisoned by his very own offspring. He follows with the tale of Julius Caesar, who had Pompey murdered but was himself assassinated by Brutus. The final story is of Croesus, King of Lydia, the proud and wealthy king who was hanged.



*Did u know?* All of these tales are simply re-tellings of the popularly known stories: all focus on the same theme of people of high degree falling into misery or death. Finally the Monk's Tale is interrupted.

## Analysis

The Monk provides one of the first-known definitions of tragedy in English literature, and, though his tale might have been fascinating to Chaucer's medieval audience, many of whom would not know the classical stories it largely details, it does not receive a huge amount of attention or adoration from modern readers and critics.

The Monk's tragedies are drawn from a variety of sources: Biblical, classical, historical and even some that, in Chaucer's time, would have been within reasonably recent folklore and memory. Yet the model of tragedy that the Monk offers is not, in fact, a classical model as such, but a Boethian

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one—a reminder of the mutability of life itself, and the tendency of fickle, feminine Fortune to spin her wheel and bring those at the top crashing down to the ground. It is, on one level, simply a series of car-crash narratives—an unrelenting dark, Boethian reminder that the high-status end miserably.

Some more recent studies have tried to locate the Monk's tale, with its emphasis on the stories told about the history, and its focus on the writers from whom the Monk has drawn the stories, as a response to Boccaccio's *De casibus* tragedies and a comment on the involvement of writing, poets and poetry in the support of tyrants and despots.

Yet neither of these readings of the Tale really explains what it is doing within its context. Louise Fradenburg argues very persuasively in her book that the Monk is a death's head at the feast—a sudden explosion of misery and death into the festive fun of the Canterbury project. The Monk's own solid physical reality, good for breeding (so the Host jokes - and breeding is the opposite of dying) is juxtaposed with his tales, precisely about the end of the body and its death, rather than life and strength.



Task

How does the Monk respond to the teasing of the Host?

Moreover, the numbers that the Monk quotes—he has a hundred tragedies in his cell, of which he manages to fit in seventeen before he is interrupted—suggest a painfully dismal repetition of the fall from fortune to misery, fortune to misery, fortune to misery. It is rather as if the Monk himself becomes a sort of anti-*Canterbury Tales* all of his own: each of his mini-tales progressively darkening the horizon.

It is no wonder then that the Knight sees fit to interrupt the Monk and halt his tale—particularly as the Monk tells tales largely about the demise of high-status characters (and the Knight, of course, is the pilgrimage's highest-ranking pilgrim). The Monk himself presents a threat to the fun of the tale: he is all 'earnest' and no 'game', as the Host points out to him, and - beginning a trend which arises more and more as these final tales progress - when he is interrupted, he refuses to speak any further. One of the tellers has his mouth firmly closed.

## 17.2 The Nun's Priest's Tale

### 17.2.1 Prologue of the Nun's Priest's Tale

#### Here the Knight "stynteth" (stops) the Monk's Tale

"Hoo!" says the Knight, "good sire, namoore of this". The Knight then praises the Monk, but says that he has heard quite enough about men's sudden falls from high status and grace, and would far rather hear about men climbing from poverty to prosperity.

The Host steps in to concur, telling the Monk that his tale is boring the company, and that his talk is worth nothing, because there is no fun to be had from it. The Host asks the Monk to tell another tale—and the Monk responds that, having no desire to play and have fun, he has said all he has to say. The Host then turns to the Nun's Priest, asking him to draw near, and asking him to be merry of heart in his tale. "Yis, sir", says the Nun's Priest—and, described as a "sweete preest" by the narrator, the Nun's Priest begins his tale.

### 17.2.2 The Nun's Priest's Tale Text

A poor widow, rather advanced in age, had a small cottage beside a grove, standing in a dale. This widow led a very simple life, providing for herself and her daughters from a small farm. In a yard

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which she kept, enclosed all around with palings and with a ditch outside it, she had a cock called Chaunticleer, who was peerless in his crowing. Chaunticleer was beautifully coloured, with a comb redder than coral, and a beak as black as jet, and he had under his government seven chickens, who were his paramours, of which his favourite was Dame Pertelote.

One morning, Chaunticleer began to groan in his throat, as a man who was troubled in his dreams does, and Pertelote, aghast, asked him what the matter was. Chaunticleer replied that he had had a bad dream, and prayed to God to help him to correctly interpret it. He had dreamt that he, roaming around the yard, saw an animal "lyk an hound" which tried to seize his body and have him dead. The "hound's" colour was somewhere between yellow and red, and his tail and both his ears were tipped with black.

Pertelote mocked him, telling him that he was a coward. Pertelote then argues that dreams are meaningless visions, caused simply by ill humors (bad substances in the body) – and quotes Cato at length to demonstrate her point. Her solution is that she will pick herbs from the yard in order to bring his humors back to normal.

Chaunticleer disagreed, arguing that while Cato is certainly an authority, there are many more authorities available to be read who argue that dreams are significations – of good things and bad things to come. He stated the example of one man who, lying in his bed, dreamt that his friend was being murdered for his gold in an ox's stall, and that his body was hidden in a dung cart. Remembering his dream, this man went to a dung cart at the west gate of the town, and found the murdered body of his friend. Chaunticleer then described the story of two men, who were preparing to cross the sea. One of them dreamed that, if he crossed the sea the next day, he would be drowned - he told his companion, who laughed at him, and resolved to go anyway. The ship's bottom tore, and his companion was drowned. Chaunticleer also cited the examples of Macrobius, Croesus and Andromache, who each had prophecies in their dreams.

Then, however, Chaunticleer praised Pertelote, asking her to speak of "mirth", and stop all this talk of prophecy-the beauty of her face, he says, makes him feel fearless. He then quoted the proverb "Mulier est hominis confusio", translating it as "Woman is man's joy and all his bliss", when it actually translates "Woman is man's ruin". Chaunticleer then flew down from his beam, called all of his hens to him, and revealed that he'd found a grain lying in the yard. He then clasped Pertelote to him with his wings, and copulated with her until morning.

When the month of March was over, Chaunticleer was walking in full pride, all of his wives around him, when a coal fox (a fox with black-tipped feet, ears and tail) broke through the hedges and into the yard. He bode his time for a while. The narrator then goes off into an aside, addressing Chaunticleer, and wishing that he had taken "wommennes conseil" (woman's counsel)-before he moves back into the tale, reminding us that his tale "is of a cok".

Chaunticleer sang merrily in the yard, and, casting his eyes among the cabbages, caught sight of the fox-and would have fled, but the fox addressed him, asking where he was going, and claiming to be his friend. The fox claimed to have met Chaunticleer's mother and father, and talked of his father's excellent singing voice, and the way his father used to stretch out his neck and stand on his tiptoes before singing. The fox then asked whether Chaunticleer can sing like his father-and Chaunticleer stood on his tiptoes, stretched out his neck, closed his eyes, and, as he began to sing, the fox grabbed him by the throat and ran off to the wood with him.



Task How has the Monk revenged himself on Harry Bailley?

The poor widow and her two daughters, hearing the cry of the chickens, ran after the fox toward the crove, and many other men and animals ran after them. Chaunticleer managed to speak to the fox, and encouraged him to turn to his pursuers and curse them, telling him that he was going to eat the

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cock. The fox agreed—but as he opened his mouth to agree, the cock broke from his mouth suddenly and flew high up into a tree. The fox tried to persuade him down, saying that he had been misinterpreted, and that Chaunticleer should fly down in order that he might “seye sooth” (tell the truth) about what he had meant, but Chaunticleer knew better this time. The fox finally cursed all those who “jangleth whan he sholde holde his pees” (chatters when he should hold his peace).



*Did u know?* The narrator then addresses everyone who thinks the tale is mere foolery, asking them to take the moral of the tale, rather than the tale itself: taking the fruit, and letting the chaff remain. Thus ends the Nun’s Priest’s Tale.

### 17.2.3 Epilogue to the Nun’s Priest’s Tale

The Host, praises the tale as “myrie”, and then, as he did with the Monk, suggests that the Nun’s Priest would be an excellent breeding man (trede-fowl) if only he were allowed to breed—for the Nun’s Priest, the Host continues, is brawny, with a great neck and large chest.

### Analysis

The Nun’s Priest’s Tale is one of the best-loved and best-known of all of the Tales, and one whose genre, in Chaucer’s time and now, is instantly recognizable. It is a beast fable, just like Aesop’s fable, and as one of Chaucer’s successors, the medieval Scots poet Robert Henryson, would go on to explore in great detail, its key relationship is that between human and animal. The key question of the genre is addressed at the end by the narrator himself: telling those who find a tale about animals a folly to take the moral from the tale, disregarding the tale itself. But can we take a human moral from a tale about animals? Can an animal represent—even just in a tale—a human in any useful way?

For a start, it is important to notice that the animal-human boundary is blurred even before the tale begins, when the Host mocks the Nun’s Priest (who, being a religious man, would have been celibate) and suggesting that he would have made excellent breeding stock (a “tredefowl”, or breeding-fowl, is the word he uses). The thought is an interesting one – because if we can think of the Nun’s Priest himself as potentially useful in breeding, animalistic terms, then can we think of his tale in potentially useful in human terms?

The question frames the other themes of the tale. The issue of woman’s counsel is raised again (last foregrounded in Chaucer’s tale of Melibee) explicitly—should Chaunticleer take Pertelote’s advice about how to interpret his dreams? Should he disregard his dreams, and get on with his life? He does, of course, looking among the cabbages (perhaps even to find herbs), when he sees the fox – and at that point, the tale seems to suggest, he should never have listened to his wife in the first place: his fears were valid.

That is, until we remember what the narrator tells us anyway at a crucial point, that his tale is “of a cok”—about a chicken. It is hardly as if we need a prophetic dream to tell us that foxes like eating chickens: it’s what we might call animal instinct. This is doubly highlighted when, after quoting Cato and discussing the various textual politics of dream interpretation, Chaunticleer calls his wives excitedly to him because he has found a grain of corn—and then has uncomplicated animal sex with Pertelote all night. It is a contradiction, Chaucer seems to imply, to expect unchicken-like behavior from a chicken: yet the contradiction is one which fuels the whole genre of beast fable. If the Nun’s Priest had too much human dignity and restraint to be a breeding fowl, Cato-quoting Chaunticleer has animal urges too strong to be a viable auctour.

Except that, of course, with the possible exception of Arviragus and Dorigen in the Franklin’s Tale, there is no more stable and robust “marriage” in the Canterbury Tales than Chanticleer and

Pertelote's. The two fowl have a fulfilling sexual relationship-and the sex occurs as a pleasurable, uncomplicated end in itself, a stark contrast with the sexual transactions of the Franklin and the Wife of Bath's tales. In one sense, then, the animals are not so bestial.

Interpreting dreams, incidentally, is a favorite theme of Middle English literature, and it frames a whole genre of poetry, known as "dream poems", of which Chaucer himself wrote several (including the Book of the Duchess and the House of Fame). Dreams and text are closely intertwined, and—even in this tale—the way in which a dream poem juxtaposes the text of the dream with the text of the story is clear. Is a dream any more or less real than a tale? If we can take a moral from a tale, can we take one from a dream?

This tale is in many ways a return to the ground, a return to basics. We start with a poor widow, and a dusty yard—a setting far removed from the high-culture classical tragedies of the Monk. Moreover, the tale keeps emphasizing anality and bottoms - in Chauntecleer's two examples of dreams-coming-true, a dung cart and a breaking ship's "bottom" are the hinge of the story, and Pertelote's advice to Chauntecleer is to take some "laxatyf" to clear out his humours. There is a good-natured sense of groundedness about this tale, a return – after the dark run of Monk (interrupted), before him the punishing Melibee (and interrupted Sir Thopas) and bitter Prioress—to the humour and warmth of the early tales. Yet its theme also darkly foreshadows the end of the tale-telling project itself.

If the tale, taken simplistically, does endorse prophetic dreams (though, as mentioned above, a look at the animal nature of its characters might be seen as parodying the whole concept!) then what is the "moral" that the narrator wants us to take away at the end? As ever, this isn't totally clear. Yet one thing it might be is the importance of speaking or not speaking.

One of the things that makes Chauntecleer the morally-representative chicken a problem is the fact that he can speak and argue with his wife on the one hand, yet cry "cok! Cok!" when he sees a grain on the floor. He is both chicken and human, rather like Chaucer writes as both himself and as Nun's Priest. The tale, however, is structured by people knowing when to speak and not knowing when to speak: Pertelote speaks out to wake Chauntecleer from his dream, Chauntecleer foolishly opens his mouth to sing for the fox when he is captured, and it is Chauntecleer's final visitation of the trap that he himself fell into on the fox which causes him in turn to open his mouth—and let Chauntecleer go. Know when you should "jangle" (chatter) and know when to hold your peace.

It is a theme of course which points a sharp finger at the whole idea of a beast fable—the whole genre, we might argue, resting on the writer precisely ignoring the correct moments to have a character speak or not speak; and it also is a dangerous moral for the Tales as a whole. In a work of literature that constantly apes orality, the injunction to shut up is a serious one—and, as a comparison of the Nun's Priest's Tale to the Manciple's Tale reveals—one very much in Chaucer's mind at the very end of the Canterbury project.

## **17.3 The Second Nun's Tale**

### **17.3.1 The Second Nun's Prologue**

The tale, written in rime royal, begins with an invocation for people to avoid sin and avoid the devil, and then a formal invocation to the Virgin Mary.

There then follows an interpretation of the name of St. Cecilia, the subject of the Second Nun's Tale: in English, the narrator tells us, her name might be expounded as "heaven's lily". The lily might represent the chasteness of Cecilia, or indeed, her white honesty. Or, perhaps her name would be best read as "the way toward understanding", because she was an excellent teacher, or perhaps a conjoined version of "heaven" and "Lia". Cecilia, the prologue concludes, was swift and busy forever in doing good works.

## Notes

## 17.3.2 The Second Nun's Tale Text

Saint Cecilia was by birth a Roman and tutored in the ways of Christ. She dreaded the day that she must marry and give up her virginity. However, she came to be engaged to Valerian. On the day of their wedding, underneath her golden robes, she wore a hairshirt, praying to God that she might remain undefiled.

On their wedding night she told a secret to Valerian: she had an angel lover who, if he believed that Valerian touched her vulgarly, would slay him. Valerian said he would believe her if he could see this angel, and she told him to go to the Via Appia and find Pope Urban among the poor people. Once Urban purged him of his sins, Valerian would be able to see the angel. When he reached Via Appia, Urban suddenly appeared to Valerian and read from the Bible. Another old man, clad in bright white clothes, with a gold-lettered book appeared before Valerian, asking him whether he believed what Cecilia had told him. When he said he did, Pope Urban baptized Valerian and sent him back home.

Returning home, he found the angel with Cecilia. This angel had brought two crowns of flowers from Paradise that will never wilt, and gave one to Cecilia and one to Valerian. The angel claimed that only the pure and chaste would be able to see this crown. Valerian then asked for the angel to bless his brother and make him pure.

This brother, Tibertius, came and can smell, but not see the flowers. Valerian explained his new faith, and eventually tried to persuade his brother to be baptized. Tibertius, however, did not like the idea of being baptized by Urban, whom, he said, would be burnt if people ever found him. Valerian told his brother not to fear death, because there was a better life elsewhere. Cecilia explains the Holy Trinity and other key tenets of Christianity to him, and afterwards, Tibertius agrees to accompany the couple to Pope Urban.



Task

From what cause does St. Cecilia finally die?

Tibertius was baptized and became a perfect Christian—and for some time the three lived happily, God granting their every request. However, the sergeants of the town of Rome sought them, and brought them before Almachius the prefect, who ordered their death. During their execution, one of the sergeants, Maximus, claimed that he saw the spirits of Valerian and Tibertius ascend to heaven. Upon hearing this, many of the witnesses converted to Christianity. For this Almachius had him beaten to death, so Cecilia had him buried alongside Valerian and Tibertius.

Almachius summoned Cecilia, but she refused to appear frightened of him, or bow to his power; and when she was given the choice of forego Christianity or perform a sacrifice, she refused both of her options. She refused to admit any guilt and condemned Almachius for praising false idols. He ordered that she be boiled to death, but she, despite being left all day and night in a bath with fire underneath it, stayed cold – she did not even break a sweat.

Almachius then commanded his servant to slay her in the bath, and, though he struck her three strokes in the neck, he could not decapitate her, and she lay there half-dead. Christians stopped the blood with sheets, and, although she lay there for three days in agony, she never stopped teaching them the Christian faith. She even preached to them, giving them her property and her things, and—after three days—she died, and her body was taken to Pope Urban. He buried her by night among the other saints, and consecrated her church, still worshipped to this day as the church of St. Cecilia.

### Analysis

The Second Nun's Tale is a conventional religious biography, a "saint's life", as the medieval genre it belongs to is often called. Written in rime royal, it is very likely that Chaucer composed the tale

previous to and separate from the Canterbury project, and only adapted it to fit within the Tales later. The Second Nun tells the story of Saint Cecilia in a dry, sanctimonious fashion that exalts her suffering and patient adherence to her faith, and, in a fashion that might be compared to the Prioress' and the Clerk's tales, stresses the patent inhumanity and saintliness of Cecilia from the first moment.

## Self Assessment

Short Answer Type Questions:

1. In what genre is the Nun's Priest's tale written?
2. What is the obvious moral theme?
3. What is the more subtle theme of the story?
4. What is Chanticleer's great fault?
5. Against what is the Monk warning the listeners?
6. Why must the listeners not trust in these things?
7. For what specific refusal is Cecilia condemned to death?
8. Why doesn't the raging fire burn the young wife?

Like the "litel clergeoun" of the Prioress' tale, Cecilia transcends the horrors of the mortal world: she stands against paganism, against false idols, and even against death, and is rewarded by being translated into a saint at the end of the tale. Some critics have recently begun to compare this tale to the Canon Yeoman's tale which follows it, wondering whether Cecilia herself might undergo some sort of transformational alchemical process: though she, unlike the false Canon's trick-coals, is entirely unchanged when heated up.

The tale points to the mythological nature of medieval Christianity. The metaphor of the angelic floral coronets, which only Christians can see, for example, is a physical manifestation of the idea that Christians belong to a City of God, a distinct community with shared values that exists within a secular and often hostile environment. There is perhaps also an interesting thought lurking in the tale about the problematic contradiction (highlighted by the Host in his words to the Monk and the Nun's Priest) that human ministers of God are not allowed to be sexual beings: Cecilia, of course, sets herself apart from the earthlier women of the Tales (the Wife of Bath is the key example) by, right at the start of the tale, professing her distaste for sex.

## 17.4 Summary

- The Monk's tale is a collection of tragedies, designed to advise men not to trust in blind prosperity but be aware that Fortune is fickle and ever-changing.
- The story is that Samson slew one thousand men with an ass's jawbone, then prayed for God to quench his thirst.
- The Monk next tells of Antiochus Epiphanes, who was punished by God for attacks on the Jews.
- The "hound's" colour was somewhere between yellow and red, and his tail and both his ears were tipped with black.
- The lily might represent the chasteness of Cecilia, or indeed, her white honesty.
- Cecilia, the prologue concludes, was swift and busy forever in doing good works.

## 17.5 Keywords

*Injunction* : An authoritative warning.

*Swift* : Happening quickly or promptly.

Notes

*Valerian* : A plant bearing clusters of small pink, red or white flowers.

*Misery* : Great physical or mental distress.

### 17.6 Review Questions

1. How does the description of Harry Bailley's married state fit in with the theme of many of the tales?
2. What is the Host's opinion of the clergy?
3. How has Chaucer altered the traditional plot of this tale?
4. How does Cecilia maintain her virginity in marriage?
5. When do angels appear in the Second Nun's tale?

### **Answers: Self Assessment**

1. It is written as a beast fable.
2. Do not listen to or act upon flattery.
3. Beware the advice of women.
4. He is vain.
5. He warns against trusting in fame and fortune.
6. They are fleeting, they will last only a short time.
7. She will not sacrifice to Jupiter.
8. Cecilia was protected by either divine intervention or a miracle.

### 17.7 Further Readings



*Books*

- |                                      |                    |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------|
| The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales | — Geoffrey Chaucer |
| The Canterbury Tales                 | — Geoffrey Chaucer |
| Geoffrey Chaucer                     | — Harold Bloom     |



*Online links*

- <http://www.pinkmonkey.com/booknotes/monkeynotes/pmCanterbury02.asp>  
<http://www.bookrags.com/notes/ct/index.html>

## Unit 18: The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales (Non-detailed Study): Discussion and Analysis-X

Notes

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### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Explain the prologue and text to the Canon's Yeoman's tale
- Explain the prologue and text to the Manciple tale
- Explain the prologue and text to the Parson's tale
- Describe briefly the analysis of all tales.

### Introduction

In this prologue, for the first time in the links between the tales, something besides conversation actually transpires. New characters come riding in; one stays; the other leaves. The Canon's Yeoman, who remains, reveals himself and his master to be outlaws of sorts, as well as complete shams. Yet, he

Notes

is congenial and anxious to participate in the fun. He tells a biographical tale which appears to be about the Canon. The Canon's Yeoman's Tale is not a typical medieval story. It seems to be a combination of the learning of the day about alchemy, preaching against alchemy, and biography/autobiography about the teller and his master. It is certain that alchemy was widely practiced in England at the time of *The Canterbury Tales* and that the church was strongly opposed to this pseudo-science. Ironically, alchemy was practiced almost exclusively by monks, the only ones with an adequate education in Latin to decipher the ancient texts on the subject.

Unlike the Miller and the Reeve, or the Friar and the Summoner, the Manciple and the Cook do not take their feud beyond the prologue itself. This segment functions merely as an amusing interlude. The story of Phoebus, his unfaithful wife, and the transformation of the crow comes from an ancient origin myth Chaucer must have encountered in the writings of Ovid. As in most myths, the central character is divine. The origin of the modern crow is explained by the god's actions upon the crow of the myth, changing him from white to black.

The theme of the story as it originated dealt with the terrible consequences of marital infidelity; but as in so many of the tales, Chaucer makes a profound change here. As the Manciple concludes, the theme of the tale becomes the foolishness to revealing all and the wisdom of keeping silent. It is appropriate to convey this theme from the mouth of the Manciple when one remembers that the Manciple stopped taunting the Cook for fear of what the Cook could reveal about him.

## **18.1 The Canon's Yeoman's Tale**

### **18.1.1 Prologue to the Canon's Yeoman's Tale**

With the story of Saint Cecilia finished, the company continues on its journey until two men overtake them. One was clad all in black but with a white gown underneath—a Canon—and his horse sweated as if it ridden for three miles. The horse that rides underneath the Canon's Yeoman similarly sweated so much that it could hardly go further. The Canon (the first man) greets the company warmly, and explains that he had hoped to join them; his Yeoman too is extremely courteous.

The Host asks if the Canon can tell a tale, and his Yeoman responds that he knows more than enough about mirth and jollity—and adds that, if the Host knew the Canon as well as he does, he would wonder how he could do some of the things he can. The Canon is, the Yeoman says, a “passyng man” (an outstanding, [or sur-passyng man]). The Host guesses that his master is a clerk, but the Yeoman says that he is something greater, telling him that he could pave all of the ground from here to Canterbury in silver and gold.

The Host is quite amazed, but then asks why—if the Canon is so important—he cares so little for his honor, and dresses so shabbily. The Yeoman seems initially horrified at the question, but then adds in secret that the Canon believes that overdone dress-sense is a vice. The Host asks where the Canon lives, and the Yeoman tells him that it is in hiding places and the back lanes of the suburbs of a town. The Host then turns to the Yeoman himself, asking why his face is so discolored. The Yeoman explains that is because he spends his time blowing in the fire—and then reveals that the Canon and he spend most of their time doing “illusioun”, borrowing money, promising profit and then slipping away.

While the Yeoman was talking, the Canon drew near and heard everything—and chastised him, telling him to hold his peace, and warning him that he was revealing things that should not be revealed. The Host bids the Yeoman to tell on, and when the Canon realized that the Yeoman would not be silenced, he fled. Since his lord is gone, the Yeoman concludes, he will tell the company everything he knows.

### 18.1.2 The Canon Yeoman's Tale Text

Notes

With this Canon, the narrator begins, I have lived for seven years, and yet I am no closer to understanding his science. The "slidyng science", as he calls it, has made him only poor—and, so he argues, it will do to anyone who applies himself to it. The narrator then expounds in detail the processes of alchemy, with reams of scientific terminology, rehearsing an inventory of vessels made of pottery and glass, apparatus like curcubites and alembics, and minerals like arsenic and brimstone.

The narrator then recites the four spirits (volatile substances—which are easily evaporated by heat) and the seven bodies (metals) which, in medieval alchemy, were an almost forerunner to the periodic table. No-one who practices alchemy, the narrator concludes, will profit: he will lose everything he puts into it. No matter how long he sits and learns the terms, he will never gain from it.



*Notes* The narrator then turns on God, saying that though God had given them hope and they had worked hard to discover the philosopher's stone, they had had no luck.

Alchemists, the narrator continues, are liars. The narrator then tells of the reactions some of the metals produce—shattering pots, sinking into the ground, and leaping into the roof; and, he says, when a pot explodes, his master just throws away the elements (even when someone points out that some of the metal has survived) and starts again, despite the money that people have spent to buy the goods. The narrator reveals that—despite any arguments about why the pot might have shattered—the alchemists always seem to get it wrong. Finally, the narrator claims that nothing is what it seems: apples which look nice are not good, men that seem the wisest are the most foolish, and the man who seems most trustworthy is a thief.

### 18.1.3 Et Sequitur Pars Secunda

This is the tale proper of the Canon's Yeoman, and it tells of a Canon whose infinite falsehood and slyness cannot be written. He makes anyone he communicates with behave foolishly, and yet people ride for miles to make his acquaintance, not knowing or suspecting that he is a charlatan.

The narrator then makes a slight aside to apologise to canons in general, claiming that his tale is of one bad canon, but is not representative of all canons, just as Judas was the one traitor among the apostles.

In London, there lived a priest who sung masses for the dead – and one day he was visited by the false Canon, who begged him to lend him a certain amount of gold. The priest obliged him, and, three days later, the Canon returned to pay him back. Expressing gratitude that the Canon has paid him back on time, the priest prompts a speech from the Canon about the importance of "trouthe" and keeping one's word. The Canon then promises to show the priest some of his "maistrie" before he goes. The narrator then comments on the falsehood and dissimulation of the Canon, before apparently addressing the audience of the pilgrimage: "This chanon was my lord, ye wolden weene?" (This canon was my master, you think?). No—this Canon, the narrator tells us, is another Canon, and, even in describing him, the Yeoman's cheeks blush red.

The Canon sent the priest's servant to bring quicksilver and coals, and then took a crucible and showed it to the priest, telling him to put an ounce of quicksilver in there. The priest did as he asked, and they put the crucible into the fire. Yet the false Canon took a fake coal, unseen, which had a hole in it, stopped with wax, which held silver filings. While the priest was wiping the sweat from his face, laid the coal in the furnace just above the crucible. Naturally, the wax melted and the silver filings ran out over the crucible.

## Notes

Next, the Canon told the priest to bring him a chalk stone, promising to make a gold ingot of the same shape. The Canon slyly inserted a metal rod into the chalk, and, when he threw into a bowl of water, the chalk melted away leaving only the silver rod. The priest was delighted, but the Canon decided to prove himself once more. Taking another ounce of quicksilver, the Canon took up a hollow stick, filled at one end with silver filings, and, putting it above the bowl of quicksilver, made it seem as if the silver (from the stick) had been translated from the quicksilver.



Task

What physical disfigurement have the experiments caused the Canon's Yeoman?

Thus by various tricks and schemes, the Canon filches the money from his unsuspecting audience, and charges them huge amounts for his wisdom and his trickery. Moreover, by telling the priest that, if he (the Canon) were caught, he would be killed as a sorcerer, the Canon secured still higher prices for his services.

It is easy, the narrator concludes, for men to take the gold they have and turn it into nothing. Moreover, after cataloguing some authorities (including Arnaldus of Villanova, Hermes Trismegistus, and Plato) who wrote of the philosopher's stone, the narrator firmly concludes that God does not want men to know how to get it—and therefore, we should “let it goon”. If God does not want it discovered, so it should remain.

### Analysis

The Second Nun's Tale is hardly over, when two new characters arrive on the pilgrimage, sweatily riding up behind the pilgrimage and eventually overtaking them. The arrival of the Canon and his Yeoman is such an unusual event—particularly at this point of the *Canterbury Tales*—that the compiler of the Hengwrt manuscript (see “The texts of the Tales” for more information on the manuscripts) actually left it out altogether. It is an unusual construction, and one with “transformation” and “change” as its central themes—not surprisingly, then, it pins down a change already starting to occur within the fabric of the *Tales* as a whole.

Alchemy is the subject of the Canon Yeoman's tale, as he calls it, the “sliding” science: and alchemy argues that all things are in a state of perpetual change, slipping from one thing to another. Coals can become the philosopher's stone, metal melts to become a false covering for a crucifix, and thanks to the trickery of the tale's false Canon, we are never quite sure what substance it is we are examining. Can we ever tell what it is we are looking at—can we ever know the difference between true and false?

The Canon himself is a mysterious, imposing and peripheral figure, and one who, at the very moment his falsehood appears to be rumbled, runs away from the company, and from the *Tales*—for good. He is almost silent, and yet his silence is not (like Chaucer's) from shyness, or from high-status-clad in a hooded black robe, with a glimpse of white underneath, he even physically appears shrouded and covered up. Moreover, we never actually ascertain whether the Yeoman's tale is about this Canon, or—as he claims—about another Canon. It seems hugely improbable, even to take the Yeoman's words at face value (and the tale offers other warnings about doing that!), that the Yeoman would have this amount of knowledge about an entirely different Canon. The Canon then is a liminal figure, sitting somewhere on the border between reality and fiction, between true and false.

His Yeoman too starts his literary life as his advocate: praising the Canon as an extraordinary, wonderful, skilled man, before immediately retracting all that praise (almost without any provocation) to unmask his master as the tricky charlatan he is. Yet this casts huge doubt on the veracity of what the Yeoman actually utters—there is a big difference between his initial claim that the Canon could pave the way to Canterbury with gold, and the portrait of the Canon built up in his tale. Moreover, the sweating arrival of the pair (their horses are so wet that they can hardly move),

combined with the all-black Canon and blushing-red Yeoman suggests that even the characters within the frame narrative of the Tales are undergoing some sort of alchemical transformation. There is a sliding transformation in what the characters actually say and think—but this is backed up in the visual metaphor of them being physically “slydinge”.

The central image of the Canon Yeoman’s tale is the devilish furnace at the center of their back-street workshop, and (rather like the alchemical/furnace imagery in Jonson’s *The Alchemist*) it is a complex metaphor: for hell, for devilish behavior—and falseness, but also for money. As the Pardoner argued in his tale, money is the root of all evil: and yet, unlike the slight comeuppance the Pardoner is served with by the Host at the end of his tale, justice is entirely absent from the denouement of the Canon Yeoman’s tale. The last furnace we saw in the Tales was Gervays’ in *The Miller’s Tale*—a timely reminder, perhaps, of the neat interclicking justice of Absolon’s branding Nicholas. Neither the Canon nor his Yeoman receives any sort of narrative punishment.

## Self Assessment

Short Answer Type Questions:

1. In what way is the prologue to the Canon’s tale different from others in the Canterbury tales?
2. What is alchemy?
3. What is always the outcome of alchemy?
4. According to the Canon’s Yeoman, what keeps people involved in the practice of alchemy?

Yet the way that this timely reminder of the profitability of falsehood intrudes upon the Tale also points to the complex narrative problem of the Pardoner’s tale: just in the way that the Pardoner’s hollow words and empty bones could bring people to salvation, so too can the Canon’s trickery actually make him money—and, moreover, the Canon’s Yeoman can supposedly turn this experience into a moral tale for the company to listen to. Of what substance is a tale made? Can a tale acknowledge the desire for gold and the ingenuity of the misdemeanors of those who pursue gold without endorsing them? As it is reaching its conclusion, the pilgrimage is waylaid by another pertinent reminder of the tale-telling project and its questionable substance.



*Did u know?* Tales, as Chaucer will admit in the retraction, and language, are not always innocent.

## 18.2 The Manciple’s Tale

### 18.2.1 Prologue to the Manciple’s Tale

The Host turns to the sleeping cook, and asks whether any man might be able to wake him. Awaking, pale and unalert, the Cook proclaims that he would rather sleep than have some of the best wine in Cheapside. The Manciple steps in courteously, excusing the cook, and then mocking him – his open mouth, which the devil could put his foot in, his stinking breath – to his face for his drunkenness. The Cook is furious, but too drunk to speak, and promptly falls off his horse. Everyone lifts him up out of the mud, and the Host addresses the Manciple, telling him that the Cook is too drunk to tell a tale, and has more than enough to do keeping himself out of the mud and on his horse.

However, adds the Host, it is a folly to openly mock the Cook to his face, for one day he might have his revenge, and “quit” the Manciple’s words. “No”, says the Manciple, and produces a draught of

## Notes

wine, which he gives to the Cook to drink, with the result that the Cook thanks him generously. Everyone is much amused, and the Host comments that good drink turns rancor into love, blessing Bacchus, god of wine. He then asks the Manciple to tell his tale.

### 18.2.2 The Manciple's Tale Text

When Phoebus, god of poetry, lived on earth, he was the lustiest of bachelors, a superior archer and the envy of all for his singing and playing on his musical instruments. Phoebus kept in his house a white crow, which could imitate the speech of any man, and who could sing more beautifully than a nightingale.

Phebus also had a wife, whom he loved more than his own life, and did his best to please her and treat her courteously—except that he was extremely jealous, and so would watch her suspiciously. Guarding a wife so closely, the narrator reminds us cynically, is pointless—if she is faithful, there is no need to do so, but if she is unfaithful no amount of monitoring will keep her faithful. Take any bird, he says, and put it in a cage—and no matter how gilded the cage and how good the treatment, the bird would still twenty thousand times rather go and eat worms in a forest. Animals, the narrator insists, can never be trained to be unanimalistic. So do men, the logic continues, always have a lecherous appetite to sleep with someone socially lower than their wives. Flesh is fond of novelty.



Task

Why is it appropriate for the Manciple to tell this particular tale?

This Phoebus, though he had no idea of it, was deceived: his wife had another man, “of litel reputacioun”, hardly worth comparing with Phoebus himself. One day when Pheobus was away, she sent for her “lemman” (lover—a word the narrator takes some pains to reject having said). The white crow saw their “working” together, and said nothing until Phoebus returned home, when the crow sang “Cokkow! Cokkow!” (Cuckold! Cuckold!).



Notes

Pheobus initially thought the bird sang a song he did not recognize, but the crow clarified that his wife had had sex with a man of little reputation on his bed.

Phoebus thought his heart burst in two—he took his bow, set an arrow to it and murdered his wife, and for sorrow of that, destroyed his harp, lute, cithern and psaltry, snapping too his arrows and his bow. Then he turned to the crow, calling it a traitor, mourning his wife, and accused the crow of lying to him - and then, to “quite anon thy false tale”, pulled out every one of the crow’s white feathers, made him black and took away his song and his speech, slinging him out of the door and leaving him to the devil. It is for this reason that all crows are black.

The narrator turns to his audience, and tells them to be aware of what they say—never tell a man that he is a cuckold because he will hate the messenger. One must think on the crow and hold one’s tongue.

### Self Assessment

Short Answer Type Questions:

5. Into what genre does the Manciple’s tale fall?
6. How does the Cook calmed and persuaded not to argue further with the Manciple?
7. How does the behavior of Phoebus wife relate her to other women in the tales?

## Analysis

## Notes

There is something hugely destructive—and self-destructive—about this tale, and particularly the way it takes the god of poetry, himself a plausible representative for the whole idea of the Tales themselves, and turns him into a petty, jealous murderer. The Manciple's Tale is almost painfully brief—not given to flights of fancy, we are given the simple information—jealous husband, unfaithful wife, talking crow, and then destruction, of wife, of crow, and of poetry.

The Manciple's Tale is also a cousin, though a darker cousin, of the Nun's Priest's Tale, and it seems likely, at least, at first, that a tale about a talking crow and the mythical god of poetry will be another fantastical beast fable—the genre leads us to expect the happily ending exploits of another Chaunticleer. Yet what actually happens is a bitter shift in tone—the happy, metaphorical beginning of the tale falls through into a painful reality. The god of poetry is a jealous human, and the white-feathered beautiful-voiced talking crow becomes the black, hollow-voiced harbinger of doom of reality. The tale brings the reader back to earth with a bump, and its reminder is clear: know when to fall silent. Know when not to speak, when not to tell.

And “tell” is an appropriate verb to raise—like Chaucer himself, the crow can counterfeit the speech of every man. The crow, in other words, is a veritable Canterbury poet himself—and what this tale teaches him, through physical suffering, is that some subjects are simply not to be told. Chaucer, in the Retraction, raises the worry that the Tales are sinful or blasphemous, and the moral “hold your tongue” could not simply be the message of the final Tales, but a thought a nervously religious Chaucer was increasingly coming to find in his own mind. Telling, in other words, has its limits—and it is better to stop before there are real consequences to it. As the final real “tale” (discounting the Parson's sermon) of the Tales, it makes for a bleak, but unmistakable end.

## 18.3 The Parson's Tale and Chaucer's Retraction

### 18.3.1 The Parson's Prologue

By the time the Manciple's tale had finished, the sun had set low in the sky. The Host, pronouncing his initial degree fulfilled, turns to the Parson to “knytte up wel a greet mateere” (conclude a huge matter) and tell the final tale. The Parson answered that he would tell no fable—for Paul, writing to Timothy, reproved people who turned aside from the truth and told fables and other such wretchedness.

What the Parson promises is morality and virtuous matters—and jokes that he does not know of the alliterative poetry tradition of the South. He leaves his tale, he says, to clerks, for he himself is not “textueel”. Everyone agreed that it was the best way to end the project, and asked the Host to give the Parson the instruction to tell the final tale. The Host did so, hasting the Parson to tell his tale before the sun went down.

### 18.3.2 The Parson's Tale Text

The Parson's tale is not actually a tale as such, but a lengthy medieval sermon on the subject of penitence. The first part of his sermon defines the three parts of penitence—contrition, confession and satisfaction, and expounds at length (with several biblical examples) the causes of the contrition.

The second part of the sermon considers confession, which is the truthful revelation of the sinner's sin to the priest. Sin is then explained as the eventual product of a struggle between the body and soul for dominance of a person—and therefore there are two types of sin: venial (minor, smaller sins) and deadly (serious sins).

The third part of the sermon considers each of the seven deadly sins as branches of a tree of which Pride is the trunk. Pride is the worst of the sins, because the other sins (Ire, Envy, Sloth, Avarice, Gluttony and Lechery) all stem from Pride. Each sin's description is followed by its spiritual remedy—and the Parson states the rules for oral confession.

## Notes

There are a number of conditions to penitence, including the intensity of the sin committed, the haste to contrition and the number of times the sin was committed. The fruit of this penitence is goodness and redemption in Christ. Following this short return to the subjects of penitence (and satisfaction), the final lines seem to suggest, by way of images of the sun and the morning, a vision of Paradise: bodies which were foul and dark become brighter than the sun, the body, formerly sick and feeble, becomes immortal and whole, and in a place where no-one feels hunger, thirst or cold, but is replenished by the perfect knowledge of God. This paradise, the final lines of the tale conclude, is only attainable through spiritual poverty and by avoiding sin.

Retraction: "Heere taketh the makere of this book his leve"

The narrator, speaking in the first person, prays to everyone that reads this "litel tretys" (little treatise – probably the Parson's tale) that, if they like anything they read in it, they thank Jesus Christ. If they find anything that displeases them, moreover, they are to put it down to the narrator's ignorance, and not to his will—he would have written better, if only he had the cunning.



*Task* At what stage of the journey is the parson's tale presented?

The narrator then asks the reader to pray for him that Christ has mercy on his sins and forgives him in his trespasses, and particularly of his translations of worldly vanities: the book of Troilus, the book of Fame, the book of the twenty-five ladies, the book of the Duchess, the book of the Parliament of Birds, and the tales of Canterbury—those that "sownen into synne" (tend toward sin).

However, the narrator thanks Christ for his translation of the Boece and other books of saint's legends and homilies, hoping that Christ will grant him grace of penitence, confession and satisfaction, through the benign grace of the King of Kings, so that he may be "oon of hem at the day of doom that shulle be saved" (one of them at the day of doom who shall be saved).



*Did u know?* The book ends with a short Latin prayer and Amen, before announcing that the book "of the tales of Caunterbury, compiled by Geffrey Chaucer" has ended, adding "of whos soule Jhesu Crist have mercy".

### Analysis

One of the biggest questions about the Tales as a whole is precisely how they end. Throughout his works, and even within the Tales (look, for example, at the interruptions of Sir Thopas and the Monk's tales) Chaucer proves that he knows how to create a false ending, a trick ending, which ends by not ending, by not concluding. The Canterbury Tales ends on a decidedly pious and religious note, first with the Parson's lengthy sermon, and then with a retraction written as "Chaucer". The Parson's sermon, a translation from a medieval work designed to advise clergy in the salvation of souls, would be a plausible medieval sermon—there seems nothing in it that is ironic: it is a perfect example of its genre.

### Self Assessment

Short Answer Type Questions:

8. What kind of story were the Host and the pilgrims expecting from the Parson?
9. Why does the Parson refuse to tell a fable?
10. In what genre is the Parson's tale written?

Yet can the Parson's sermon seem anything other than just another genre? In a work which has anthologized genres—we have already read beast fables, saint's lives, fabliaux, Breton lays, and all manner of other stories—and problematised them, drawing attention to their speaker's voice as something (as the Pardoner points out) ventriloquized, can we really be expected to take the Parson's voice seriously?

Critics disagree wildly about the answer to this question. The same problem applies to Chaucer's retraction—which, as in the Man of Law's prologue, blurs the line between the Chaucer writing the Tales (who has also written the Book of the Duchess, Troilus and Criseyde, and so on) and the fictional Chaucer who is a character within the pilgrimage. Is the Chaucer who writes these tales just another constructed voice?

Or, perhaps, is the Retraction of the tales a genuine one? Chaucer, in this theory, genuinely was dying and was unable to finish the work—or for some reason, felt the need to immediately retract it, as he genuinely believed that it did come too close to sin. Thus, before the Host's plan was complete, he concluded the tale with a pious sermon and then a Retraction: no-one could therefore accuse the Tales of being unchristian. Is it a death-bed confession?

A Retraction is a fairly usual way for a medieval work to end, and perhaps that points us to the aforementioned effect: its very normality is perhaps a clue that Chaucer's intention is not pure and simple. For it could be read simply as another "funny voice"—the voice of the Chaucer who told Sir Thopas: could be read as comedy rather than penance. Moreover, as E.T. Donaldson has firmly stated, the use of the Parson's Tale as an interpretative key to unlock the whole of the Tales is problematic, particularly when you consider the deliberate religious provocation of tales like the Miller's, the Wife of Bath's and the Merchant's. The tales by no means seem to be written to a purely Christian agenda—though Christianity is undoubtedly a key theme.

End-points in Chaucer are difficult to definitively interpret, and perhaps this dichotomy was intended by Chaucer himself. Perhaps this ending is simply one way of closing down the Tales—the Manciple's tale, of course, has been only the most recent in a line of tales which reiterate the advice of these final fragments to hold one's peace, and know when to fall silent. Is this Chaucer, on an imaginary, real or literary deathbed, punningly, holding his peace, but also being "at peace"? One thing is for sure: understanding the ending of the Tales seems a fitting encapsulation of the complex problem of interpreting the work as a whole.

## 18.4 Summary

- The Host is quite amazed, but then asks why—if the Canon is so important—he cares so little for his honor, and dresses so shabbily.
- The Host then turns to the Yeoman himself, asking why his face is so discolored.
- In London, there lived a priest who sung masses for the dead – and one day he was visited by the false Canon, who begged him to lend him a certain amount of gold.
- Next, the Canon told the priest to bring him a chalk stone, promising to make a gold ingot of the same shape.
- The Host did so, hasting the Parson to tell his tale before the sun went down.

## 18.5 Keywords

*Horried* : Full with horror.

*Shabbily* : Dressed in old or worn clothes.

*Ingot* : A rectangular block of steel, gold or other metal.

*Sling* : A sweetened drink of spirits, especially gin and water.

Notes

### **18.6 Review Questions**

1. By whom was alchemy practiced and why was its practice confined to this group?
2. What angers the pilgrim Canon? What does he do because of his anger?
3. Describe the two tricks the alchemist employs to dupe the priest in the Canon's Yeoman's tale.
4. What did phoebus crow look like before he was cursed?
5. What requirement necessitated the clergy to instruct the laity about penitence?

### **Answers: Self Assessment**

1. It contains action, the Canon and his Yeoman ride up to join the travelers.
2. The attempt to transmute base metals into gold.
3. Alchemy always fails.
4. They keep hoping that the next time they will be successful.
5. It is based in myth.
6. He is given more wine.
7. There are several unfaithful wives in the various tales.
8. They were expecting a merry tale.
9. He says he will not hide his message in a lowly fable.
10. It is a sermon.

### **18.7 Further Readings**



*Books*

- |                                      |                    |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------|
| The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales | — Geoffrey Chaucer |
| The Canterbury Tales                 | — Geoffrey Chaucer |
| Geoffrey Chaucer                     | — Harold Bloom     |



*Online links*

- <http://www.pinkmonkey.com/booknotes/monkeynotes/pmCanterbury02.asp>  
<http://www.bookrags.com/notes/ct/index.html>

## Unit 19: John Milton—Paradise Lost

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### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Know about the text and author of Paradise Lost
- Explain the prologue and invocation of Paradise Lost.

### Introduction

Paradise Lost is an epic poem in blank verse by the 17th-century English poet John Milton. It was originally published in 1667 (though written nearly ten years earlier) in ten books, with a total of over ten thousand individual lines of verse. A second edition followed in 1674, redivided into twelve books (in the manner of the division of Virgil's Aeneid) with minor revisions throughout and a note on the versification; most of the poem was written while Milton was blind, and was transcribed for him.

The poem concerns the Christian story of the Fall of Man: the temptation of Adam and Eve by the fallen angel Satan and their expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Milton's purpose, stated in Book I, is to "justify the ways of God to men" and elucidate the conflict between God's eternal foresight and free will. Although the primary event in the epic is about the Fall of Man, the character Satan serves as an anti-hero and as a prominent driving force in the plot.



*Notes* Milton depiction has fascinated critics, some of which have interpreted Paradise Lost as a poem questioning the church's power rather than only a description of the fall of Adam and Eve.

## Notes

Milton incorporates Paganism, classical mythology, and Christianity into the poem. While Milton's principal goal in the work is to give a compelling Theodicy, he nevertheless deals with a range of topics, from marriage to politics (Milton was politically active during the time of the English Civil War). Many difficult theological issues are deliberately addressed, including fate, predestination, the Trinity, the introduction of sin and death into the world, as well as the nature of angels, fallen angels, Satan and the war in heaven. Milton draws on his knowledge of languages, and diverse sources—primarily Genesis, much of the New Testament, the deuterocanonical Book of Enoch, and other parts of the Old Testament. Milton's epic is often considered one of the greatest literary works in the English language, along with those of Shakespeare.

## 19.1 Paradise Lost-I: Introduction to the Author and the Text

### 19.1.1 Introduction to the Text

John Milton was born on December 9, 1608, around the time Shakespeare began writing his romance plays (*Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, *The Tempest*) and John Smith established his colony at Jamestown. Milton's father was a scrivener and, perhaps more importantly, a devout Puritan, who had been disinherited by his Roman Catholic family when he turned Protestant. In April 1625, just after the accession of Charles I, he matriculated at Christ's College, Cambridge. During these years, Milton considered entering the ministry, but his poetic ambitions always seemed to take precedence over his ministerial aspirations.

Milton composed his early verse in Latin, in the fashion of a classically educated person. As soon as his third year at Cambridge, however, he expressed his desire to abandon such fashionable poetry in order to write in his native tongue. Unlike the learned classicists of his day, who imitated Greek and Latin versification, Milton sought to rehabilitate the English poetic tradition by establishing it as an extension or flowering of the classical tradition. He saw himself as a poet whose lineage extended, through the Romans, back to the Greeks. Like Homer and Virgil before him, Milton would be the epic poet of the English nation.

The poetic vocation to which Milton was heir is both nationalistic and religious in character. The epic poet chronicles the religious history of a people; he plays the role of prophet-historian. Hence, as Milton wrote in a letter to Charles Diodati, "the bard is sacred to the gods; he is their priest, and both his heart and lips mysteriously breathe the indwelling Jove." A sense of religiosity and patriotism drive Milton's work. On the one hand, he felt that he could best serve God by following his vocation as a poet. His poetry would, on the other hand, serve England by putting before it noble and religious ideas in the highest poetic form. In other words, Milton sought to write poetry which, if not directly or overtly didactic, would serve to teach delightfully. The body of work emerging from these twin impulses - one religious, the other political-witnesses his development as (or into) a Christian poet and a national bard. Finally, it is in *Paradise Lost* that Milton harmonizes his two voices as a poet and becomes the Christian singer, as it were, of epic English poems.



*Task* Write a note on the poem, *Paradise Lost*.

It should be noted, then, that in *Paradise Lost* Milton was not only justifying God's ways to humans in general; he was justifying His ways to the English people between 1640 and 1660. That is, he was telling them why they had failed to establish the good society by deposing the king, and why they had welcomed back the monarchy. Like Adam and Eve, they had failed through their own weaknesses, their own lack of faith, their own passions and greed, their own sin. God was not to blame for humanity's expulsion from Eden, nor was he to blame for the trials and corruption that befell England during the time of the Commonwealth under Oliver Cromwell. The failure of the

Puritan revolution was tantamount, for Milton, to the people's failure to govern themselves according to the will of God, rather than of a royal despot. England had had the opportunity to become an instrument of God's plan, but ultimately failed to realize itself as the New Israel. *Paradise Lost* was more than a work of art. Indeed, it was a moral and political treatise, a poetic explanation for the course that English history had taken.

Milton began *Paradise Lost* in 1658 and finished in 1667. He wrote very little of the poem in his own hand, for he was blind throughout much of the project. Instead, Milton would dictate the poem to an amanuensis, who would read it back to him so that he could make necessary revisions. Milton's daughters later described their father being like a cow ready for milking, pacing about his room until the amanuensis arrived to "unburden" him of the verse he had stored in his mind.

Milton claimed to have dreamed much of *Paradise Lost* through the nighttime agency of angelic muses. Besides lending itself to mythologization, his blindness accounts for at least one troubling aspect of the poem: its occasional inconsistencies of plot. Because he could not read the poem back to himself, Milton had to rely on his memory of previous events in the narrative, which sometimes proved faulty.

Putting its infrequent (and certainly minor) plot defects aside, *Paradise Lost* is nothing short of a poetic masterpiece. Along with Shakespeare's plays, Milton's *Paradise Lost* is the most influential poem in English literature as well as being a basis for or proof-text of modern poetic theory.

### 19.1.2 Introduction to the Author

John Milton was born in London in 1608 at the height of the Protestant Reformation in England. His father was a law writer who had achieved some success by the time Milton was born. This prosperity afforded Milton an excellent education, first with private tutoring, then a private school, and finally Cambridge. Milton, a studious boy, excelled in languages and classical studies.

His father had left Roman Catholicism and Milton was raised Protestant, with a heavy tendency toward Puritanism. As a student, he wanted to go into the ministry, but was disillusioned with the scholastic elements of the clergy at Cambridge. Cambridge, however, afforded him time to write poetry. After Cambridge, he continued his studies for seven years in a leisurely life at his father's house. It was here that he wrote some of his first published poems, including "Comus" (1634) and "Lycidas" (1638), both of which he published in 1645.

Milton toured the European continent in 1638-1639 and met many of the great Renaissance minds, including Galileo and Grotius. The beginning of the Puritan Revolution found Milton back in England, fighting for a more humanist and reformed church. For more than twenty years, Milton set aside poetry to write political and religious pamphlets for the cause of Puritanism. For a time, he served as Secretary for Foreign Tongues under Cromwell.

Milton was a mixed product of his time. On the one hand, as a humanist, he fought for religious tolerance and believed that there was something inherently valuable in man. As a Puritan, however, he believed that the Bible was the answer and the guide to all, even if it went against democracy itself. Where the Bible didn't afford an answer, Milton would turn to reason.

Milton himself was married three times, all of which were rather unhappy affairs. He defended divorce in "The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce" in 1643. With this and other treatises, Milton often came in conflict with the Puritanism he advocated.

At the end of the war, Milton was imprisoned for a short time for his views. In 1660, he emerged blind and disillusioned with the England he saw around him.

Nevertheless, he was yet to write his greatest work. *Paradise Lost* was published in 1667, followed by *Paradise Regained* in 1671. Milton's ability to combine his poetry with his polemics in these and other works, were the key to his genius.

**Notes**

The classical influences in his work can be clearly delineated: Homer, Ovid, but especially Virgil. Shakespeare was the leading playwright of his day, and there are some references to his works in Milton's own poetry. The style and structure of the Spenser's "The Faerie Queen," was another influence on *Paradise Lost*. It was one of only a few books that were owned by the Milton's during John's upbringing. Milton died from "gout" in 1674 and was buried in the Church of St. Giles in London.

## **19.2 Paradise Lost-I: Importance of Prologue**

### **19.2.1 Prologue and Invocation**

Milton opens *Paradise Lost* by formally declaring his poem's subject: humankind's first act of disobedience toward God, and the consequences that followed from it. The act is Adam and Eve's eating of the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, as told in Genesis, the first book of the Bible. In the first line, Milton refers to the outcome of Adam and Eve's sin as the "fruit" of the forbidden tree, punning on the actual apple and the figurative fruits of their actions. Milton asserts that this original sin brought death to human beings for the first time, causing us to lose our home in paradise until Jesus comes to restore humankind to its former position of purity.

Milton's speaker invokes the muse, a mystical source of poetic inspiration, to sing about these subjects through him, but he makes it clear that he refers to a different muse from the muses who traditionally inspired classical poets by specifying that his muse inspired Moses to receive the Ten Commandments and write Genesis. Milton's muse is the Holy Spirit, which inspired the Christian Bible, not one of the nine classical muses who reside on Mount Helicon—the "Aonian mount" of l.15. He says that his poem, like his muse, will fly above those of the Classical poets and accomplish things never attempted before, because his source of inspiration is greater than theirs. Then he invokes the Holy Spirit, asking it to fill him with knowledge of the beginning of the world, because the Holy Spirit was the active force in creating the universe.

Milton's speaker announces that he wants to be inspired with this sacred knowledge because he wants to show his fellow man that the fall of humankind into sin and death was part of God's greater plan, and that God's plan is justified.

### **Analysis**

The beginning of *Paradise Lost* is similar in gravity and seriousness to the book from which Milton takes much of his story: the Book of Genesis, the first book of the Bible. The Bible begins with the story of the world's creation, and Milton's epic begins in a similar vein, alluding to the creation of the world by the Holy Spirit. The first two sentences, or twenty-six lines, of *Paradise Lost* are extremely compressed, containing a great deal of information about Milton's reasons for writing his epic, his subject matter, and his attitudes toward his subject. In these two sentences, Milton invokes his muse, which is actually the Holy Spirit rather than one of the nine muses. By invoking a muse, but differentiating it from traditional muses, Milton manages to tell us quite a lot about how he sees his project. In the first place, an invocation of the muse at the beginning of an epic is conventional, so Milton is acknowledging his awareness of Homer, Virgil, and later poets, and signaling that he has mastered their format and wants to be part of their tradition. But by identifying his muse as the divine spirit that inspired the Bible and created the world, he shows that his ambitions go far beyond joining the club of Homer and Virgil. Milton's epic will surpass theirs, drawing on a more fundamental source of truth and dealing with matters of more fundamental importance to human beings. At the same time, however, Milton's invocation is extremely humble, expressing his utter dependence on God's grace in speaking through him. Milton thus begins his poem with a mixture of towering ambition and humble self-effacement, simultaneously tipping his hat to his poetic forebears and promising to soar above them for God's glorification.

## Self Assessment

## Notes

State the following sentences are True or False:

1. William Shakespeare was the author of the poem, Paradise Lost.
2. The poem concerns the Christian story of the fall of woman.
3. Milton was politically active during the time of the English civil war.
4. Grotius would be the epic poet of the English nation.
5. John Milton was born on December 7, 1608.
6. Milton was met many of the great Renaissance minds including Galileo and Grotius during his tour in 1638-39.
7. Paradise Lost was published in 1667.
8. The Iliad and the Aeneid are the great epic poems of Greek and Latin.

Milton's approach to the invocation of the muse, in which he takes a classical literary convention and reinvents it from a Christian perspective, sets the pattern for all of Paradise Lost. For example, when he catalogs the prominent devils in Hell and explains the various names they are known by and which cults worshipped them, he makes devils of many gods whom the Greeks, Ammonites, and other ancient peoples worshipped. In other words, the great gods of the classical world have become—according to Milton—fallen angels. His poem purports to tell of these gods' original natures, before they infected humankind in the form of false gods. Through such comparisons with the classical epic poems, Milton is quick to demonstrate that the scope of his epic poem is much greater than those of the classical poets, and that his worldview and inspiration is more fundamentally true and all-encompassing than theirs. The setting, or world, of Milton's epic is large enough to include those smaller, classical worlds. Milton also displays his world's superiority while reducing those classical epics to the level of old, nearly forgotten stories. For example, the nine muses of classical epics still exist on Mount Helicon in the world of Paradise Lost, but Milton's muse haunts other areas and has the ability to fly above those other, less-powerful classical Muses.



*Did u know?* Milton both makes himself the authority on antiquity and subordinates it to his Christian worldview.

The Iliad and the Aeneid are the great epic poems of Greek and Latin, respectively, and Milton emulates them because he intends Paradise Lost to be the first English epic. Milton wants to make glorious art out of the English language the way the other epics had done for their languages. Not only must a great epic be long and poetically well-constructed, its subject must be significant and original, its form strict and serious, and its aims noble and heroic. In Milton's view, the story he will tell is the most original story known to man, as it is the first story of the world and of the first human beings. Also, while Homer and Virgil only chronicled the journey of heroic men, like Achilles or Aeneas, Milton chronicles the tragic journey of all men—the result of humankind's disobedience. Milton goes so far as to say that he hopes to “justify,” or explain, God's mysterious plan for humankind. Homer and Virgil describe great wars between men, but Milton tells the story of the most epic battle possible: the battle between God and Satan, good and evil.

## 19.3 Summary

- Paradise Lost is an epic poem in blank verse by the 17th-century English poet John Milton.
- The poem concerns the Christian story of the Fall of Man: the temptation of Adam and Eve by the fallen angel Satan and their expulsion from the Garden of Eden.

**Notes**

- Milton composed his early verse in Latin, in the fashion of a classically educated person.
- The epic poet chronicles the religious history of a people; he plays the role of prophet-historian.
- Milton toured the European continent in 1638-1639 and met many of the great Renaissance minds, including Galileo and Grotius.
- Milton opens Paradise Lost by formally declaring his poem's subject: humankind's first act of disobedience toward God, and the consequences that followed from it.

**19.4 Keywords**

- Epic* : A long poem narrating the deeds of heroic or legendary figures or the past history of a nation.
- Paganism* : A person holding religious beliefs other than those of the main world religions.
- Gout* : A disease in which defective metabolism of uric acid causes arthritis, especially in the smaller bones of the feet.
- Spirit* : The non-physical part of a person which is the seat of emotions and character.

**19.5 Review Questions**

1. Write an essay on the biography of John Milton.
2. Discuss the introduction to the text of Paradise Lost-I.
3. Describe the importance of prologue-Paradise Lost-I.

**Answers: Self Assessment**

- |          |          |         |
|----------|----------|---------|
| 1. False | 2. False | 3. True |
| 4. False | 5. False | 6. True |
| 7. True  | 8. True  |         |

**19.6 Further Readings**



*Books*

- Paradise Lost I (Non-detailed study) — John Milton  
John Milton Paradise Lost — John Milton  
John Milton: a short Introduction — Roy Flannagan



*Online links*

- <http://www.bookrags.com/notes/pl/index.html>  
<http://pinkmonkey.com/booknotes/barrons/paradis02.asp>

## Unit 20: Paradise Lost-I (Non-detailed Study): Discussion and Analysis-I

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20.4.1 Summary: Prologue and Invocation

20.5 Summary

20.6 Keywords

20.7 Review Questions

20.8 Further Readings

### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Explain prologue and invocation of Paradise Lost Book I-IV
- Describe briefly summary and analysis of Book I-IV.

### Introduction

Book I of *Paradise Lost* begins with a prologue in which Milton performs the traditional epic task of invoking the Muse and stating his purpose. He invokes the classical muse, Urania but also refers to her as the "Heavly muse" implying the christian nature of this work. He also says that the poem will deal with man's disobedience toward God and the results of that disobedience. He concludes the prologue by saying he will attempt to justify God's ways to men.

Book II divides into two large sections. The first is the debate among the devils concerning the proper course of action. The second section deals with Satan's voyage out of Hell with Sin and Death—the only extended allegory in *Paradise Lost*. The council of demons that begins Book II recalls

## Notes

the many assemblies of heroes in both the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*. Further the debates also seem based on the many meetings that Milton attended in his various official capacities. In his speech, each devil reveals both the characteristics of his personality and the type of evil he represents. For example, Moloch, the first to speak, is the unthinking man of action. Like Diomedes in the *Iliad*, he is not adept in speech, but he does know how to fight. He is for continued war and unconcerned about the consequences.

Book III opens with a prologue, often called “The Prologue to Light,” that is addressed to the “holy light” of God and Heaven. In this prologue, Milton asks for God’s light to shine inwardly so that he can reveal what no man has seen. The scene of Book III now shifts from heaven to Satan who has landed on the border between Earth and Chaos. From this seat in darkness, Satan sees a light and moves toward it. The light is a golden stairway leading to heaven. From this new vantage point, Satan views the magnificence of the Earth and of the beautiful sun that illumines it. As Satan moves toward the sun, he sees the archangel Uriel and quickly transforms himself into a cherub. Satan deceives Uriel and asks where Man may be found. Uriel directs Satan toward Earth.

In the opening section of Book IV, Satan talks to himself, and for the first time, the reader is allowed to hear the inner workings of the demon’s mind. This opening passage is very similar to a soliloquy in a Shakespearean drama, and Milton uses it for the same effect. Traditionally, the soliloquy was a speech given by a character alone on the stage in which his innermost thoughts are revealed. Thoughts expressed in a soliloquy were accepted as true because the speaker has no motive to lie to himself. The soliloquy then provided the dramatist a means to explain the precise motivations and mental processes of a character. Milton uses Satan’s opening soliloquy in Book IV for the same purpose.

## 20.1 Book – I

### 20.1.1 Summary: Lines 1–26: Prologue and Invocation

Milton opens *Paradise Lost* by formally declaring his poem’s subject: humankind’s first act of disobedience toward God, and the consequences that followed from it. The act is Adam and Eve’s eating of the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, as told in *Genesis*, the first book of the Bible. In the first line, Milton refers to the outcome of Adam and Eve’s sin as the “fruit” of the forbidden tree, punning on the actual apple and the figurative fruits of their actions. Milton asserts that this original sin brought death to human beings for the first time, causing us to lose our home in paradise until Jesus comes to restore humankind to its former position of purity.

Milton’s speaker invokes the muse, a mystical source of poetic inspiration, to sing about these subjects through him, but he makes it clear that he refers to a different muse from the muses who traditionally inspired classical poets by specifying that his muse inspired Moses to receive the Ten Commandments and write *Genesis*. Milton’s muse is the Holy Spirit, which inspired the Christian Bible, not one of the nine classical muses who reside on Mount Helicon—the “Aonian mount” of *I.15*. He says that his poem, like his muse, will fly above those of the Classical poets and accomplish things never attempted before, because his source of inspiration is greater than theirs. Then he invokes the Holy Spirit, asking it to fill him with knowledge of the beginning of the world, because the Holy Spirit was the active force in creating the universe.



*Notes* Milton’s speaker announces that he wants to be inspired with this sacred knowledge because he wants to show his fellow man that the fall of humankind into sin and death was part of God’s greater plan, and that God’s plan is justified.

## Analysis

## Notes

The beginning of *Paradise Lost* is similar in gravity and seriousness to the book from which Milton takes much of his story: the Book of Genesis, the first book of the Bible. The Bible begins with the story of the world's creation, and Milton's epic begins in a similar vein, alluding to the creation of the world by the Holy Spirit. The first two sentences, or twenty-six lines, of *Paradise Lost* are extremely compressed, containing a great deal of information about Milton's reasons for writing his epic, his subject matter, and his attitudes toward his subject. In these two sentences, Milton invokes his muse, which is actually the Holy Spirit rather than one of the nine muses. By invoking a muse, but differentiating it from traditional muses, Milton manages to tell us quite a lot about how he sees his project. In the first place, an invocation of the muse at the beginning of an epic is conventional, so Milton is acknowledging his awareness of Homer, Virgil, and later poets, and signaling that he has mastered their format and wants to be part of their tradition. But by identifying his muse as the divine spirit that inspired the Bible and created the world, he shows that his ambitions go far beyond joining the club of Homer and Virgil. Milton's epic will surpass theirs, drawing on a more fundamental source of truth and dealing with matters of more fundamental importance to human beings. At the same time, however, Milton's invocation is extremely humble, expressing his utter dependence on God's grace in speaking through him. Milton thus begins his poem with a mixture of towering ambition and humble self-effacement, simultaneously tipping his hat to his poetic forebears and promising to soar above them for God's glorification.

Milton's approach to the invocation of the muse, in which he takes a classical literary convention and reinvents it from a Christian perspective, sets the pattern for all of *Paradise Lost*. For example, when he catalogs the prominent devils in Hell and explains the various names they are known by and which cults worshipped them, he makes devils of many gods whom the Greeks, Ammonites, and other ancient peoples worshipped. In other words, the great gods of the classical world have become—according to Milton—fallen angels. His poem purports to tell of these gods' original natures, before they infected humankind in the form of false gods. Through such comparisons with the classical epic poems, Milton is quick to demonstrate that the scope of his epic poem is much greater than those of the classical poets, and that his worldview and inspiration is more fundamentally true and all-encompassing than theirs. The setting, or world, of Milton's epic is large enough to include those smaller, classical worlds. Milton also displays his world's superiority while reducing those classical epics to the level of old, nearly forgotten stories. For example, the nine muses of classical epics still exist on Mount Helicon in the world of *Paradise Lost*, but Milton's muse haunts other areas and has the ability to fly above those other, less-powerful classical Muses. Thus Milton both makes himself the authority on antiquity and subordinates it to his Christian worldview.

The *Iliad* and the *Aeneid* are the great epic poems of Greek and Latin, respectively, and Milton emulates them because he intends *Paradise Lost* to be the first English epic. Milton wants to make glorious art out of the English language the way the other epics had done for their languages. Not only must a great epic be long and poetically well-constructed, its subject must be significant and original, its form strict and serious, and its aims noble and heroic. In Milton's view, the story he will tell is the most original story known to man, as it is the first story of the world and of the first human beings. Also, while Homer and Virgil only chronicled the journey of heroic men, like Achilles or Aeneas, Milton chronicles the tragic journey of all men—the result of humankind's disobedience. Milton goes so far as to say that he hopes to "justify," or explain, God's mysterious plan for humankind. Homer and Virgil describe great wars between men, but Milton tells the story of the most epic battle possible: the battle between God and Satan, good and evil.

### 20.1.2 Summary: Lines 27–722: Satan and Hell

Immediately after the prologue, Milton raises the question of how Adam and Eve's disobedience occurred and explains that their actions were partly due to a serpent's deception. This serpent is Satan, and the poem joins him and his followers in Hell, where they have just been cast after being defeated by God in Heaven.

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Satan lies stunned beside his second-in-command, Beelzebub, in a lake of fire that gives off darkness instead of light. Breaking the awful silence, Satan bemoans their terrible position, but does not repent of his rebellion against God, suggesting that they might gather their forces for another attack. Beelzebub is doubtful; he now believes that God cannot be overpowered. Satan does not fully contradict this assessment, but suggests that they could at least pervert God's good works to evil purposes. The two devils then rise up and, spreading their wings, fly over to the dry land next to the flaming lake. But they can undertake this action only because God has allowed them to loose their chains. All of the devils were formerly angels who chose to follow Satan in his rebellion, and God still intends to turn their evil deeds toward the good.

Once out of the lake, Satan becomes more optimistic about their situation. He calls the rest of the fallen angels, his legions, to join him on land. They immediately obey and, despite their wounds and suffering, fly up to gather on the plain. Milton lists some of the more notable of the angels whose names have been erased from the books of Heaven, noting that later, in the time of man, many of these devils come to be worshipped as gods.

Among these are Moloch, who is later known as a god requiring human sacrifices, and Belial, a lewd and lustful god. Still in war gear, these fallen angels have thousands of banners raised and their shields and spears in hand. Even in defeat, they are an awesome army to behold.

Satan's unrepentant evil nature is unwavering. Even cast down in defeat, he does not consider changing his ways: he insists to his fellow devils that their delight will be in doing evil, not good. In particular, as he explains to Beelzebub, he wishes to pervert God's will and find a way to make evil out of good. It is not easy for Satan to maintain this determination; the battle has just demonstrated God's overwhelming power, and the devils could not even have lifted themselves off the lake of fire unless God had allowed it. God allows it precisely because he intends to turn their evil designs toward a greater good in the end. Satan's envy of the Son's chosen status led him to rebel and consequently to be condemned. His continued envy and search for freedom leads him to believe that he would rather be a king in Hell than a servant in Heaven. Satan's pride has caused him to believe that his own free intellect is as great as God's will.



*Did u know?* Satan remarks that the mind can make its own Hell out of Heaven, or in his case, its own Heaven out of Hell.

Satan addresses his comrades and acknowledges their shame in falling to the heavenly forces, but urges them to gather in order to consider whether another war is feasible. Instantly, the legions of devils dig into the bowels of the ground, unearthing gold and other minerals. With their inhuman powers they construct a great temple in a short time. It is called Pandemonium (which means "all the demons" in Greek), and the hundreds of thousands of demonic troops gather there to hold a summit. Being spirits, they can easily shrink from huge winged creatures to the smallest size. Compacting themselves, they enter Pandemonium, and the debate begins.

### Analysis

Throughout the first two or three books of *Paradise Lost*, Satan seems as if he's the hero of the poem. This is partly because the focus of the poem is all on him, but it is also because the first books establish his struggle—he finds himself defeated and banished from Heaven, and sets about establishing a new course for himself and those he leads. Typically, the hero or protagonist of any narrative, epic poem or otherwise, is a person who struggles to accomplish something. Milton plays against our expectations by spending the first quarter of his epic telling us about the antagonist rather than the protagonist, so that when we meet Adam and Eve, we will have a more profound sense of what they are up against. But even when the focus of the poem shifts to Adam and Eve, Satan remains the most active force in the story.

One important way in which the narrator develops our picture of Satan—and gives us the impression that he is a hero—is through epic similes, lengthy and developed comparisons that tell us how big and powerful Satan is. For example, when Satan is lying on the burning lake, Milton compares him to the titans who waged war upon Jove in Greek mythology. Then, at greater length, he compares him to a Leviathan, or whale, that is so huge that sailors mistake it for an island and fix their anchor to it. In other epics, these sorts of similes are used to establish the great size or strength of characters, and on the surface these similes seem to do the same thing. At the same time, however, the effect of these similes is to unsettle us, making us aware that we really do not know how big Satan is at all. No one knows how big the titans were, because they were defeated before the age of man. The image of the Leviathan does not give us a well-defined sense of his size, because the whole point of the image is that the Leviathan's size generates deception and confusion.



*Task* What is Satan's attitude in the beginning of the poem?

More than anything, the similes used to describe Satan make us aware of the fact that size is relative, and that we don't know how big anything in Hell is—the burning lake, the hill, Pandemonium, etc. Milton drives this fact home at the end of Book I with a tautology: while most of the devils shrink in size to enter Pandemonium, the important ones sit “far within / And in their own dimensions like themselves” (l.792–793). In other words, they were however big they were, but we have no way of knowing how big that was. Finally, it is important to note that the first description of Satan's size is the biggest we will ever see him. From that point on, Satan assumes many shapes and is compared to numerous creatures, but his size and stature steadily diminishes. The uncertainty created by these similes creates a sense of irony—perhaps Satan isn't so great after all.

The devils in Paradise Lost are introduced to the story here in Book I in almost a parody of how Homer introduces great warriors in the Iliad. The irony of these descriptions lies in the fact that while these devils seem heroic and noteworthy in certain ways, they just lost the war in Heaven. As frightening and vividly presented as these creatures are, they did not succeed in killing a single angel.

In Book I, Milton presents Satan primarily as a military hero, and the council of devils as a council of war. In doing so, he makes Paradise Lost resonate with earlier epics, which all center around military heroes and their exploits. At the same time, Milton presents an implicit critique of a literary culture that glorifies war and warriors. Satan displays all of the virtues of a great warrior such as Achilles or Odysseus. He is courageous, undaunted, refusing to yield in the face of impossible odds, and able to stir his followers to follow him in brave and violent exploits. Milton is clearly aware of what he's doing in making Satan somewhat appealing in the early chapters. By drawing us into sympathizing with and admiring Satan, Milton forces us to question why we admire martial prowess and pride in literary characters. Ultimately he attempts to show that the Christian virtues of obedience, humility, and forbearance are more important.

## **20.2 Book – II**

### **20.2.1 Summary: Prologue and Invocation**

Satan opens the debate in Pandemonium by claiming that Heaven is not yet lost, and that the fallen angels (or devils) might rise up stronger in another battle if they work together. He opens the floor, and the pro-war devil Moloch speaks first. Moloch was one of the fiercest fighters in the war in Heaven, and he anxiously pleads for another open war, this time armed with the weapons of Hell. He reasons that nothing, even their destruction, could be worse than Hell, and so they have nothing

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to lose by another attack. Belial speaks up to contradict him. He eloquently offers calm reason to counter Moloch's fiery temper, and claims that God has not yet punished them as fiercely as he might if they went to war with him again. After all, they are no longer chained to the fiery lake, which was their previous and worse punishment; since God may one day forgive them, it is better that they live with what they now have. But peace is not really what he advocates; rather, Belial uses his considerable intelligence to find excuses to prevent further war and to advocate lassitude and inaction. Mammon speaks up next, and refuses to ever bow down to God again. He prefers to peacefully advance their freedom and asks the devils to be industrious in Hell. Through hard work, the devils can make Hell their own kingdom to mimic Heaven. This argument meets with the greatest support among the legions of the fallen, who receive his suggestion with applause.

Quiet falls upon the crowd as the respected Beelzebub begins to speak. He also prefers freedom to servitude under God, but counsels a different course of action than those previously advocated. Apparently, he says, rumors have been circulating in Heaven about a new world that is to be created, to be filled with a race called Man, whom God will favor more than the angels. Beelzebub advises, at Satan's secret behest, that they seek their revenge by destroying or corrupting this new beloved race. The rest of the devils agree and vote unanimously in favor of this plan. They must now send a scout to find out about this new world, and in a feat of staged heroics, Satan volunteers himself.

While the other devils break into groups to discuss the outcome of the debate and to build other structures, Satan flies off to find Hell's gate. When he approaches, he sees that it is actually nine gates—three each of brass, iron, and adamantite—and that two strange shapes stand guard in front. One looks like a woman down to her waist, but below has the form of a serpent, with a pack of howling dogs around her waist. The other is only a dark shape. Satan chooses to confront the shape, demanding passage through the gates. They are about to do battle when the woman-beast cries out. She explains to Satan who she and her companion are and how they came to be, claiming that they are in fact Satan's own offspring. While Satan was still an angel, she sprang forth from his head, and was named Sin. Satan then incestuously impregnated her, and she gave birth to a ghostly son named Death. Death in turn raped his mother Sin, begetting the dogs that now torment her. Sin and Death were then assigned to guard the gate of Hell and hold its keys.

Apparently, Satan had forgotten these events. Now he speaks less violently to them and explains his plot against God. After Satan's persuasion, they are more than eager to help him. Sin unlocks the great gates, which open into the vast dark abyss of night. Satan flies out but then begins to fall, until a cloud of fire catches and carries him. He hears a great tumult of noise and makes his way toward it; it is Chaos, ruler of the abyss. Chaos is joined by his consort Night, with Confusion, Discord and others at their side. Satan explains his plan to Chaos as well. He asks for help, saying that in return he will reclaim the territory of the new world, thus returning more of the universe to disorder. Chaos agrees and points out the way to where the Earth has recently been created. With great difficulty, Satan moves onward, and Sin and Death follow far behind, building a bridge from Hell to Earth on which evil spirits can travel to tempt mortals.

**Analysis**

Just as Book I may be seen as a parody of military heroism, the devils' debate in Book II can be read as a parody of political debate. Their nonviolent and democratic decisions to wreak the destruction of humankind shows the corruption of fallen reason, which can make evil appear as good. Milton depicts the devils' organization ironically, as if he were commending it. Satan, for example, diplomatically urges others "to union, and firm faith, and firm accord," making Hell's newly formed government sound legitimate and powerful when it is in fact grossly illegitimate and powerless (II.36). It is possible that Milton here satirizes politicians and political debates in general, not just corrupt politicians. Certainly, Milton had witnessed enough violent political struggles in his time to give him cause to demonize politicians as a species. Clearly, the debate in Hell weighs only different evils, rather than bringing its participants closer to truth.

This scene also demonstrates Milton's cynicism about political institutions and organizations. The devils' behavior suggests that political power tends to corrupt individuals who possess it. Even learned politicians, as Belial is here in Book II, who possesses great powers of reason and intellectual discourse, have the power to deceive the less-educated public. In his other writings, Milton argues that political and religious organizations have the potential to do evil things in the name of order and union. After the debate in Hell is concluded, the object of parody shifts to philosophers and religious thinkers. Following the debate, the devils break into groups, some of which continue to speak and argue without any resolution or amenable conclusion. Similar debates over the sources of evil and of political authority were fiercely contested in Milton's time. Milton calls the devils' discussions "vain wisdom all, and false philosophy," a criticism which he extends in his other writings to the words of the religious leaders of his time.



*Task* Who is Beelzebub, and what does he propose?

After Beelzebub takes the floor, it becomes clear that the caucus has been a foregone conclusion. Satan lets the sides rhetorically engage each other before he announces through Beelzebub the plan he had all along. Satan and Beelzebub conspire to win the argument, and do, without any of the other devils recognizing the fraud. Satan's volunteering to be the scout then silences all possible dissent, since he is heralded as the leader of Hell. Here again is a parody of Hell mimicking Heaven: Satan offers to sacrifice himself for the good of the other devils, in a twisted imitation of Christ. The parallel is made even more blatant when Sin cries out to Satan at the gate of Hell: "O father, what intends thy hand . . . against thy only son?" (II.727–728). Sin's statement foreshadows how God will send his only Son to die, for the good of the humankind. Satan believes he is free, and both Belial and Mammon celebrate the freedom of the devils even in Hell, and yet we see that they have no power to do anything except distort Heavenly things, twisting them into evil, empty imitations.

Satan's encounter with Sin and Death is an allegory, in which the three characters and their relationships represent abstract ideas. Sin is the first child of Satan, brought to life by Satan's disobedience. Since Satan is the first of God's creations to disobey, he personifies disobedience, and the fact that Sin is his daughter suggests that all sins arise from disobedience and ingratitude toward God. To those who behold her birth, she is first frightening but then seems strangely attractive, suggesting the seductive allure of sin to the ordinary individual. Sin dwells alone and in utter torment, representing the ultimate fate of the sinner. That Death is Sin's offspring indicates Milton's belief that death is not simply a biological fact of life but rather a punishment for sin and disobedience, a punishment that nobody escapes.

## 20.3 Book – III

### 20.3.1 Summary: Prologue and Invocation

Book III opens with a second invocation to his muse, this time addressed to "holy light" (III.1). Milton asks that the heavenly light shine inside him and illuminate his mind with divine knowledge so that he can share this knowledge with his readers.

The scene shifts to Heaven, where God has been watching all of the events in Hell with his Son sitting at his right hand. He sees Satan flying up toward the new Earth and the parents of mankind. At the same time, he sees everything that will happen because of it, perceiving past, present, and future simultaneously. He sees that man will fall, of his own fault, because God gave him free will—yet without that will, man would not be capable of sincere love. Man would merely go through the motions. While it would be just to punish man for his own actions, God determines that he will

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act primarily out of love and mercy. The Son, full of compassion, praises God for his kindness toward man, but asks how mercy can be given without destroying justice. God answers that a suitable sacrifice must be made: someone worthy must offer to die to pay for man's sin. The angelic choirs are silent, but the Son immediately offers himself. He will become mortal so that God can yield to Death and conquer Hell. God is overjoyed, even though he will be giving up his son, because he knows that it is good to sacrifice his son for the salvation of the human race, in order for justice and mercy to be served. Those that have faith in the Son will be redeemed, but those who do not accept grace will still be doomed to Hell. The choirs of angels now break into a song of praise extolling the goodness of both Father and Son, which will turn a sorrowful deed into greater glory for both God and man.

The story returns to Satan, who lands on Earth in what is now China. There are not yet any living things there, or any of the works of man that will eventually distract man's mind from God. At length, Satan sees a high-reaching structure in the distance, an enormous kingly gate in the sky with stairs leading all the way down to Earth. This gate guards Heaven, which was at that time visible from Earth. Flying over to it, Satan climbs up a few steps to get a better view. He sees the new creation in all its glory, but can only feel jealousy. He does not stay put for long, though: he is drawn by the golden sun, hanging above the green and lush land, and flies toward it. There he sees an angel standing on a hill. To deceive him, Satan changes to a cherub, or low-ranking angel. Recognizing the other angel as the Archangel Uriel, Satan approaches and addresses him. Satan claims to have just come down from Heaven, full of curiosity about the new world he has been hearing so much about, and curious about its inhabitants. Satan's transformation and his speech are so flawless that even Uriel cannot see through the subterfuge. The Archangel is pleased that a young angel is showing so much zeal to find out about the world that God brought out of the Chaos from earth, air, wind and fire. He happily points out the way to Paradise, where Adam lives. After giving his due respects, Satan flies off with dark intentions.

**Analysis**

As the narrative of *Paradise Lost* shifts from its sustained focus on Hell and Satan and begins to present glimpses of Heaven and God, we may feel that the story loses some of the intense interest and appeal that it began with. The discussion in Heaven is moving and theologically interesting, but the parts of the poem treating the evil designs of Satan are written with more potency and rhetorical vigor. The characters in Heaven play a relatively passive role, watching the story unfold, while Satan actively and endlessly devises his evil machinations. Moreover, the sinful, evil characters hold our attention more easily than the pure and virtuous ones. Satan appears to be the active hero, struggling for his personal desires, and God may seem rather dull. These observations, however, are beside the point that Milton hopes to prove to his readers: God's reason and grace rule the universe and control all of those who live there.

The encounter between Satan and Uriel demonstrates Satan's capacity for deception and fraud, as he subverts Uriel's role as a guardian by disguising himself as a cherub. Uriel is unable to recognize Satan in part because he does not believe it possible that Satan would be lurking around. As a devout and virtuous angel, Uriel is unable to recognize evil even when it presents itself right in front of him. Through Satan's deception of Uriel, Milton shows the significance of the sin of fraud, or hypocrisy. Fraud is an especially damaging sin because it is invisible to others, hurting them in ways they are not even aware of. In the *Inferno*, Dante maintains that fraud is the worst of all man's sins. Milton goes almost as far in showing that leading innocent people to evil is much worse than leading yourself to evil.

Milton reveals his own personal theological positions in Book III. Through God's initial speech, for example, Milton discards the orthodox Calvinist position of predestination. Omniscient God, seeing the fall in the future, says that men cannot blame God for their fate, or for acts of evil or bad luck,

insisting that man possesses free will, even though God can foresee what they will do. God's speech here contradicts the Calvinist belief, held by most of Milton's fellow Puritans, that the fate of every man's soul is decided before birth.



*Did u know?* Milton refuses to abandon his belief in free will, insisting that man must have free will in order to prove his sincere love for God. This balance between free will and virtue is a paradox—man is free to choose, but only truly free when he chooses the good.

Milton had to confront certain problems inherent in any attempt to represent beings and events outside of time and human understanding. To have God and the Son appear as separate characters in a work of fiction poses particular problems and risks in terms of logical consistency. There may not be a completely coherent way to represent God and the Son as characters who are both independent and human-like, but at the same time consubstantial, omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent. It was extremely ambitious of Milton to risk heresy by putting words in God's mouth, and he lessens this risk by incorporating numerous biblical allusions into the speeches of God and the Son.

By making God and the Son two different characters, Milton asserts that they are essentially separate but equal entities. Milton did not believe in the Holy Trinity completely, and believed that the Son was created after God, not coeternally. The relationship between God and the Son is not fully revealed. Appearing as separate characters with separate comments, they may still share a mind. Some actions, like God's plea for a volunteer, and the Son's subsequent volunteering, argue that they do not share a single mind. God asks for a volunteer, yet he must know ahead of time that his Son will be the only volunteer. The precise nature of the relationship between the two remains mysterious.

## **20.4 Book – IV**

### **20.4.1 Summary: Prologue and Invocation**

Satan lands atop Mount Niphates, just north of Paradise, the Garden of Eden. He becomes gripped with doubt about the task in front of him; seeing the beauty and innocence of Earth has reminded him of what he once was. He even briefly considers whether he could be forgiven if he repented. But Hell follows him wherever he goes—Satan is actually the embodiment of Hell. If he asks the Father for forgiveness, he knows it would be a false confession; he reasons that if he returned to Heaven, he still could not bear to bow down. Knowing redemption or salvation cannot be granted to him, he resolves to continue to commit acts of sin and evil. He does not notice that during his internal debate, he has inadvertently revealed his devilish nature. He is observed by Uriel, the archangel he tricked into pointing the way. Uriel notices his conflicting facial expressions, and since all cherubs have permanent looks of joy on their faces, Uriel concludes that Satan cannot be a cherub.

Satan now approaches Eden, which is surrounded by a great thicket wall. He easily leaps over it like a wolf entering a sheep's pen. Inside he sees an idyllic world, with all varieties of animals and trees. He can see the tallest of the trees, the Tree of Life—and next to it, the forbidden Tree of Knowledge. He perches himself on the Tree of Life, disguised as a cormorant, a large sea bird. Finally, he notices two creatures walking erect among the other animals. They walk naked without shame, and work pleasantly, tending the garden. Satan's pain and envy intensifies as he sees this new beautiful race, created after he and his legions fell. He could have loved them, but now, his damnation will be revenged through their destruction. He continues to watch them, and the man,

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Adam, speaks. He tells Eve not to complain of the work they have to do but to be obedient to God, since God has given them so many blessings, and only one constraint: they must not eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. Eve agrees wholeheartedly, and they embrace.

Eve tells Adam of her first awakening as she came to life and how she wondered who and where she was. She found a river and followed it upstream to its source. Her path led to a clear, smooth lake, and Eve looked into the lake, seeing an image in its surface, which she soon discovers is her own. She hears a voice explaining to her that she was made out of Adam, and with him she will become the mother of the human race. Overlooking Adam and Eve, Satan sees his opportunity. If the Father has given them a rule to follow, then they might be persuaded to break it. He leaves the two for a while, going off to learn more from other angels.

Meanwhile, Uriel comes before the Archangel Gabriel, at the gate of Eden, and tells him about the shape-changing spirit that he saw from the hilltop. They both suspect that it might be one of the fallen ones. Gabriel promises that if the spirit is in the garden, they will find it by morning. Around this time, Adam and Eve finish their day's work. They go to their leafy bower, praising God and each other for their blissful life, and after a short prayer, they lie together—making love without sin, because lust had not yet tainted their natures.



Task

What does Satan feel is his greatest fault?

Night falls, and Gabriel sends search parties into the Garden. Two of his angels find Satan, disguised as a toad, whispering into the ear of Eve as she sleeps. They pull him before Gabriel, who recognizes him, and demands to know what he is doing in Paradise. Satan at first feigns innocence, as they have no proof that he means harm. But Gabriel knows him to be a liar, and threatens to drag him back to Hell. Enraged by this threat, Satan prepares to fight him. The two square off for a decisive battle, but a sign from Heaven—the appearance in the sky of a pair of golden scales—stops them. Satan recognizes the sign as meaning he could not win, and flies off.

## Analysis

As Book IV opens, Milton presents Satan as a character deeply affected by envy and despair. Earlier in the poem, Satan seems perfectly confident in his rebellion and evil plans. His feeling of despair at the beauty of Paradise temporarily impairs this confidence. While in Hell, Satan tells himself that his mind could make its own Heaven out of Hell, but now he realizes that the reverse is true. As close to Heaven, as he is, he cannot help but feel out of place, because he brings Hell with him wherever he goes. For Satan, Hell is not simply a place, but rather a state of mind brought on by a lack of connection with God. Satan's despondent recognition of this fact corresponds with what Milton sees as the worst sin of all: despair. If even this beautiful new world cannot make Satan forget Hell, then he can never hope to seek forgiveness and return to Heaven. As the Bible says, the one sin that cannot be forgiven is despairing of forgiveness; if one cannot even ask for mercy, it cannot be granted. Satan realizes this, and decides that the only course of action is to enjoy his own wickedness, and pursue it with all his strength. Milton preempts the crucial question of whether Satan could have successfully repented back in Book III. There, God said that he would give grace to humankind because Satan would prompt humankind's sin. But he would not help the fallen angels, and especially Satan, because their sin came out of themselves and from no other source.

Satan's continuing process of degradation is reflected in his use of progressively despicable, lowly disguises. Through these first three books of *Paradise Lost*, Satan's physical presence takes many different forms. In Book I, he is a monumental figure so large that the largest tree would seem a paltry wand in his hand. In Book III, he disguises himself as a cherub, but his inner turmoil ultimately ruins this benign-seeming appearance. Satan is later described as leaping over Eden's fence like a

wolf into a sheep's pen. While he does not exactly take the form of a wolf, he continues to be compared to and associated with wild, predatory animals. He takes the shape of a bird atop the Tree of Life, and then morphs into a toad to whisper temptation into Eve's ear. Satan's shapes become progressively less impressive and stately. Once an imposing figure, he shrinks himself to become a lesser angel, then a mere bird, and finally a much less appealing animal: a toad.

In this book, we are presented with Eve's first memories of awakening to consciousness, though we have to wait until Book VIII to see Adam's first memories. Eve's account subtly underscores her distance from God and need for guidance. She awakens in shade rather than daylight, suggesting her separation from the light of God's truth. Almost immediately, she finds herself captivated and deceived by an image—her reflection in the water, which she does not recognize as merely an image. She admits that she would probably still be by the water's edge, fixated there in vain desire, if it wasn't for God's calling her away. This image recalls the story of Narcissus from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a story that Renaissance poets such as Petrarch used to show that erotic desire is based on visual images that are inherently vain and deceptive. Milton's allusion to Narcissus makes a similar point: human beings, especially women, need God's help to escape the trap of desire based on images. Significantly, it is the voice rather than the visual image of God that calls her away. Also noteworthy in this context is the fact that in his first speech to Eve, God says that Eve is herself an image—the reflection of Adam.

## Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

- Which angel does Satan trick by disguising himself as a cherub?
  - Michale
  - Uriel
  - Raphael
  - Abdiel
- Which of the following forms does Satan not take?
  - Angel
  - Toad
  - Cormorant
  - All of these
- In which book of the Bible does the story of Adam and Eve occur?
  - Leviticus
  - Exodus
  - Genesis
  - Deuteronomy
- Which devil advocates a renewal of all-out war against God?
  - Belial
  - Moloch
  - Mammon
  - Beelzebub
- Which angel wields a large sword in the battle and wounds Satan?
  - Michael
  - Abdiel
  - Uriel
  - None of these
- Which of the following is not found in Hell?
  - Gems
  - Gold
  - Oil
  - Minerals
- Which devil is the main architect of Pandemonium?
  - Mulciber
  - Mammon
  - Moloch
  - Belial
- How many times does Milton invoke a muse?
  - One
  - Two
  - Three
  - Four

## Notes

9. Who leads Adam and Eve out of paradise?
- |             |             |
|-------------|-------------|
| (a) God     | (b) The son |
| (c) Michael | (d) Raphael |
10. Which of the following poets does Milton emulate?
- |                           |                    |
|---------------------------|--------------------|
| (a) Virgil                | (b) Homer          |
| (c) Both Virgil and Homer | (d) None of these. |

After God leads Eve away from her reflection, she first encounters Adam under a platan tree. Platan is the Greek name for plane tree, and by giving the name of the tree in Greek rather than English, Milton alludes to Plato, the Greek philosopher, whose name is etymologically linked with that of the plane tree. The most well-known of Plato's arguments is the thesis that reality consists of ideal forms that can only be perceived by the intellect, in contrast with the deceptive shades or reflections of these ideal forms that human beings perceive in everyday life. Milton associates the platan tree, or Plato, with Adam, suggesting that he is closer to the ideal forms or essences of things, whereas Eve is more part of the world of images, shade, and illusion, and is led away from illusions only reluctantly.

Milton's presentation of Adam and Eve was controversial in his time. Milton paints an idyllic picture of an innocent, strong, and intelligent Adam, whereas Christian tradition more typically emphasizes Adam's basically sinful nature. The Puritans, like many other Christians, viewed the sexual act as inherently sinful—a necessary evil that cannot be avoided precisely because man has fallen. Milton, in contrast, makes a point of noting that Adam and Eve enjoy pure, virtuous sexual pleasure without sin: they love, but do not lust. Milton implies that not only is sex not evil, but that demonizing it goes against God's will. He persuasively argues that God mandates procreation, and that anyone who would advocate complete abstinence (as St. Paul does in the New Testament) would be an enemy to God and God's magnificent creation. Furthermore, Eve's story about seeing her reflection in the water hints that her vanity may become a serious flaw—and weakness—later on. Her curiosity is sparked by her lack of understanding about who she is and where she is. She traces the river back to its source just as she wishes to trace herself to her source, through emotional self-reflection, in search of answers to her difficult questions. Also, her willingness to listen and believe the voice she hears, which tells her about her identity, also foreshadows that she will trust another voice she will hear later—Satan's.

Milton's presentation of Adam and Eve is controversial in our own time because the discourse between Adam and Eve strikes many modern audiences as misogynistic. Milton portrays Adam as her superior because he has a closer relationship to God. The idea that Adam was created to serve God only, and Eve is created to serve both God and Adam, illustrates Milton's belief that women were created to serve men. The narrator remarks of Adam and Eve that their difference in quality was apparent—"their sex not equal seemed" (IV.296). Milton implies that she is weaker in mind as well as body than Adam. Eve herself freely admits her secondary and subordinate role. When she explains her dependence on him she explains to Adam that she is created because of him and is lost without him. Having Eve herself possess and verbalize these misogynistic, submissive views adds a peculiar and somewhat disturbing power to the conversation. Milton's views on the relations between men and women were certainly common, if not dogmatic, in his time. Milton's reading of the Bible dictated that in marriage the woman is to obey the man, and that he is her ruler. The relationship between Adam and Eve, though unequal, remains perfectly happy, because they both in the end live in praise of God. Eve accepts her role as Adam does his own, and God loves both equally.

## 20.5 Summary

- The beginning of *Paradise Lost* is similar in gravity and seriousness to the book from which Milton takes much of his story: the Book of Genesis, the first book of the Bible.

- The Iliad and the Aeneid are the great epic poems of Greek and Latin, respectively, and Milton emulates them because he intends Paradise Lost to be the first English epic.
- Satan lies stunned beside his second-in-command, Beelzebub, in a lake of fire that gives off darkness instead of light.
- God allows it precisely because he intends to turn their evil designs toward a greater good in the end.
- Sin dwells alone and in utter torment, representing the ultimate fate of the sinner.
- Uriel comes before the Archangel Gabriel, at the gate of Eden, and tells him about the shape-changing spirit that he saw from the hilltop.

## 20.6 Keywords

*Captive* : Charm.

*Incestuously* : Involving or guilty of incest.

*Torment* : Serve physical or mental suffering.

## 20.7 Review Questions

1. Who leads the fallen angels to dig for gold in Hell? Why?
2. Who volunteers to go alone to spy on God's new creation?
3. What is Jacob's ladder in the biblical account?
4. Who is Uriel? What does Satan ask of him?
5. How does Satan feel about his own free will?

## Answers: Self Assessment

- |         |        |        |
|---------|--------|--------|
| 1. (b)  | 2. (d) | 3. (c) |
| 4. (b)  | 5. (a) | 6. (c) |
| 7. (a)  | 8. (c) | 9. (c) |
| 10. (c) |        |        |

## 20.8 Further Readings



Books

- |                                      |                 |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------|
| Paradise Lost I (Non-detailed study) | — John Milton   |
| John Milton Paradise Lost            | — John Milton   |
| John Milton: a short Introduction    | — Roy Flannagan |



Online links

- <http://www.bookrags.com/notes/pl/index.html>  
<http://pinkmonkey.com/booknotes/barrons/paradis02.asp>

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## Unit 21: Paradise Lost-I (Non-detailed Study): Discussion and Analysis-II

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### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Explain prologue and invocation of Book V-VIII
- Discuss the analysis of Book V-VIII.

### Introduction

Eve's dream at the start of Book V is an obvious foreshadowing of the actual temptation scene in Book IX. This foreshadowing, however, is also ironic in that the reader already knows that Eve and Adam will yield to the temptation of Satan. Thus, rather than being simply an instance of foreshadowing, Eve's dream is confirmation and emphasis on what the reader knows must and will happen. Further, by bringing up the dream at this point in the text, Milton makes the reader analogous to God. Both God and the reader know that Adam and Eve will fall, but neither the reader nor God is the cause of that fall. Consequently, when Adam tells Eve that the dream will not come true, that it is bred of fear rather than reason, the reader, once again like God, knows that Adam is wrong but can do nothing to help him.

In Book VI, Milton presents his description of epic warfare. He follows many of the conventions of the great classic epics, such as the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*, by giving graphic descriptions of battles and wounds, highlighting the boasting give and take in individual battles, and developing massive scenes of chaotic violence. However, Milton goes beyond his classical models and, in a sense, mocks the nature of the warfare he describes. The reasons that lie behind this sense of mockery in Book VI have been frequently discussed and disputed by critics and commentators. The general sense of those who see a kind of mocking humor in the battle scenes is that Milton was dealing with two difficulties. First, the combat in Heaven is between combatants who cannot be killed, and second there is no doubt as to the outcome of the battle.

The prologue to Book VII is especially interesting on two counts. First, the Muse Milton invokes is again Urania, the classical Muse of Astronomy, who is appropriate since the focus of this book is on the creation of Earth and the heavens, and Book VIII will deal with planetary motions. But, once again, just as he did in Book I, Milton disassociates Urania from the classical tradition and equates her with Christian inspiration, literally (in Book I) with the Holy Spirit. This treatment of Urania epitomizes one of Milton's goals in *Paradise Lost* — to compose a Christian epic. He brings together the pagan classical tradition with Christian doctrine; the invocation and transmutation of Urania provides an emblematic image of this goal.

Adam continues his conversation with Raphael in Book VIII. He asks Raphael about the movement of the stars and planets. The angel says that it doesn't matter whether Earth moves or the heavens. God has made some things unknowable. Ultimately, Raphael adds, the complexities of the universe are beyond Man's comprehension and Man should be satisfied with what God allows him to know. Then Adam tells Raphael, who was on a mission to guard Hell when God made Adam, the story of how Man was created.

## **21.1 Book-V**

### **21.1.1 Summary: Prologue and Invocation**

Adam awakes from a peaceful sleep, but Eve appears to have been restless during the night. She relates to him the disturbing dream she has had. She explains that in the dream she hears a voice and follows it to the Tree of Knowledge. There, a creature who looks like an angel appears, takes a fruit from the forbidden tree and tastes it. The angel tells Eve that she could be like the gods if she eats too, but before she can try it, he vanishes and she returns to dreamless sleep. Adam is troubled by the dream, but assures her that it is not necessarily a prediction of what will happen in the future, because she still has the faculty of reason to control her actions. Comforted, they return to their work and praise of God.

Meanwhile, in Heaven, God calls the Archangel Raphael to his side. He does not want Adam and Eve to claim that the devil took them by surprise if they are lured into disobedience, so he instructs Raphael to tell Adam about the danger in store for him. When Raphael arrives in Paradise, the couple warmly welcomes him. They eat together, and Raphael explains the differences between heavenly food and earthly food. After the meal, Eve leaves the scene and allows Raphael to speak to Adam.

Raphael first describes the composition of the things God created on Earth. God gave different kinds of substance to all living things. The highest substance is spirit, which God put into humankind. Below humans are animals, which have living flesh but no spirit, followed by plants and then inanimate objects. Each group possesses the attributes of the groups below it; for instance, whereas animals have physical senses, humankind possesses all of the same senses plus the ability to reason. Raphael says that man is the highest being on Earth because of his God-given ability to reason, and warns Adam to always choose obedience to God. Adam wonders how any being created by God

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could choose to be disobedient, but Raphael explains that Adam was created as perfect yet mutable, endowed with the power to maintain his perfection but also the power to lose it. Adam desires to know more, and asks how disobedience first came into Heaven. To answer, Raphael relates the story of Satan's fall.

When Heaven was still at peace, Raphael explains, all the hierarchies of angels were obedient to God. One day the Father announced to them that he had begotten a son, who was to rule at his right hand. While God's announcement pleased most of the angels, one of them was angry. That angry angel lost his heavenly name, and is now called Satan. Proud to be one of the highest archangels, Satan felt that he deserved the same powers as God. Jealous of the Son, he persuaded one third of the other angels in Heaven to join him. Satan erected his own throne in heaven, and told his followers that they should not allow themselves to be unjustly ruled. One of these followers, however, disagreed. He was named Abdiel, and after arguing with Satan he faithfully returned to the side of God, braving the scorn of the other rebellious angels.

**Analysis**

Eve's dream, created by Satan's whispering in her ear as she sleeps, foreshadows her ultimate temptation and downfall. God's decision to send Raphael to warn Adam about the dangers ahead also foreshadows their fall, although the fact that it does so is paradoxical. After all, the ostensible purpose of sending Raphael is to arm Adam and Eve with knowledge, so that they won't fall from sheer ignorance. We might expect Raphael's visit to give Adam and Eve a fighting chance, creating more suspense and doubt as to the outcome, but this is not the case. Every Christian reader already knows that Adam and Eve will fall, so instead of creating suspense, Raphael's words of instruction only heighten our sense of the gravity of their sin and the tragedy of their disobedience.

There is a further paradox in the fact that even as Milton foreshadows the fall and makes it seem inevitable and predestined, he strives to prove that the fall was anything but inevitable. *Paradise Lost* insists that Adam and Eve had free will and were protected by adequate knowledge and understanding. In fact, Milton's poem goes much further in this regard than the Bible, which does not include Raphael's warning visit or God's own assurance that Adam and Eve have free will. These parts of the story are Milton's invention, and his insistence on humankind's free will flew in the face of what most Puritans believed. Since we know the end of the story from the first line of the poem, this emphasis on free will does not generate an impression of greater possibility, but rather informs our understanding of what Adam and Eve's sin means.

When Raphael begins to tell Adam about the war in Heaven, he first admits that explaining these events presents a challenge, because the spiritual beings involved are beyond human comprehension, and it may even be unlawful for him to tell of these things. Raphael here describes problems that Milton himself has to confront in *Paradise Lost*, including how to narrate religious mysteries in a form that will be understood, but also the problem of what authorizes Milton to explain these mysteries at all. Much of *Paradise Lost* is based on the Book of Genesis, but much of it is Milton's invention. Moreover, Milton presents his epic not as a fiction based on Christian scripture, but as a divinely inspired Christian document. We may well wonder why Milton, a devout Christian, thought he could presume to explain such matters as the origins of Christ and Satan and the details of life in Paradise. Part of the answer probably is that Milton truly believes that his poem is divinely inspired, and that the Holy Spirit, as the source of all creativity, speaks through him. Another part of the answer may be that Milton does present *Paradise Lost* as a fiction that conveys truths not literally but allegorically. Thus, he adapts his subject matter to the conventional expectations of an epic poem, thereby using a literary form that his audience was already familiar with. The truth of his poem lies in its interpretation rather than in its plot.

One way in which Milton follows the conventions of epic poetry is by having Raphael narrate the long background story of the origin and course of the war in Heaven. The great Greek and Latin epics begin by situating their characters in the middle of the story and then turning backward to

recount events that occurred before the story began. This style of narration, referred to as *in medias res* (Latin for “in the middle of things”), allows the epic poem to begin with engaging scenes and action to immediately engage our interest and attention. When the story is underway, the narrator can confidently return to fill in the gaps in our knowledge and give us further context about the story we are reading. Milton uses a similar tactic in Book V, throwing both Adam and us, the readers, in the middle of the story. We, like Adam, have heard only about Heaven’s side of the war in Heaven and about Adam and Eve’s early days. Raphael then informs us of the world’s creation and its structures and hierarchies.



*Task* What does Eve’s dream foreshadow?

Milton uses Raphael’s story to present another of his unorthodox religious views. Milton believed that the Son had an origin and was thus not eternal. This notion challenged traditional Christian belief, which holds that the Son (Jesus) is coeternal with the Father —although they relate as father and son, there was no “birth” or starting point for the divine relationship or for either of them. Since they are two parts of the same eternal God, they must both have existed for eternity. Milton rejects this idea with his assertion that there was a specific time when the Father begat the Son. Milton certainly did not deny the divinity of Jesus, but his challenging belief in Jesus’ separate origin reminds us that he was never afraid to distance himself from conventional religion, and that he trusted his own interpretations more than those of any institution.

## 21.2 Book–VI

### 21.2.1 Summary: Prologue and Invocation

Raphael continues his story of the first conflict between Satan and the Father. Again, Raphael gestures that he must find a way to relate the war in terms that Adam will understand. Raphael returns to his story with Abdiel, who confronts Satan and the other rebel angels and tells them that their defeat is imminent. He leaves the followers of Satan and is welcomed back into the ranks of God. He is forgiven by God and praised for his loyalty, obedience, and resistance of evil. God appoints Gabriel and Michael the leaders of Heaven’s army, which is justly made up of only as many angels as Satan’s army.

Shortly thereafter, the two sides prepare their armies. The two armies line up in full view of each other, waiting for the signal to attack. Satan and Abdiel square off in the middle; they exchange insults, and then blows, and the battle begins. Both sides fight fiercely and evenly until Michael, the co-leader of the good angels, deals Satan a blow with an unusually large and intimidating sword. The sword slices through Satan’s entire right side, and the rebellious angels then retreat with their wounded leader. But because angels have no bodies, says Milton, they can only be wounded temporarily, and Satan is able to regroup for the next day of fighting. Satan easily rouses himself and his followers for a second day of battle arguing that better weapons must yield better results. He plans to use a secret weapon, cannons, which the rebels spend the entire night building.

Satan’s army unveils the cannons the next day and bombards the good angels. The good angels find themselves at a disadvantage as their armor becomes a hindrance to their escape. Michael finally provides a solution: the good angels pick up mountains and move them across the battlefield to bury the rebel angels and their artillery. The rebel angels must slowly dig themselves out from underneath the mountains and reassemble. Night falls, and God decides that there will be no fighting on the third day, and that the war must now end. He sends out his Son the next day, who charges through the enemy ranks on a great chariot and drives them from the battlefield. The Son, endowed

**Notes**

with the power of God, surrounds the rebel angels, Satan included, and drives them out of the Gate of Heaven through a hole in Heaven's ground. They fall for nine days through Chaos, before landing in Hell.

Raphael warns Adam that Satan has begun to plot the doom of mankind. Raphael hypothesizes that Satan, in order to get revenge, wishes to make them commit sin to tarnish God's beloved creation. Raphael adds that Satan may also want others to rebel against God and suffer a similar fate. Raphael explains to Adam that they must fear Satan and must not yield to his evil plot.

**Analysis**

The war in Heaven is probably intended to be read as a metaphor, encapsulating spiritual lessons in an epic scenario so that we (and Adam) can understand what Raphael is talking about. The story certainly contains lessons that Raphael wants Adam to learn from. One of the morals of the war in Heaven is that disobedience leads to a person's becoming blind to the truth. Satan and the rebel angels feel empowered by their new decision not to submit, yet their opposition to God actually renders them powerless. Satan and his army never seem to realize the futility of their rebellion. Satan rouses himself and his troops to more and more disobedience, but their continued failure and continued hope of victory demonstrate the blinding effect that their pride and vanity have wrought. Thus blinded, they are easily overcome in battle each day, by only a small portion of God's angels actually fighting against them. Adam tries to learn the parallel between the battle between good and evil that occurred in Heaven and the battle that will occur subtly on Earth. In similar fashion, we are supposed to envision the parallel of Adam's struggle in our own lives, as we strive to ward off evil and attain virtue.

*Task*

Who is the leader of God's angels in the war in Heaven?

Raphael's narrative makes the war in Heaven seem unreal, and almost cartoonish. As Raphael explains, angels are exempt from death, which lessens the consequences of the battle and thus makes it seem that less is at stake. Satan, for instance, is grievously wounded by Michael's sword—he is almost hacked in two—but he is ready to fight the next day. The good angels pick up entire mountains and sling them at the rebel angels. Unable to die or even be seriously wounded, the rebel angels can dig themselves out from under the mountainous rubble, dust themselves off, and plan for their next strike. The entire war comes to seem rather silly because it lacks drama. The outcome is never in doubt.

The style of battle does not resemble the warfare of Milton's day, but rather the feudal warfare of earlier epics. Milton presents the warring factions each lining up with their spears and shields across a battlefield. The battlefield discussions between the two sides before battle are reminiscent of scenes in Homer's *Iliad* and Virgil's *Aeneid*. Then, amid classical style warfare, the rebel angels employ what was in Milton's time a relatively new and dangerous weapon of war: a gunpowder cannon. Milton introduces this discrepancy in modes of warfare to allude to his society's advancements over those of the classical age. Satan's invention of the cannon is an unexpected development, signaling Milton's belief that gunpowder is a demonic invention and that so-called advancements in war are futile and worthless.

**21.3 Book–VII****21.3.1 Summary: Prologue and Invocation**

At the halfway point of the twelve books of *Paradise Lost*, Milton once more invokes a muse, but this time it is Urania, the Muse of Astronomy. Milton refers to her in Christian terms, as a source of

inspiration much like the Holy Spirit. He asks Urania to insure his safe transition from relating the story of the war in Heaven back to Raphael and Adam's conversation on Earth.

Notes



Notes

Milton asks that the muse inspire him through the rest of Raphael's speech and protect him from the troublesome beliefs of others who do not have access to her wisdom.

Back on Earth, Adam asks Raphael about how and why the world was created, as well as about his own creation. Adam initially believes that he may not be allowed to hear the story of creation, so he asks cautiously, although his curiosity is overwhelming. Raphael agrees to tell him, explaining that the story of creation is not a secret to be kept from human beings. Raphael begins by picking up where he left off, with the fall of Satan and his rebel followers. He explains that shortly after the fall, the Father wished to forge a new race, partly to erase the memory of the rebellion and partly to make up for the rebels' absence from the ranks of God's loyal creations. Raphael believes that by replacing the fallen angels, God renders Satan unable to claim that he diminished God's creation. By creating Earth and mankind in a nearly empty part of the universe, God shows the fallen angels that his glorious kingdom can be expanded indefinitely. For all these reasons, God decides to create Earth and humans, with the idea that Earth and Heaven will eventually be joined together as one kingdom through mankind's obedience to God's divine will.

Raphael says that God sends the Son down into Chaos to create Earth. The Earth is first formed out of Chaos and given light and dark, or night and day, in equal measure. Land is separated from water, and animals are created to populate both land and sea. The creation takes six days, and Adam and Eve are created last. The entire act of creation is done through the Son, who makes man in his image and gives him authority over all the animals on Earth. God gives Adam one command: he must not eat the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, which gives knowledge of good and evil. The Son, finishing with his work, hangs Earth beneath Heaven by a chain. He reascends to Heaven as the angels sing hymns and praise his work. Pleased with his work, God rests on the seventh day, which then becomes known as the Sabbath.

### Analysis

In the same manner as the two previous invocations of the muse, Milton's invocation of Urania fuses classical allusion with Christian belief. Milton reconfigures Urania and likens her to the Holy Spirit, placing a corrective, Christian spin on an old mythological figure. The cumulative effect of Milton's allusions to and corrections of classical culture is to convey the impression that Greek and Roman civilization was indeed great, but misled in its philosophy and religion. Thus Milton can claim to build upon the achievements of classical authors while replacing their religious beliefs with Christian ones. Being born before Christ, most classical authors do have a good excuse for not professing Christian beliefs.



Did u know?

Milton's stance toward antiquity is not unlike that of earlier Christian poets such as Dante or Spenser, who were similarly steeped in classical literary culture.

Raphael's account of the world's creation closely follows the biblical account of creation in the first few chapters of Genesis. Milton takes some of his language directly from popular English translations of the Bible. By using biblical language, Milton gives Raphael's account more authority and renders the invented details of his story more credible as well. Raphael's extended explanations about the world and about God and Satan are lengthy, but their length demonstrates Milton's beliefs concerning the absolute importance of conversation, knowledge, and thought. Book VII presents a curious

## Notes

Adam who seeks knowledge and an agreeable Raphael who disposes his knowledge in human terms. Their evolving interaction in this book differs from their interaction in earlier books, as Adam becomes more aggressive in his attempts to gain wisdom from Raphael. Throughout their conversation, the desire for knowledge is expressed through metaphors of hunger, eating, and digestion.



*Did u know?* Adam's craving for knowledge begins to surface in this book and foreshadows his potential temptation to eat from the Tree of Knowledge.

The Son is given a more significant role in Book VII than he has in previous books, illustrating that he is the instrument through which God acts. Milton actually departs from the Bible in having the Son create the world, as Genesis says nothing about the Son. But according to Christian teaching, God and the Son are manifestations of the same entity. Milton begins with the orthodox Christian premise of a three-part God and then elaborates on the relationship between God the Father and God the Son. By having God send the Son to defeat Satan and create the universe, Milton shows how God and the Son can work separately yet still work as one God. Even though they appear as separate characters, Milton believed that the Son represents the living, active, almost human likeness of God.

## 21.4 Book–VIII

### 21.4.1 Summary: Prologue and Invocation

After Raphael finishes the story of creation, Adam asks him about the motions of the stars, sun, and planets. Eve decides to leave them alone to converse, not because she is bored or unable to grasp the discussion, but because she prefers to hear about the conversation afterward from Adam. Adam assumes from his observations that the other planets orbit the earth, but Raphael explains how it is possible (though not certain) that it only appears this way because of the turning of the Earth on its axis. Raphael mentions to Adam that it does not matter whether the Earth moves or the universe moves around the Earth. Such broad questions often have no possible answers, he explains, because God does not intend human beings to comprehend everything about his creation. Furthermore, Raphael warns Adam that he should be satisfied with the knowledge that God has made available and to resist the urge to gain further understanding outside of the limits he has set.

After listening to Raphael, Adam tells him what he knows about his own creation. He remembers first awakening to consciousness, wondering who and where he was. He quickly realized that he could walk, run, jump, and even speak. Then God came to him and explained how and why he was created, giving him dominion over all the rest of creation, and asking in return only that he not eat from the Tree of Knowledge. Adam surveyed his environment and met the animals of Earth in pairs of two. He had never seen these creatures before, but when God asked him to name the animals, he realized that he already knew each of their names, as God had given him this knowledge beforehand. Adam explains that he soon longed for a companion more equal to himself than the animals, a person with whom he could share his thoughts. To fulfill Adam's desire, God created Eve from a rib in Adam's side while he slept.



*Notes*

Adam remembers this fact because God allowed his mind to remain aware of what was happening even while he slept. Upon seeing Eve, Adam fell instantly in love.



Task How did God create Eve?

Notes

Raphael talks to Adam about love, recommending that he refrain from carnal passion and search for a pure love that rejuvenates and expands his mind and body. Yet Adam is worried about his physical attraction to Eve, since she is noticeably less pure than he. Raphael says that while Eve is more beautiful on the outside, she is less worthy than Adam on the inside. Her spirituality is weaker than Adam's, her intellect is slightly less developed, and her vanity is a serious weakness. Raphael tells Adam that his love for Eve must transcend her sexual attractiveness. Adam responds by admitting his physical attraction to Eve while asserting that his love comes from her emotional and spiritual companionship. Raphael reiterates to Adam the danger that he faces with Eve and the need for both of them to avoid Satan's temptations. Afterward, Raphael takes his leave to return to Heaven and Adam goes to sleep.

### Analysis

Adam's memory of first awakening to consciousness presents significant differences from Eve's first memories, which we see in Book IV. Whereas Eve awakens in shade, Adam does so in broad sunlight—"happy Light," as he calls it (VIII.285). Eve is quickly drawn in by reflections and images, coming to desire an illusion of herself, and only gradually drawn by God toward Adam and the wisdom represented by the platan tree. Adam, in contrast, looks toward the sky and toward God immediately upon waking up. He quickly discovers that he knows the true names of things, so he is not deceived by mere appearances and shadows. God appears to him as a visible presence rather than merely a voice, and entrusts Adam with his commandments, all of which suggests that Adam is closer to God and to the truth than Eve. When God asks Adam why he wants a companion, given that God himself is solitary and without peer, Adam shows that he understands his own nature, arguing that he is deficient and defective, unlike God.

Adam's account of his first meeting with Eve is somewhat different from the version Eve gives in Book IV. There, Eve says that she turned away from Adam at first because he did not seem as attractive as her own reflection. Although Adam has heard Eve's explanation, in his explanation to Raphael he says that her turning away from him seemed to him to be intentionally designed to make her more attractive to him (whether the intention was Eve's or God's), as it is natural for him to pursue her rather than the other way around. This discrepancy could point to Adam's tendency to deceive himself where Eve is concerned.

Adam and Raphael's description of Eve illustrates Milton's view of the inequality of men and women. Eve's decision to leave Raphael and Adam alone, preferring to hear the conversation from Adam afterward, demonstrates her submission to Adam and her reluctance to converse with the angel herself. We get the sense that she withdraws because she acknowledges her place in God's hierarchy. Moreover, Milton tells us that she prefers to hear the story mingled with Adam's caresses, indicating that intellectual stimulation by itself is not sufficient for her. Her absence allows Adam and Raphael to discuss her openly, but it also implies Milton's belief that women are either uninterested or mentally ill-equipped for intellectual pursuits. Whatever the reason, Eve's lack of knowledge or engagement with reason allows her to remain ignorant to the dangers that lie ahead for her and Adam.

### Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

- Which of the angels is considered a hero arguing against Satan?
  - Abdiel
  - Uriel
  - Michael
  - Raphael

## Notes

2. In an attempt to defeat God and his angels, what do the rebel angels make?
  - (a) A Fortress
  - (b) A Catapult
  - (c) A Large sword
  - (d) A Cannon
3. According to Paradise Lost, which of the following does not created by God?
  - (a) The son
  - (b) Adam and Eve
  - (c) Computers
  - (d) He creates everything
4. Who does Milton name as his heavenly muse?
  - (a) Titania
  - (b) Urania
  - (c) Virgil
  - (d) Michael
5. What does Eve do when she first becomes conscious?
  - (a) Go in search of her mate
  - (b) Talk to the animals
  - (c) Look at her reflection in a stream
  - (d) Eat of the Tree of knowledge

Raphael's account of our solar system displays Milton's knowledge of the conflicting scientific theories and beliefs of his time. Milton was well aware that the organization of the universe was hotly disputed. Some astronomers thought that the universe revolved around the Earth, and others, including Milton's contemporary Galileo (to whom he alludes by name in Book I), felt that the Earth revolved around the sun. While Galileo's theory was widely denounced by religious authorities, Milton does not take either side of the issue in Paradise Lost, having Raphael assert that the debate is unimportant because it concerns matters that do not pertain to humankind's relationship with God.

Similarly, Raphael's message to Adam about the limits of human knowledge functions as a warning to scientists in Milton's time. Many believed that science could yield incorrect and misleading answers to questions about the universe. Milton argues that humankind should resist making theories about the universe and other incomprehensible things, and focus rather on pragmatic issues of their daily spiritual lives. Milton believed in the necessity of scientific questionings and pursuits, but he also believed that the pursuit of truth through science would yield dangerous results. Truth, according to Milton, should only be pursued through faith and religion; humans should tend to their more Earthly practical matters and have faith that God will manage the metaphysical matters of the universe.

### 21.5 Summary

- Raphael first describes the composition of the things God created on Earth. God gave different kinds of substance to all living things.
- Eve's dream, created by Satan's whispering in her ear as she sleeps, foreshadows her ultimate temptation and downfall.
- Milton uses Raphael's story to present another of his unorthodox religious views.
- Satan's army unveils the cannons the next day and bombards the good angels.
- The style of battle does not resemble the warfare of Milton's day, but rather the feudal warfare of earlier epics.
- Raphael's account of the world's creation closely follows the biblical account of creation in the first few chapters of Genesis.

### 21.6 Keywords

- Feudal* : According to, resembling, or denoting the system of feudalism.
- Muse* : Be absorbed in thought.

**Rebellious** : Difficult to control.

**Notes**

**Cannon** : Heavy piece of artillery formerly used in warfare.

### **21.7 Review Questions**

1. What kind of food does Eve prepare for Raphael?
2. Why does Satan rebel against God?
3. Had the light appeared before the Sun?
4. What does God plan to do to repair the loss of Satan and his angels in Heaven?
5. What is the first thing that Adam wants to find after his creation?

### **Answers: Self Assessment**

- |        |        |        |
|--------|--------|--------|
| 1. (a) | 2. (d) | 3. (d) |
| 4. (b) | 5. (c) |        |

### **21.8 Further Readings**



*Books*

- |                                      |                 |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------|
| Paradise Lost I (Non-detailed study) | — John Milton   |
| John Milton Paradise Lost            | — John Milton   |
| John Milton: a short Introduction    | — Roy Flannagan |



*Online links*

- <http://www.bookrags.com/notes/pl/index.html>  
<http://pinkmonkey.com/booknotes/barrons/paradis02.asp>

Notes

## Unit 22: Paradise Lost-I (Non-detailed Study): Discussion and Analysis-III

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### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Explain the prologue and invocation of Book IX-XII
- Discuss the analysis of Book IX-XII
- Explain the characters and style of Paradise Lost.

## Introduction

## Notes

Milton's fourth invocation differs from earlier ones in that he does not call on Urania except obliquely, and he does not mention his blindness. Rather he offers an explanation for his epic and says that the tone must now become "Tragic". The word "tragic" had two connotations for Milton. First, it carried the simple moral meaning of something terribly bad or unfortunate. Christians since the Middle Ages had always considered the falls of Lucifer and Adam tragic. But "tragic" also refers to the dramatic concept of tragedy as first defined by Aristotle and developed through the centuries to its high achievement in Elizabethan England. Milton knew the nature of dramatic tragedy from his study of the Greeks as well as from reading Shakespeare and other Elizabethan dramatists.

The first scene of Book X takes place in Heaven, where the angels are aware of Adam's and Eve's fall. God assembles the hosts to confirm this fact and to emphasize that he knew Adam and Eve would yield to temptation but that he in no way inclined them to the deed. The act was of their own free wills. Now, however, Adam and Eve must be judged; however, God adds, justice can be tempered with mercy. God sends the Son to pronounce sentence on Adam and Eve.

Books XI and XII change the focus of *Paradise Lost*. The plot of Adam's and Eve's fall has been completed. The final scenes for most characters have occurred. A brief conclusion seems logical. Instead, Milton adds two more books that trace biblical history through Jesus. Many scholars and readers have questioned the artistic justification for these books, and, in truth, the books do seem to needlessly prolong the work. On the other hand, several solid arguments can be adduced to explain the reasons for Books XI and XII, if not their necessity.

Milton's stated purpose in the poem is to justify God's ways to Man. By the end of Book X, Milton has been able to explain his concept of what God did and why, but he has offered little in the way of justification. Can the single instance of disobedience by Eve and then Adam justify death, war, plague, famine — an endless list of evil? To truly accomplish his goal, Milton needs to show the effects of the fall on Adam and Eve over a longer period and at the same time develop the notion that some greater good than innocence and immortality in Paradise could result from the fall. Books XI and XII represent Milton's attempt at justification.

Book XII appears to be a simple continuation of Book XI, and, in fact, in the first edition of *Paradise Lost*, Books XI and XII were one book. In the second edition, Milton changed his original ten book format to twelve. One of the changes was the division that created Books XI and XII. Biblical scholars in the seventeenth century dated the Creation at 4,000 BC and the flood at 2,000 BC. So Milton divided his original Book X into two 2,000 years sections, each ending with a savior — Noah in Book XI and Jesus in Book XII. He also arranged for a slightly different presentation in each book. Book XI is presented as a series of almost scene-like visions, each complete in itself. Book XII is much more narrative. Michael says that he will now tell the story, and he presents a grand sweep of historical events rather than a scene-by-scene account.

## 22.1 Book – IX, Lines 1—403

### 22.1.1 Summary: Prologue and Invocation

With Raphael's departure for Heaven, the story no longer consists of conversations between heavenly beings and humankind. Milton explains that he must now turn to Adam and Eve's actual act of disobedience. The poem must now turn tragic, and Milton asserts his intention to show that the fall of humankind is more heroic than the tales of Virgil and Homer. He invokes Urania, the "Celestial Patroness" (IX.21) and muse of Christian inspiration, and asks for her to visit him in his sleep and inspire his words, because he fears he is too old and lacks the creative powers to accomplish the task himself. He hopes not to get caught up in the description of unimportant items, as Virgil and Homer did, and to remain focused on his ultimate and divine task.

## Notes

Satan returns to the Garden of Eden the night after Raphael's departure. Satan's return comes eight days after he was caught and banished by Gabriel. He sneaks in over the wall, avoiding Gabriel and the other guards. After studying all the animals of the Garden, Satan considers what disguise he should assume, and chooses to become a snake. Before he can continue, however, he again hesitates—not because of doubt this time, but because of his grief at not being able to enjoy this wondrous new world. He struggles to control his thoughts. He now believes that the Earth is more beautiful than Heaven ever was, and becomes jealous of Adam and Eve and their chosen status to occupy and maintain Paradise. He gripes that the excess beauty of Earth causes him to feel more torment and anguish. Gathering his thoughts into action, he finds a sleeping serpent and enters its body.

The next morning, Adam and Eve prepare for their usual morning labors. Realizing that they have much work to do, Eve suggests that they work separately, so that they might get more work done. Adam is not keen on this idea. He fears that they will be more susceptible to Satan's temptation if they are alone. Eve, however, is eager to have her strength tested. After much resistance, Adam concedes, as Eve promises Adam that she will return to their bower soon. They go off to do their gardening independently.

## Analysis

Milton begins Book IX as he began Books I and VII: with an invocation and plea for guidance, as well as a comparison of his task to that of the great Greek and Roman epics, the Iliad, Odyssey, and the Aeneid. Milton explains by way of this invocation that Adam and Eve's fall is the major event that occurs in Paradise Lost. Their fall is the poem's climax, even though it comes as no surprise. By describing the fall as tragic, Milton conveys the gravity and seriousness of this catastrophe for all of humankind, but he also situates Adam and Eve's story within the literary conventions of tragedy, in which a great man falls because of a special flaw within his otherwise larger-than-life character. The fall paves the way for humankind's ultimate redemption and salvation, and thus Milton can claim that his epic surpasses Homer's and Virgil's because it pertains to the entire human race, not one hero or even one nation.

Milton mocks the knightly romances of the Middle Ages on the grounds that they applaud merely superficial heroism. The idea of the chivalrous warrior was an oxymoron in Milton's view. Milton presents his hero as a morally powerful person—Adam's strength and martial prowess are entirely irrelevant. Milton voices doubts about whether his society will appreciate a real Christian hero, or whether he himself is still skilled enough or young enough to complete his literary task, balancing his confidence in his own ability with the humility appropriate to a Christian poet.

Satan's return to the story presents him as a changed and further degenerated character. Before the temptation of Eve, we see Satan go through another bit of soul-searching. This time, however, he does not waver in his determination to ruin humankind, but only makes a cold expression of regret for things that might have been. Milton notes that Satan is driven to action by the grief and turmoil he feels inside and by his wounded sense of pride. It is clear now that Satan's decision to corrupt humankind is final, yet he still thinks about how he would have enjoyed the beauty of Earth if he had not rebelled. Milton displays the internal agony that results from the sin of despair: Satan can clearly see, despite all his previous arguments, that it would have been better to remain good. However, he has forbidden himself from even considering the possibility of repentance. As a result, he degenerates further and further, making his mind and body his own personal Hell.



Task

Why is Book IX a central part of the epic poem?

Milton has given absolute power to the reason and free will of both men and Satan, only to show that the mind can defeat itself—using reason to arrive at an unreasonable position. Satan's thoughts

are increasingly contradictory and confusing, becoming hard for us, and perhaps for himself, to follow. Satan comes to believe his own faulty logic and his own lies. In Books I and II, his ability to reason is strong, but now in Book IX he can hardly form a coherent argument. Ironically, Satan has proved the truth of his own earlier statement that the mind can make a heaven of hell or a hell of heaven. Satan intended to make a heaven out of Hell, where he would be an evil version of God. Instead, he has brought his torture with him, and made a hell out of the earth that, but for him, would be heavenly.

## **22.2 Book – IX, Lines 404—1189**

### **22.2.1 Summary: Prologue and Invocation**

Satan, in the form of the serpent, searches for the couple. He is delighted to find Eve alone. Coiling up, he gets her attention, and begins flattering her beauty, grace, and godliness. Eve is amazed to see a creature of the Garden speak. He tells her in enticing language that he gained the gifts of speech and intellect by eating the savory fruit of one of the trees in the garden. He flatters Eve by saying that eating the apple also made him seek her out in order to worship her beauty.

Eve is amazed by the power that this fruit supposedly gives the snake. Curious to know which tree holds this fruit, Eve follows Satan until he brings her to the Tree of Knowledge. She recoils, telling him that God has forbidden them to eat from this tree, but Satan persists, arguing that God actually wants them to eat from the tree. Satan says that God forbids it only because he wants them to show their independence. Eve is now seriously tempted. The flattery has made her desire to know more. She reasons that God claimed that eating from this tree meant death, but the serpent ate (or so he claims) and not only does he still live, but can speak and think. God would have no reason to forbid the fruit unless it were powerful, Eve thinks, and seeing it right before her eyes makes all of the warnings seem exaggerated. It looks so perfect to Eve. She reaches for an apple, plucks it from the tree, and takes a bite.



*Did u know?* The Earth then feels wounded and nature sighs in woe, for with this act, humankind has fallen.

Eve's first fallen thought is to find Adam and to have him eat of the forbidden fruit too so that they might be equal. She finds him nearby, and in hurried words tells him that she has eaten the fruit, and that her eyes have been opened. Adam drops the wreath of flowers he made for her. He is horrified because he knows that they are now doomed, but immediately decides that he cannot possibly live without Eve. Eve does not want Adam to remain and have another woman; she wants him to suffer the same fate as she. Adam realizes that if she is to be doomed, then he must follow. He eats the fruit. He too feels invigorated at first. He turns a lustful eye on Eve, and they run off into the woods for sexual play.

Adam and Eve fall asleep briefly, but upon awakening they see the world in a new way. They recognize their sin, and realize that they have lost Paradise. At first, Adam and Eve both believe that they will gain glorious amounts of knowledge, but the knowledge that they gained by eating the apple was only of the good that they had lost and the evil that they had brought upon themselves. They now see each other's nakedness and are filled with shame. They cover themselves with leaves. Milton explains that their appetite for knowledge has been fulfilled, and their hunger for God has been quenched. Angry and confused, they continue to blame each other for committing the sin, while neither will admit any fault. Their shameful and tearful argument continues for hours.

Notes

**Analysis**

The ease with which Satan persuades Eve to sin paints an unflattering portrayal of woman, one that accords with Milton's portrayal throughout the poem of women as the weaker sex. Eve allows the serpent's compliments to win her over, demonstrating that she cares more about superficial things such as beauty than profound things such as God's grace. Furthermore, that Eve gives in to the serpent after only a few deceptive arguments reveals her inability to reason soundly. Not only is she herself corruptible, however, but she also seeks to corrupt others: her immediate reaction upon discovering her sin is to lure Adam into her fate. Rather than repent and take full responsibility for her actions, she moves instinctively to drag Adam down with her to make him share her suffering. Eve thus comes across as an immoral and harmful being, one whose values are skewed and who has a bad influence on others.

Satan's argument that knowledge is good because knowing what is good and evil makes it easier to do what is good wrongfully assumes that knowledge is always good. This flaw in his argument is the theological thrust of this book: though the intellect is powerful and god-like, obeying God is a higher priority than feeding the intellect. Milton believes that one cannot first obey reason and then obey God; rather one must trust God and then trust reason. Raphael's wise argument from Book VIII about the limitations of human knowledge and the need to feel comfortable with this limited knowledge, is blatantly neglected or forgotten. If Eve had stayed to listen to Raphael and Adam's discussion and had recognized the dangers of working separately, then she could have been safer from Satan's temptation. Or if Adam had relayed Raphael's warning message to Eve more thoroughly and persuasively, and if he had denied Eve's suggestion that they work separately, then the fall might have been avoidable. Eve overestimates the powers of her ability to protect herself and to resist temptation, and Adam underestimates the need to protect Eve and share his knowledge with her. Both must suffer from each other's shortfalls.

Adam sins not out of a desire to gain the knowledge from eating the fruit, but out of recognition that Eve has left him with little or no alternative. Adam needs even less persuading than Eve to eat the apple, and does so knowing that he is disobeying God. He knows that he could not be happy if Eve were banished, and his desire to stay with Eve overwhelms his desire to obey God. Adam's sin of temptation is choosing Eve over God, letting physical and emotional impulses overtake reason. The wreath of flowers he makes for Eve symbolizes his love for her. When he sees that she has eaten from the Tree of Knowledge, he drops the wreath, symbolizing her fallen state. The dropping of the wreath may also hint at Adam's disappointment in Eve as a spiritual lover and companion, and even his falling out of pure love with her. After Adam eats the apple, his attraction to Eve changes subtly, and he looks at her more like a connoisseur, eager to indulge. The sexuality the two displays are now perverted, their love in the dark forest more lustful and animal-like than their earlier love in the lush, bright bower. Their arguing and blaming of each other demonstrate their lack of unity and peace, and demonstrate, as does the Earth's sighing, their fallen state.

**22.3 Book – X**

**22.3.1 Summary: Prologue and Invocation**

The scene returns to Heaven, where God knows immediately that Adam and Eve have eaten from the Tree of Knowledge. Gabriel and the other angels guarding Paradise also know, and they fly back up to Heaven. They report that they did all they could to prevent Satan from re-entering the Garden. God tells them that he allowed it himself without condoning it, and acquits his angels of any guilt. He then sends his Son down to Earth to pass judgment on the couple.

In Paradise, the Son calls to Adam, who comes forth shamefacedly along with Eve. They are embarrassed by their nakedness. Asked if they have eaten from the tree, Adam admits that Eve gave the fruit to him to eat, and Eve blames the serpent for persuading her to take it. The Son first condemns the serpent, whose body Satan possessed to tempt Eve. He ordains that all snakes now

must crawl on their bellies, never to carry themselves upright again. The Son decrees that Adam and Eve's children will bruise the serpent's head, while serpents will forever bite humans by the heel. As punishment for the couple, Eve and all women to follow will give birth in pain, and must submit to their husbands.

Notes



*Notes* Adam and all men after him will have to labor to hunt and harvest food in cursed ground. After passing these sentences, the Son returns to Heaven.

Meanwhile in Hell, Sin and Death remain at the gate of Hell where Satan left them. Sensing that Satan has succeeded in his task, they finish the bridge linking Hell to Earth and begin to travel toward Earth to meet him. At the edge of Paradise, Sin and Death meet Satan. They congratulate him for succeeding in his mission and promise him that they will infect the Earth. Death will corrupt all living things, causing them to die, and Sin will corrupt the thoughts and deeds of humankind. They also tell Satan that his success must have allowed them to leave Hell, proving that he has established his control over humankind and Earth. Satan thanks Sin and Death for their praises and urges them to hurry on their way to conquer Earth. Satan believes that he has in fact acquired the special powers Sin and Death spoke of, when in truth God allows them to enter Earth so that the Son can conquer them when he becomes human. Now, Satan goes back down to Hell, where his followers have been eagerly waiting his return. Satan speaks to them from Pandemonium, tells them of his triumph, and expects to hear riotous applause. Instead, he hears hisses signifying scorn for him and his devastating act. The devils have all been transformed into snakes, along with Satan, who did not understand the punishment the Son foretold. A grove of trees appears in Hell, with fruit that turns to ashes as soon as the snakes try to bite it.



*Did u know?* Sin and Death arrive on Earth and begin their work. From Heaven, God sees that they have come to Earth and tells his angels that he will allow Sin and Death to stay on Earth until Judgement Day. After then, they must return to Hell and be forever locked up with Satan and the other devils.

God now calls for his angels to alter the universe. They tilt the Earth's axis or alter the path of the sun (the poem allows for both interpretations). Now humankind will have to endure extreme hot and cold seasons, instead of enjoying the constant temperate climate that existed before Adam and Eve's fall from God's grace. Meanwhile, Discord follows Sin to Earth and causes animals to war with each other and with humans too. Seeing these changes, Adam is sorrowful, and laments. He knows that the rest of humankind will suffer because of his disobedience, and wishes that he could bear all of the punishment upon himself. He curses life and wishes that Death would come at once to alleviate his misery. Instead, Eve comes to him. But Adam is angry; he blames and insults Eve's female nature, wondering why God ever created her. She begs his forgiveness, and pleads with him not to leave her. She reminds him that the snake tricked her, but she fully accepts the blame for sinning against both God and him. She argues that unity and love can save them in a fallen world. She longs for death and suggests that they take their own lives, but Adam forbids it. Eve's speech affects Adam. He becomes calm, consoling her and sharing responsibility for their fall. They must stop blaming each other, he says. They must live with their mistakes and make the most out of their fallen state. Remembering the prophecy that Eve's seed would bruise the head of the serpent, he feels that there is hope for humankind and advises that they obey God and implore his mercy and forgiveness. They return to the spot where they were punished. There, they fall to their knees, confess their sins, and ask for forgiveness.

## Notes

## Analysis

If Book IX presents the climax of *Paradise Lost*, then Book X presents its resolution, as the punishments that the Son hands out restore some sort of order to the world. Satan and the other supporting characters disappear from the rest of the poem, eliminating the source of human temptation and thus focusing the poem on Adam and Eve's regret. But Adam and Eve begin to redeem humankind with their repentance at the end of Book X. As a result, these characters will disappear from the story, and humankind's predicted redemption will take precedence as the story continues, with Adam and Eve learning about their fallen future.

The devils' punishment to live as snakes forever tempted by fruit on a glorious tree echoes Satan's temptation of Eve. Now they must forever suffer the pains of desire without ever having hope of attaining their wishes, a punishment befitting their crime. To have the devils frozen in a state of perpetual desire and unattainable satisfaction is fit for a group of evildoers who continue to battle God through their disobedience.

Milton uses the concept of typology—the Christian belief that Old Testament characters symbolize and predict New Testament characters—to demonstrate the intimate relationship between the fall of humankind and the redemption of humankind. This relationship between the fall and the resurrection forms the base of the Christian interpretation of the Bible. Milton considers Mary, the mother of the Son (Jesus), to be the “second Eve.” As Sin and Death came into the world through Eve, the Son would conquer Sin and Death through Mary. Likewise, Milton considers Jesus to be a “second Adam” who corrects Adam and Eve's disobedience through his resurrection. Through these comparisons between Eve and Mary, and Adam and Jesus, the fall and the resurrection become intertwined. The fall is the cause of human history; the resurrection is the result of human history.



Task

What is Adam and Eve's punishment for their disobedience to God?

Although Adam and Eve are ailing at the end of Book IX, they take action in Book X and separate their fate from Satan's fate. Satan, as Milton shows, cannot allow himself to repent. His damnation is permanent since his disobedience comes from within and without repentance. On the other hand, humankind's disobedience comes from the temptation of another. This idea helps to explain Adam and Eve's actions and subsequent punishment at the end of Book X. Realizing the terrible consequences of their actions, they come dangerously close to rationalizing suicide, but Adam decides to beg God for forgiveness—the only right answer, in Milton's opinion. Though the coming of the Son and the salvation of humankind had already been foretold, the couple's decision to repent is crucial in God's willingness to forgive them. God will show mercy when asked, but as we see with Satan, there can be no mercy without repentance. In one of the most important quotations in *Paradise Lost*, Milton poetically demonstrates the importance of Adam and Eve's decision in the last several lines of Book X. Adam explains how their repentance and prayer will occur, and then as they pray, Milton duplicates Adam's explanation as the actual action of their prayer. As Adam explains to Eve:

What better can we do, than to the place  
 Repairing where he judg'd us, prostrate fall  
 Before him reverent, and there confess  
 Humbly our faults, and pardon beg, with tears  
 Watering the ground. . .  
 (X.1087–1090)

This moment of prayer is crucial because now humankind will not all go the way of Satan, because man produces what the devil could not: true sorrow and regret.

Milton gives Eve the ability to argue persuasively to Adam, showing her intelligence and talents after all. Eve displays a new humility and grace when she repents after the fall. Her strength lies in her ability to relate her feelings to Adam, feelings that Adam shares. Eve's contemplation of suicide is a sign of weakness, but after Eve's moving speech, Adam is able to help see—and to help her see—why they should not commit suicide. As they lose hope of Paradise, they witness the hope of their race: God's Son, Jesus. It is this hope that prevents the couple from taking their own lives when they realize the extent of their punishment. They choose hope over despair. Milton resolves their distinguished differences through a display of unity: Eve's loving and emotional arguments to stay together and Adam's rational argument to repent help them begin to save humankind together. Their similarities and teamwork, not their differences and occasional parity, allow them to obey reason and survive.

## **22.4 Book – XI**

### **22.4.1 Summary: Prologue and Invocation**

God hears the prayers of Adam and Eve, inspired by his own grace. He allows his Son to act as an advocate for humankind, and eventually pay for humankind's sins. The Father then calls all the angels of Heaven together, and announces his plans. He commands the Archangel Michael to go down to Earth and escort Adam and Eve out of Paradise. They can no longer live in a pure place now that they are impure. But through leading a good and moral life, they may be reunited with God after their death. To make the news easier on them, God allows Michael to show Adam a vision of what is to come in the future of humankind.

Adam anticipates that God has heard their prayers. He reassures Eve that she will be able to seek revenge on Satan by being the mother of humankind. She still feels ashamed for bringing Sin and Death into the world, and does not feel that she deserves to have such a role. Nevertheless, she asserts, she will try to obey God and live peacefully in Paradise. Michael then flies down from Heaven and tells them that they must leave Paradise. This news shocks and saddens them, even though their death will be delayed so that they may live for many years. Michael comforts them with the knowledge that all of the Earth, not just Paradise, has been given to them by God and is under the eye of the Father. They are saddened to leave Paradise but know they must obey God's command. Adam laments that he will never be able to speak with God again, but Michael explains that Adam can speak to God wherever he goes. The Archangel then puts Eve to sleep and takes Adam up to a high hill to show him visions of humankind's future.

From the highest hill in Paradise, Michael allows Adam to see nearly an entire hemisphere of the Earth. Adam sees two men offering sacrifices, and watches in horror as one of them kills the other. Michael explains that these men are Cain and Abel, the first sons of Adam and Eve. Adam is shocked and dismayed at his first vision of death. The angel then shows him the other ways that death will take the lives of men: disease, war, and old age. Adam asks if there is any alternative to death, woefully declaring that he could not die too soon, but Michael advises him that obeying God and living a virtuous life can allow people to live long and fruitful lives, so long as Heaven permits.

Next a vision appears of men and women enjoying dances, games, and amorous courting. Adam assumes that this vision is a good portent, but Michael informs him that they are atheists who live for pleasure, not for God, and that they will die as well. This image is followed by the appearance of great armies, slaughtering men by the thousands and plundering cities. Michael tells how war will be praised by violent men, and many terrible conquerors will be admired as heroes. One man, Michael explains, will try to prevent these wars: Enoch. The other men shun him and threaten to kill him, until God lifts him up and brings him safely to Heaven. The scene then changes to further

## Notes

sins of death and dancing and sex. These scenes depict a later era in which sins of the flesh will abound. A single man can be seen, preaching to the others to repent and stop this evil way of life, but he is ignored. He goes off into the mountains and constructs a giant boat, filling it with all the animals of the Earth, and his family. A great flood then comes, wiping out all living things except those on the boat. The good man who builds the boat is Noah. Michael explains how God was angered by humankind's sinful ways, and decided to cleanse the earth of them. He finds one virtuous man, Noah, and preserves humankind through him. The flood wipes out all human life except for Noah and his family. At the end of the flood, Adam sees a rainbow appear and God's covenant with humankind that he will never again destroy the Earth by flood. Adam feels reassured by this story and its promise that virtue and obedience to God will continue on Earth through Noah.

## Analysis

The visions in Books XI and XII provide a larger context to *Paradise Lost* and allow Milton to "justify the ways of God to men" and to conclude his epic poem with the message that one must live virtuously and be obedient to God. These stories, narrated as Adam's visions, explain why God allows sin and death into the world, and why God wants us to live a certain way. Without these visions and stories, Milton could not explain God's reasoning and his glorious plan for humankind. These visions enable Milton to transcend his focus from the first narrative in the Bible to subsequent books, so that he can discuss human history in broad terms. Part of his message is that human history should be told in terms of its sins, not its advancements in civilizations or invention. These visions expose a dangerous cycle of sins, from sloth and envy to gluttony and lust. Through these visions, Milton asserts the need for repentance and service to God.

Adam and Eve's repentance is made possible through the grace of God. The act of repentance was necessary for salvation, and since God wanted humankind to be redeemed, he planted the seeds of repentance in the souls of Adam and Eve. This realization is appropriate to the belief that humankind, after the fall, is totally depraved. Adam and Eve cannot do anything good on their own accord without God's guidance. God also now specifically reveals why he allows Death to come into the world. Humankind is now impure and unfit for Paradise, as well as for the kingdom of Heaven. The sacrifice of Jesus makes humankind worthy of Heaven: his sacrifice is humankind's final remedy.



*Notes* The price of Jesus' sacrifice is heavy, but the reward outweighs the cost. After death, humankind can be purified and renewed, thus restoring them to their previous position as God's obedient children.

The whole sequence of visions contains a careful emotional balance between grief at the corruption of sin and joy at the redemption of the moral soul. Michael evokes this balance through these visions to inform Adam of humankind's sins and punishments, as well as their sacrifices and rewards. Otherwise, he might have given up hope, and God does not want humankind to fall victim to the same despair that doomed Satan. On the other hand, Adam cannot fail to realize just how depraved humankind will become as a result of the fall—Adam and Eve's sins will be repeated again and again by their children and their children's children. The vision of ensuing decay through war, disease and intemperate living gives Adam a tremendous sense of worry and shame. But the figure of Enoch, the one who is saved by God, demonstrates the need to stand up for one's moral beliefs, even if other nonbelievers will kill one for such integrity. The strength and hope in Enoch's story gives Adam the confidence he needs to continue living obedient to God.

Milton presents Adam, along with other men from his vision, as prefigurations of Christ. The whole scene with Adam on the mountain prefigures an event in Jesus' life. In the Gospels, Satan takes Jesus up onto a mountain and offers him all the kingdoms of the world, if he will bow down in

worship to the devil. Adam's time on the mountain is not such a test, but it does tax his courage. Likewise, Enoch's ability to stand up for his beliefs shows the redemptive qualities of humankind. The story of Noah shows that his unwavering belief in God helps to save the virtues of humankind. Noah is given such an important place here because Milton, like many other Christian thinkers, thought of him as a Christ figure: a single man whose virtue in the face of evil saves humankind. From the stories of Enoch and Noah, Adam can recognize the power of devotion to God. These visions, and Adam himself, demonstrate the path of greatness that prefigures the salvation of humankind through Jesus' sacrifice. These visions also demonstrate Milton's belief that a true measure of a person, from Adam up until modern times, is his or her virtuous relationship with God.

## **22.5 Book – XII**

### **22.5.1 Summary: Prologue and Invocation**

Michael continues relating the story of the future of humankind to Adam. After the flood, humankind develops from a "second stock": Noah and his family. Humans now act more obediently to God than humans before the Flood, offering sacrifices from their flocks and fields. However, several generations later, a leader arrives with proud and ungodly ambitions. This upstart is Nimrod, a tyrant who forces many men under his rule. He constructs the Tower of Babel in an attempt to reach up to Heaven. As punishment, God decrees that men will now speak different languages and be unable to understand each other. Adam agrees with Michael that no one should have dominion over other people, who are by nature free. Michael qualifies this freedom: because of the fall, he says, men only have true liberty when they obey "right reason," or reason tempered by conscience. Still, Michael adds, it remains a great sin for one person to take away the liberty of another.

Continuing his story, Michael explains that God chooses Israel as the one nation to rise above the rest. He takes one person, Abraham, father of the Israelites, from a race that worships idols. At God's command, Abraham sets off from his native land and travels to Canaan, the Promised Land. His descendants eventually move to Egypt, and become enslaved by Pharaoh, the ruler of Egypt. Finally, a man named Moses is born, and he eventually leads the people out of Egypt, through the plagues brought down upon the Pharaoh. Michael tells how God allowed the Israelites to pass through the Red Sea, then closed the waters around the Pharaoh's army, which had come to recapture the Israelites. The followers of Moses must travel through the desert to return to Canaan, but they survive with the help of God.

Adam is much relieved to hear that God will bless a portion of humankind, after having it cursed for so long. But he does not understand how all the laws given to these people can possibly be obeyed, or how the Israelites are to remain just before God. Michael replies that they cannot remain just, even if they obey the law, until a greater sacrifice is made. He explains that after generations, the Israelites will turn more and more to sin, until God decides to strengthen their enemies. When they repent, God will save them from these same enemies. After many different rulers, there will come a king named David, and from his descendants will eventually come a Messiah, or chosen one. This Messiah, also known as Jesus or the Son, will once again bring together Earth and Heaven. However, he will have to suffer for it: he shall be hated by many while he lives and will be distrusted, betrayed, and punished by death. However, the grave will not hold this Messiah for long, and rising up he will defeat both Sin and Death, and bruise the head of Satan. His resurrection fulfills the prophecy about the Son finally punishing Satan through his sacrifice. Adam worries that the followers of Jesus will be persecuted, and Michael confirms that they will indeed be persecuted. However, the Archangel says, from Heaven the Messiah will send down the Holy Spirit to provide spiritual protection. But after the first followers die, corrupt leaders as well as good ones will enter the church. Thus those who genuinely follow the truth will still be prosecuted, laments Michael: the world will continue to accommodate evil and make it difficult for individuals to do good deeds.

**Notes**

Finally, the Messiah will return a second time, to judge all humankind and reunite Heaven and Earth.

Adam is now more than comforted. He can hardly believe that out of his evil deed so much good will come. Now, however, it is time for him and Eve to leave Paradise. He comes down from the mountain with Michael. Eve awakens from her sleep and tells Adam that she has had an educating dream. Michael then leads the couple to the gate of Eden. There he stands with other angels, brandishing a sword of flame that will forever protect the entrance to Paradise. Slowly and tearfully, Adam and Eve turn away hand in hand with Michael, and wander out into a new world.

**Analysis**

The discussion between Adam and Michael about Nimrod and the Tower of Babel provides Milton with an opportunity to express his fundamental ideas about political and religious freedom. Adam's admonishment of Nimrod for trying to control other men is the most extreme example of Milton's distrust of institutions and his absolute faith in the ability of the individual person to make his own decisions. Humankind's freedom has already been restricted by the fall, but humankind can still obey reason if individuals think and act separately and for God. When individuals use reason in this way, then they possess true freedom. However, because of Adam's sin, humankind will find it difficult to always follow reason; when an individual strays from God and from reason, he becomes a slave to passions and desires, and is thus not truly free at all, but becomes a slave to desire. This paradox is the reason why Milton did not feel that total individual freedom, within the Church for example, would result in anarchy. Each person can act separately with reason and obey God. The rest of Michael's discourse follows the biblical accounts closely. He progresses through the Old Testament, working his way through the most significant events until he comes to the line of King David, the line from which the Messiah would come. When Milton comes to Jesus' birth, he works more of his own personal interpretations into the biblical story. When Adam asks Michael how the Israelites could possibly follow all of the laws that God gave them, which are contained in the four books following Genesis in the Bible, Milton begins a brief discussion of the Christian view of Old Testament law. Through the vision, Milton explains that law can identify and punish wrongdoing but cannot abolish or eradicate it completely. Without a proper remedy for Adam's sin, attempts to obey God's law only emphasize humankind's sinfulness, according to Christian belief. This lack of a remedy is why the Israelites failed time and again to keep their covenant with God. When a worthy sacrifice is made, when Jesus offers himself on the cross, only then could humankind be capable of doing anything pleasing to God.

Adam brings up the pivotal concept of the fortunate fall, which asserts that the fall of humankind is fortunate for several reasons. Adam and Eve's disobedience allows God to show his mercy and temperance in their punishments and his eternal providence toward humankind. This display of love and compassion, given through the Son, is a gift to humankind. Humankind must now experience pain and death, but it can also experience mercy, salvation, and grace in ways it would not have been able to had Adam and Eve not disobeyed. While humankind has fallen from grace, it can redeem and save itself through a continued devotion and obedience to God. The salvation of humankind, in the form of the Son's (Jesus') sacrifice and resurrection, can begin to restore humankind to its former state. In other words, good will come of sin and death, and humankind will eventually be rewarded. This fortunate result justifies God's reasoning and explains his ultimate plan for humankind.



Task

What becomes of Solomon's people?

Adam's ability to perceive the fall as a fortunate one is an inherent paradox in Milton's mixture of the human and the divine. Adam is to be judged according to what he did in his own time, and yet he is allowed to see all the future consequences of his actions in an instant. A mortal mind cannot readily accept this idea. Few Christian thinkers (certainly not Milton) would say that the sin of Adam and Eve was an unequivocally good thing. Rather, the fall and the resurrection are both intimate parts of God's providence—he foresees them both and sees them outside of time, existing together. Humankind, on the other hand, must do its best in a temporal world, dealing with the decisions of the present. As Adam and Eve leave Paradise, they know that obedience to God and love for his creation can help humankind toward its salvation, and lead humankind toward regaining the Paradise that has been lost.

### Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

- In what book does the fall take place?
  - Book VIII
  - Book X
  - Book IX
  - Book XII
- What is Milton's stated purpose in Paradise Lost?
  - To assert his superiority to other poets
  - To argue against the doctrine of predestination
  - To justify the ways of God to men
  - To make his story hard to understand
- Which of the following is not a character in Paradise Lost?
  - Night
  - Agony
  - Discord
  - Death
- When Satan leaps over the fence into Paradise, what does Milton liken him to?
  - A snake slithering up a tree
  - A germ infecting a body
  - A wolf leaping into a sheep's pen
  - A fish leaping out of water
- Which angel tells Adam about the future in Books XI and XII?
  - Uriel
  - Raphael
  - Michael
  - None of these
- Which statement about the Earth is asserted as true in Paradise Lost?
  - It was created before God the son
  - Earth hangs from Heaven by a chain
  - The Earth is a Lotus flower
  - The Earth revolves around the sun
- What is the stated subject of Paradise Lost?
  - The fight between good and evil
  - Heaven's battle and Satan's tragic fall
  - The creation of the universe
  - Adam and Eve's disobedience
- Which devil in Satan's second-in-command?
  - Mammon
  - Sin
  - Moloch
  - Beezelbub
- Who discusses cosmology and the battle of Heaven with Adam?
  - God
  - Eve
  - Raphael
  - Michael

Notes

10. Which scene happens first chronologically?
  - (a) Satan and the devils rise up from the lake in Hell
  - (b) The son is chosen as God's second-in-command
  - (c) God and the son create the universe
  - (d) The angels battle in Heaven

## **22.6 Paradise Lost-I: Grand Style and Character Portrayal of Satan**

### **22.6.1 Character Portrayal of Satan**

Some readers consider Satan to be the hero, or protagonist, of the story, because he struggles to overcome his own doubts and weaknesses and accomplishes his goal of corrupting humankind. This goal, however, is evil, and Adam and Eve are the moral heroes at the end of the story, as they help to begin humankind's slow process of redemption and salvation. Satan is far from being the story's object of admiration, as most heroes are. Nor does it make sense for readers to celebrate or emulate him, as they might with a true hero. Yet there are many compelling qualities to his character that make him intriguing to readers.

One source of Satan's fascination for us is that he is an extremely complex and subtle character. It would be difficult, perhaps impossible, for Milton to make perfect, infallible characters such as God the Father, God the Son, and the angels as interesting to read about as the flawed characters, such as Satan, Adam, and Eve. Satan, moreover, strikes a grand and majestic figure, apparently unafraid of being damned eternally, and uncowed by such terrifying figures as Chaos or Death. Many readers have argued that Milton deliberately makes Satan seem heroic and appealing early in the poem to draw us into sympathizing with him against our will, so that we may see how seductive evil is and learn to be more vigilant in resisting its appeal.

Milton devotes much of the poem's early books to developing Satan's character. Satan's greatest fault is his pride. He casts himself as an innocent victim, overlooked for an important promotion. But his ability to think so selfishly in Heaven, where all angels are equal and loved and happy, is surprising. His confidence in thinking that he could ever overthrow God displays tremendous vanity and pride. When Satan shares his pain and alienation as he reaches Earth in Book IV, we may feel somewhat sympathetic to him or even identify with him. But Satan continues to devote himself to evil. Every speech he gives is fraudulent and every story he tells is a lie. He works diligently to trick his fellow devils in Hell by having Beelzebub present Satan's own plan of action.

Satan's character—or our perception of his character—changes significantly from Book I to his final appearance in Book X. In Book I he is a strong, imposing figure with great abilities as a leader and public statesman, whereas by the poem's end he slinks back to Hell in serpent form. Satan's gradual degradation is dramatized by the sequence of different shapes he assumes. He begins the poem as a just-fallen angel of enormous stature, looks like a comet or meteor as he leaves Hell, then disguises himself as a more humble cherub, then as a cormorant, a toad, and finally a snake. His ability to reason and argue also deteriorates. In Book I, he persuades the devils to agree to his plan. In Book IV, however, he reasons to himself that the Hell he feels inside of him is reason to do more evil. When he returns to Earth again, he believes that Earth is more beautiful than Heaven, and that he may be able to live on Earth after all. Satan, removed from Heaven long enough to forget its unparalleled grandeur, is completely demented, coming to believe in his own lies. He is a picture of incessant intellectual activity without the ability to think morally. Once a powerful angel, he has become blinded to God's grace, forever unable to reconcile his past with his eternal punishment.

## 22.6.2 Other Characters

### Adam

Adam is a strong, intelligent, and rational character possessed of a remarkable relationship with God. In fact, before the fall, he is as perfect as a human being can be. He has an enormous capacity for reason, and can understand the most sophisticated ideas instantly. He can converse with Raphael as a near-equal, and understand Raphael's stories readily. But after the fall, his conversation with Michael during his visions is significantly one-sided. Also, his self-doubt and anger after the fall demonstrate his new ability to indulge in rash and irrational attitudes. As a result of the fall, he loses his pure reason and intellect.

Adam's greatest weakness is his love for Eve. He falls in love with her immediately upon seeing her, and confides to Raphael that his attraction to her is almost overwhelming. Though Raphael warns him to keep his affections in check, Adam is powerless to prevent his love from overwhelming his reason. After Eve eats from the Tree of Knowledge, he quickly does the same, realizing that if she is doomed, he must follow her into doom as well if he wants to avoid losing her. Eve has become his companion for life, and he is unwilling to part with her even if that means disobeying God.

Adam's curiosity and hunger for knowledge is another weakness. The questions he asks of Raphael about creation and the universe may suggest a growing temptation to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. But like his physical attraction to Eve, Adam is able to partly avoid this temptation. It is only through Eve that his temptations become unavoidable.

### Eve

Created to be Adam's mate, Eve is inferior to Adam, but only slightly. She surpasses Adam only in her beauty. She falls in love with her own image when she sees her reflection in a body of water. Ironically, her greatest asset produces her most serious weakness, vanity. After Satan compliments her on her beauty and godliness, he easily persuades her to eat from the Tree of Knowledge.

Aside from her beauty, Eve's intelligence and spiritual purity are constantly tested. She is not unintelligent, but she is not ambitious to learn, content to be guided by Adam as God intended. As a result, she does not become more intelligent or learned as the story progresses, though she does attain the beginning of wisdom by the end of the poem. Her lack of learning is partly due to her absence for most of Raphael's discussions with Adam in Books V, VI, and VII, and she also does not see the visions Michael shows Adam in Books XI and XII. Her absence from these important exchanges shows that she feels it is not her place to seek knowledge independently; she wants to hear Raphael's stories through Adam later. The one instance in which she deviates from her passive role, telling Adam to trust her on her own and then seizing the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, is disastrous.

Eve's strengths are her capacity for love, emotion, and forbearance. She persuades Adam to stay with her after the fall, and Adam in turn dissuades her from committing suicide, as they begin to work together as a powerful unit. Eve complements Adam's strengths and corrects his weaknesses. Thus, Milton does not denigrate all women through his depiction of Eve. Rather he explores the role of women in his society and the positive and important role he felt they could offer in the divine union of marriage.

### God

An omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent character who knows everything before it happens. Attempting to present such an unimaginable character accurately, Milton appropriates several of God's biblical speeches into his speeches in Paradise Lost. God loves his creation and strongly defends humankind's free will. He presents his love through his Son, who performs his will justly and mercifully.

Notes

God, in *Paradise Lost*, is less a developed character than a personification of abstract ideas. He is unknowable to humankind and to some extent lacks emotion and depth. He has no weaknesses, embodies pure reason, and is always just. He explains why certain events happen, like Satan's decision to corrupt Adam and Eve, tells his angels what will happen next, and gives his reasoning behind his actions in theological terms. God allows evil to occur, but he will make good out of evil. His plan to save humankind by offering his Son shows his unwavering control over Satan.

**The Son**

For Milton, the Son is the manifestation of God in action. While God the Father stays in the realm of Heaven, the Son performs the difficult tasks of banishing Satan and his rebel angels, creating the universe and humankind, and punishing Satan, Adam and Eve with justice and mercy. The Son physically connects God the Father with his creation. Together they form a complete and perfect God.

The Son personifies love and compassion. After the fall, he pities Adam and Eve and gives them clothing to help diminish their shame. His decision to volunteer to die for humankind shows his dedication and selflessness. The final vision that Adam sees in Book XII is of the Son's (or Jesus') sacrifice on the cross—through this vision, the Son is able to calm Adam's worries for humankind and give Adam and Eve restored hope as they venture out of Paradise.

**22.6.3 Grand Style of Paradise Lost**

Milton's style is first of all epic; he is consciously writing an epic poem, modeling it after the great epics of the classical past. His language used is Latinate; he considered writing the poem in Latin, and adapts many terms from Latin. This makes his style seem more formal, and makes many terms more complex than if drawing on more familiar English words. It is written in blank verse, and iambic pentameter.

He uses many allusions to classical and exotic topics, adding weight and grandeur to the style. The so-called "grand" or lofty style of Milton's *Paradise Lost* is significant to the poem in numerous ways, chiefly because it struck Milton as by far the style most appropriate to the lofty subject matter he had chosen for his poem. Rather than choosing a "low" (that is, a common or colloquial) style or the kind of "middle" style used in much conventional poetry, Milton chose an elevated style because it seemed the only style that could do justice to the important matters he meant to discuss and depict.

Several elements of Milton's "grand style" might be listed as follows:

- A tendency to use long and complex sentences
- A tendency to employ learned allusions, especially to the Bible and to the Greek and Roman classics
- A relative absence of obvious humor, especially any crude humor
- A tendency to choose unusual words in place of simple, common words
- A tendency to construct sentences in ways that resemble sentence structures often found in Latin
- A general (but not total) tendency to avoid crudeness of any kind, especially sexual crudity
- A tendency to display the learning of the poet and to expect similar learning in the poem's readers

Many aspects of this "grand style" that illustrate its significance can be seen at the very beginning of Book 3, when Milton invokes divine inspiration by addressing a hymn to "holy Light". Here

Light is personified, so that it seems more than a mere physical fact but instead seems something living, even divine, and thus deserving of the dignity of the so-called “grand style.” Another example of the “grand style” in this passage appears in line 6, when Milton uses numerous words of Latin origin to describe Light as a “Bright effluence of bright essence increate”. This is not simple, plain, unadorned, Anglo-Saxon phrasing; rather, it is the kind of lofty phrasing Milton considered appropriate to his highly important topics. Milton can write very simple English, as when he refers to “The rising world of waters dark and deep”, but even here there is a touch of Latin sentence structure, since the adjectives follow the noun rather than preceding it.

A different kind of writer, with different purposes, would have written, “The Almighty power hurled him . . . .” Milton, however, makes his phrasing sound like a grand or elevated kind of English by using this kind of “Latinized” sentence structure.

## 22.7 Summary

- Milton mocks the knightly romances of the Middle Ages on the grounds that they applaud merely superficial heroism.
- Milton explains that their appetite for knowledge has been fulfilled, and their hunger for God has been quenched.
- Adam sins not out of a desire to gain the knowledge from eating the fruit, but out of recognition that Eve has left him with little or no alternative.
- In Paradise, the Son calls to Adam, who comes forth shamefacedly along with Eve.
- Adam is much relieved to hear that God will bless a portion of humankind, after having it cursed for so long.
- The discussion between Adam and Michael about Nimrod and the Tower of Babel provides Milton with an opportunity to express his fundamental ideas about political and religious freedom.

## 22.8 Keywords

*Temptation* : A desire to do something.

*Bruise* : An injury appearing as an area of discoloured skin on the body, caused by a blow or impact rupturing underlying blood vessels.

*Escort* : A person who is hired or formally requested to accompany a member of the opposite sex to a social event.

*Lament* : A passionate expression of grief.

## 22.9 Review Questions

1. What is Adam and Eve’s tragic catastrophe?
2. What does Discord do on Earth after the fall?
3. In what form does Michael appear on Earth?
4. Who baptizes the first believers after Christ’s death?
5. Describe the character of God in Paradise Lost.
6. Explain the grand style of Milton.

Notes

**Answers: Self Assessment**

- |         |        |        |
|---------|--------|--------|
| 1. (c)  | 2. (c) | 3. (b) |
| 4. (c)  | 5. (c) | 6. (b) |
| 7. (d)  | 8. (d) | 9. (c) |
| 10. (b) |        |        |

**22.10 Further Readings**



*Books*

- |                                      |                 |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------|
| John Milton: a short Introduction    | — Roy Flannagan |
| John Milton Paradise Lost            | — John Milton   |
| Paradise Lost I (Non-detailed study) | — John Milton   |



*Online links*

- <http://www.bookrags.com/notes/pl/index.html>  
<http://pinkmonkey.com/booknotes/barrons/paradis02.asp>

## Unit 23: Shakespeare's Sonnets

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### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Consider Shakespeare as a poet
- Describe the introduction to sonnets
- Discuss the sonnet-Being your slave what should I do but tend
- Discuss the sonnet-Thou blind fool, that time of year thou mayst in me behold, what dost thou to mine eyes.

### Introduction

William Shakespeare, baptised 26 April 1564; died 23 April 1616 was an English poet and playwright, widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language and the world's pre-eminent dramatist. He is often called England's national poet and the "Bard of Avon". His surviving works, including some collaborations, consist of about 38 plays, 154 sonnets, two long narrative poems, and several other poems. His plays have been translated into every major living language and are performed more often than those of any other playwright.

Shakespeare was born and raised in Stratford-upon-Avon. At the age of 18, he married Anne Hathaway, with whom he had three children: Susanna, and twins Hamlet and Judith. Between

**Notes**

1585 and 1592, he began a successful career in London as an actor, writer, and part owner of a playing company called the Lord Chamberlain's Men, later known as the King's Men. He appears to have retired to Stratford around 1613, where he died three years later. Few records of Shakespeare's private life survive, and there has been considerable speculation about such matters as his physical appearance, sexuality, religious beliefs, and whether the works attributed to him were written by others.

Shakespeare produced most of his known work between 1589 and 1613. His early plays were mainly comedies and histories, genres he raised to the peak of sophistication and artistry by the end of the 16th century. He then wrote mainly tragedies until about 1608, including *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth*, considered some of the finest works in the English language. In his last phase, he wrote tragicomedies, also known as romances, and collaborated with other playwrights.



*Notes* Many of Shakespeare plays were published in editions of varying quality and accuracy during his lifetime. In 1623, two of his former theatrical colleagues published the First Folio, a collected edition of his dramatic works that included all but two of the plays now recognised as Shakespeare's.

Shakespeare was a respected poet and playwright in his own day, but his reputation did not rise to its present heights until the 19th century. The Romantics, in particular, acclaimed Shakespeare's genius, and the Victorians worshipped Shakespeare with a reverence that George Bernard Shaw called "bardolatry". In the 20th century, his work was repeatedly adopted and rediscovered by new movements in scholarship and performance. His plays remain highly popular today and are constantly studied, performed and reinterpreted in diverse cultural and political contexts throughout the world.

## **23.1 Shakespeare as a Poet**

Shakespeare's Sonnets have fascinated and puzzled readers for 400 years. They contain some of the most beautiful love poetry in English, but there is also much about them that is dark, hard-edged and harsh. There is innocence and delight in many of the poems, but there is also illusion and self-delusion, along with the ever-present awareness of time and mortality. The Sonnets present a world of glittering, punning language, but this is also a world of flesh and death.

William Shakespeare is referred to as a Literary Genius and much of this praise is due to the wonderful words of his short sonnet poems and his extended poems. He is the most widely read author in the whole of the Western World - his poems and quotes from poems are familiar to everyone. And yet when we think about Shakespeare, we immediately think of his famous plays and not his less famous poems. During the Bard's lifetime dramatists were not considered 'serious' authors with 'serious' talent - but it was highly fashionable to write poems. Plays were for entertainment poems were for the elite! There was not even such a thing as a custom built theatre until 1576! Actors were common folk. Poets of the era such as Christopher Marlowe, Sir Philip Sydney, Sir Walter Raleigh were of the nobility and their poems are still enjoyed today. These poets had credibility and so did their poetry. William Shakespeare came from Yeoman stock - he lacked credibility - his poems would have helped with this problem! The Bard did not give permission for one of his plays or his sonnets to be published. He was, however, happy to have his poems published. William Shakespeare has been attributed with the following poems:

### **23.1.1 A Lover's Complaint**

A Lover's Complaint is the most neglected of the Poems of William Shakespeare, assuming that it is his. It was first published in 1609, by Thomas Thorpe, under the same cover as the Sonnets; but has

seldom been reprinted. The Lover's Complaint seems to be a very early poem, but no date of composition of the poem can be assigned.

Notes

### 23.1.2 Venus and Adonis

Venus and Adonis, Shakespeare's narrative poem in six-line stanzas, was published by Richard Field (1561 - 1624). The poem was dedicated to Shakespeare's patron, Henry Wriothesley, Third Earl of Southampton (1573-1624). This dedication refers to the author's "unpolisht lines" and contains the typically fawning language of a commoner addressing a nobleman in the hope of obtaining, or retaining, their patronage in exchange for poems dedicated to the recipient.

### 23.1.3 The Rape of Lucrece

On May 9, 1594, the poem was entered in the Hall Book of the Worshipful Company of Stationers, the English government's pre-publication registry. The poem was listed in the Hall Book under the title of The Ravishment of Lucrece but was published with the title Lucrece. The Rape of Lucrece was substituted as a title at a later date. The Rape of Lucrece is a narrative poem resembling a revenge tragedy with 1,855 lines.

### 23.1.4 The Phoenix and the Turtle

In 1601 a very fine poem subsequently titled The Phoenix and the Turtle appeared untitled as one of the Poetical Essays appended to Robert Chester's Love's Martyr: or Rosalind's Complaint. It was attributed to William, and many scholars have accepted the poem as genuine. The date of composition of the poem is unknown, but this poem must be a more mature work.

### 23.1.5 The Passionate Pilgrim

The Passionate Pilgrim (1599) was a poetry collection containing twenty poems by various poets. The title page to the second edition contains the ascription "By W. Shakespeare" but only five of the poems appear to be his. The poems, or Sonnets 138 and 144, despite the "never before imprinted" claim of "a Book called Shakespeares sonnettes", were included, albeit in a slightly different format, in The Passionate Pilgrim poem.

In 1593 and 1594, when the theatres were closed because of plague, Shakespeare published two narrative poems on erotic themes, Venus and Adonis and The Rape of Lucrece. He dedicated them to Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton. In Venus and Adonis, an innocent Adonis rejects the sexual advances of Venus; while in The Rape of Lucrece, the virtuous wife Lucrece is raped by the lustful Tarquin. Influenced by Ovid's Metamorphoses, the poems show the guilt and moral confusion that result from uncontrolled lust. Both proved popular and were often reprinted during Shakespeare's lifetime. A third narrative poem, A Lover's Complaint, in which a young woman laments her seduction by a persuasive suitor, was printed in the first edition of the Sonnets in 1609. Most scholars now accept that Shakespeare wrote A Lover's Complaint. Critics consider that its fine qualities are marred by leaden effects. The Phoenix and the Turtle, printed in Robert Chester's 1601 Love's Martyr, mourns the deaths of the legendary phoenix and his lover, the faithful turtle dove. In 1599, two early drafts of sonnets 138 and 144 appeared in The Passionate Pilgrim, published under Shakespeare's name but without his permission.



Task

Write about two important poems of Shakespeare.

## Notes

The Sonnets were the last of Shakespeare's non-dramatic works to be printed AND published in 1609. Scholars are not certain when each of the 154 sonnets was composed, but evidence suggests that Shakespeare wrote sonnets throughout his career for a private readership. Even before the two unauthorised sonnets appeared in *The Passionate Pilgrim* in 1599, Francis Meres had referred in 1598 to Shakespeare's "sugred Sonnets among his private friends". Few analysts believe that the published collection follows Shakespeare's intended sequence. He seems to have planned two contrasting series: one about uncontrollable lust for a married woman of dark complexion (the "dark lady"), and one about conflicted love for a fair young man (the "fair youth"). It remains unclear if these figures represent real individuals, or if the authorial "I" who addresses them represents Shakespeare himself, though Wordsworth believed that with the sonnets "Shakespeare unlocked his heart". The 1609 edition was dedicated to a "Mr. W.H.", credited as "the only begetter" of the poems.

It is not known whether this was written by Shakespeare himself or by the publisher, Thomas Thorpe, whose initials appear at the foot of the dedication page; nor is it known who Mr. W.H. was, despite numerous theories, or whether Shakespeare even authorised the publication.



*Did u know?* Critics praise the Sonnets as a profound meditation on the nature of love, sexual passion, procreation, death, and time.

## 23.2 Sonnets: Being your Slave what should I do but Tend

Shakespeare's sonnets comprise 154 poems in sonnet form that were published in 1609 but likely written over the course of several years. Evidence for their existence long preceding publication comes from a reference in Francis Mere's 1598 *Palladis Tamia, Wits Treasury*, where his allusion to Shakespeare's "sugred Sonnets among his private frinds" might indicate that the poet preferred not to make these works public. It is unclear whether the 1609 publication, at the hands of a certain Thomas Thorpe, was from an authorized manuscript of Shakespeare's; it is possible that the sonnets were published without the author's consent, perhaps even without his knowledge.

This is but one of the mysteries of Shakespeare's sonnets. Another, which continues to spur debate among literary scholars today, is the identity of the publication's dedicatee, the collection's "onlie begetter," a Mr. W. H. Speculation largely vacillates between two main candidates: Mr. William Herbert, third Earl of Pembroke; and Mr. Henry Wriothesley, third Earl of Southampton. Both possibilities are tenable, as both were men of means and of literary interest enough to be patrons to Shakespeare. In fact the poet dedicated other works to each: his *First Folio* to Herbert and his *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece* to Wriothesley. Those who favor one man or the other draw on circumstantial evidence concerning his life and character, such as the amicable terms on which Shakespeare is known to have been with Wriothesley, or events in Herbert's life that may be intimated in the exploits of the sonnets' "fair lord."

The fair lord is one of three recurring characters in the sonnets, together with the dark lady and the rival poet. The real-world referents of these persons are yet another locus of controversy. Some critics suggest that the fair lord and the collection's dedicatee are one and the same, while others disagree. Still others question the autobiographical nature of the sonnets, arguing that there is no hard proof that their content is anything but fictional.

These mysteries and others, including the ordering of the sonnets, the date of their composition, and seeming deviations from the otherwise rigid format (one sonnet has 15 lines, another only 12; sonnets 153 and 154 do not fit well in the sequence), have generated an abundance of scholarly criticism over the years, and the dialogues they provoke remain highly contentious to this day.



*Did u know?* The 1609 publication of Shakespeare's sonnets is today referred to as the "Quarto" and remains the authoritative source for modern editions.

## Notes

**Sonnet 57 - "Being your slave what should I do but tend"**

Being your slave, what should I do but tend  
 Upon the hours and times of your desire?  
 I have no precious time at all to spend,  
 Nor services to do, till you require.  
 Nor dare I chide the world-without-end hour  
 Whilst I, my sovereign, watch the clock for you,  
 Nor think the bitterness of absence sour  
 When you have bid your servant once adieu;  
 Nor dare I question with my jealous thought  
 Where you may be, or your affairs suppose,  
 But, like a sad slave, stay and think of nought  
 Save, where you are how happy you make those.  
 So true a fool is love that in your will,  
 Though you do any thing, he thinks no ill.

In the previous sonnet, the poet expressed his deep concern over the potential of lust to destroy his relationship with the young man, and here it appears that his fears have become reality. The poet is now alone, kept waiting while his dear young friend is out having fun with others. Unwilling to feel anger towards his friend, the poet allows in his own sadness, longing for the restoration of their relationship. However, in the final couplet we see that the poet understands completely the folly of his submissive behaviour, and his acceptance of love as a "fool" (13) is, in itself, proof that the poet is reprimanding both his lover and himself. In fact, although this poem seems to illustrate the poet's disturbing reliance on his lover, one cannot overlook the possibility that the sonnet is highly ironical and filled with sarcasm rather than self-depreciation. Actually, one could say that both voices are being heard in sonnet 57: "The friend is meant, I think, to take the poem first as an effusive and oh-so-sad compliment, and only later to do the double-take"; Did he really mean that? I don't suppose he was being sarcastic? Precisely because the sonnet is equivocal its protest is the more effective. But, of course, the protest is largely qualified by the fact that what the poet says is quite literally true: he does hang about, watching the clock, waiting for the friend to come. Love has made him a 'sad slave', 'so true a fool'. There is in the poetry a kind of verbal shrugging of the shoulders and a rueful half-smile, especially in the couplet. It is the fact that the poet sees himself in these two ways at once that makes it possible and even essential to hear the two tones together throughout the poem" (Martin 73).

Sonnet 57 reflects two attitudes: The weak helpless poet versus the powerful prevailing lover. The speaker, the poet, is totally humiliated by his lover, he doesn't have the courage to confront his partner and express how unjust is he in leaving him for a long time waiting for him as if his beloved delights in torturing the poet by always lingering and ignoring him. The poet concludes that this is foolishness and naivety from his part to react as such towards the rough treatment of his beloved; being a slave and mere servant to his "sovereign" lover.

## Notes

Sonnet 57, along with the following sonnet, reveal the fair lord to be abusive of the poet's undying devotion. In addressing this cruelty here, the speaker obviously recognizes it and is commenting upon it. It is as if he is answering a question posed by the fair lord along the lines of, "Why are you so demanding of my time?" However, in the final couplet of Sonnet 58, he resigns himself to the fate of a slave, waiting around for word from the fair lord: "I am to wait, though waiting so be hell,/Not blame your pleasure be it ill or well."

The idea of someone in love being enslaved by the beloved was common. For example, in Sir Philip Sidney's Sonnet 47 from *Astrophil and Stella*, the speaker asks, "What, have I thus betrayed my liberty?/Can those black beams such burning marks engrave/In my free side? or am I born a slave,/Whose neck becomes such yoke of tyranny?" The "black beams" are Stella's eyes. This theme reappears in Shakespeare's sonnets to the dark lady, as well.



Task

What is the reason for the suffering of the speaker in sonnet 57?

The theme of Sonnets 57 and 58 is reminiscent of the idea presented in Sonnet 26, which declares, "Lord of my love, to whom in vassalage/Thy merit hath my duty strongly knit." However, in Sonnet 26 the devotion is called "duty so great," and the positive attitude of the poet is reflected in words like "merit," "good," "star," "grociouly," "fair," "worthy," and "sweet." However, in sonnet 57 the attitude of the speaker has changed drastically, and his position is one of desperation and resentment. This is reflected in the diction choices of "slave," "services," "bitterness," "sour," "jealous," "sad," "fool," and "ill."

The suffering of the speaker is not just in that he misses the fair lord, but in that he must pretend not to. He pretends these both to the fair lord, whom he is addressing in this and the following sonnet, as well as to himself while he waits. Lines 9-12 make this struggle obvious, since they contradict each other: "Nor dare I question with my jealous thought/Where you may be, or your affairs suppose,/But, like a sad slave, stay and think of nought/Save, where you are, how happy you make those." He claims not to question the fair lord's whereabouts and actions, but he can "think of nought" else.

While the speaker pines away, waiting for the fair lord to show him some attention, it is implied that the fair lord is off being promiscuous somewhere else. Line 2 refers to the times when the fair lord is away from the poet as "times of your desire." Lines 9-10 seem a bit sarcastic: "Nor dare I question with my jealous thought/Where you may be, or your affairs suppose;" the speaker feels "jealous" for a reason, and the idea that the "affairs" of the fair lord are of questionable moral quality is furthered. In the final line of the sonnet, it is clear that whatever the fair lord is up to is distasteful to the poet: "Though you do anything, he thinks no ill."

### Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

- Sixteenth century love sonnets typically follow all but which of the following conventions?
  - A fair young lady is deeply in love with a man who's hesitant to court her
  - Exaggerated language expresses the lover's adoration
  - The speaker is a male lover
  - The female object of attention and affection is beautiful and pure.
- The fair young man to whom the poet speaks in sonnets 1-126 demonstrates which of the following characteristics?

- (a) Allegiance to lower class society  
 (b) An inner beauty that matches his physical appearance  
 (c) Good looks leaning toward the female persuasion  
 (d) A sense of inferiority
3. Who was not among the candidates for the identity of the Dark Lady sonnet 127-152?  
 (a) Shakespeare's wife, Ann Boleyn (b) Mary Fitton  
 (c) A Negro prostitute (d) Lady Penelope Rich
4. In sonnet 76-86, Shakespeare refers to his Rival poet as  
 (a) a finer spirit (b) the affable familiar ghost  
 (c) a worthier pen (d) so great a sum of sums
5. The major theme that Shakespeare sets forth in the first 17 of his sonnets is that  
 (a) Poetry has the power to conquer time  
 (b) Love is the only faithful from immortality  
 (c) Beauty and youth can be continued by producing progeny  
 (d) Everyone's lot in life is to suffer
6. The sonnets in which Shakespeare says that the fair young man more than make up for the poet's failures in life are often referred to as the  
 (a) Compensation quatrains (b) Despair sonnets  
 (c) Odes to immortality (d) Passion poems
7. How many of Shakespeare's sonnets dwell on a religious theme?  
 (a) 126 (b) The first 17 and last 17  
 (c) Just 1 (d) All of them
8. Which of the following colours are not mentioned in sonnet 12, 73 or 99?  
 (a) Sable (b) Ashem  
 (c) Berry blue (d) Sunset

### 23.3 Thou Blind Fool, that Time of Year Thou Mayst in me Behold, what Dost Thou to Mine Eyes

#### Sonnet 137 - "Thou blind fool, Love, what dost thou to mine eyes"

Thou blind fool, Love, what dost thou to mine eyes,  
 That they behold, and see not what they see?  
 They know what beauty is, see where it lies,  
 Yet what the best is take the worst to be.  
 If eyes, corrupt by over-partial looks,  
 Be anchored in the bay where all men ride,  
 Why of eyes' falsehood hast thou forged hooks,  
 Whereto the judgment of my heart is tied?  
 Why should my heart think that a several plot,  
 Which my heart knows the wide world's common place?  
 Or mine eyes, seeing this, say this is not,  
 To put fair truth upon so foul a face?

Notes

In things right true my heart and eyes have erred,  
And to this false plague are they now transferred.

The poet reflects on his infatuation with the woman and is perplexed by what he finds. He is uncertain whether to blame his eyes or his heart, or both of them jointly. They both seem to be in error in supposing that so foul a person is in fact fair and worthy of love. The previous sonnets were far from flattering to the woman, having suggested that her sexual appetites were almost unlimited. This one is no better, and implies that she is like a common prostitute, being 'the bay where all men ride' and 'the common' where all men have free access.

Sonnets 46 & 47 describe a conflict between heart and eyes which is resolved by an alliance between the two. In this sonnet both heart and eyes are portrayed as being at fault in perverting what they perceive. But pride of place is given to the eyes, in that they are shown to lead the way and, being corrupt, they drag the heart along behind them. The distinction is only poetic and has no psychological basis, nor did it have in Shakespeare's day. He is merely elaborating a conceit which serves the purpose of illuminating the contradictions in his heart over his blind infatuation for the dark lady. The function of eyes in setting a soul on the pathway to love had been well established by Petrarch, ever since that fatal Good Friday on 6 April 1327 when he first set eyes on Laura in the Church at Avignon. Shakespeare is merely following this convention by attributing to the eyes the power to lead the way in love, and to subvert the personality. It is also entirely consistent with the blindness of Cupid, which does not however prevent Cupid from seeing with a sixth sense. As Virgil said *Quis fallere possit amantem?* 'Who can deceive a lover?'

The sonnet continues in the less than flattering tone of flattery which the previous three sonnets have used. His mistress is a piece of common land to which all men have access, a harbour in which all ships ride, she has a foul face which is painted to look fair, and finally she is a false plague, which has the power to infect all at random. This is far from the tradition of the Petrarchan praise of Laura which had set the precedent for all sonneteers thereafter, so that mistresses were nearly always praised as lofty, beautiful, chaste and inaccessible goddesses. It is true that a contrary tradition had been established which rebelled against this slavery and fantastic idealisation of women, an idealisation which had little basis in reality. Sir Thomas Wyatt, whose poems Shakespeare would have known, had already introduced a more down to earth approach to loving and courtship. And sonnet sequences had already been published which consisted of a main section devoted to adoration, followed by a concluding section which repudiated love, the cold beloved, and the slavery which held the lover in chains.

These poems to the dark lady are however rather different because of their psychological complexity and because the element of Petrarchan praise is replaced by straight speaking which is little short of insulting. The lady cannot have regarded it as flattery to be spoken of as a common prostitute, however much she might have enjoyed her power over men. Nor can it have been pleasing to be told that her face was foul, or that she was a 'false plague', or 'as black as hell, as dark as night'. Nothing in the sonnet literature of the time prepares us for such an onslaught on a loved one, and we have to conclude that, despite the occasional tender words to his mistress, the poet did not find the experience uplifting, certainly not spiritual, and that it was in many ways a source of revulsion and self-disgust which he found it impossible to flee from or expiate from his soul.

The unflattering tone of this sonnet and the other sonnets to the dark lady are in contrast with the Petrarchan tradition of sonneteering, in which the addressed woman is represented as lofty, chaste, and unattainable. Sir Thomas Wyatt, whose works Shakespeare would have known, had already breached this tradition with poems such as *The Lady to Answer Directly with Yea or Nay*. However, while other poets had represented women as less idealistic, in this sonnet Shakespeare downright insults the object of his desire, calling her "common," like a prostitute, and a "false plague." This degrading tone implies that the love affair was, for the speaker, unpleasant and even shameful.

The idea of the poet's eyes and heart distorting what they perceive is reminiscent of Sonnets 46 and 47, in which they are "at a mortal war" but end up reaching a compromise regarding the perception of the fair lord. But while those sonnets describe the eyes and heart lying to each other in order to deprive each other of basking in the fair lord's beauty, here the eyes are the main perpetrators, leading the heart behind them; Cupid has "forged hooks" out of them to this end. Thus the poet is overcome by the "blind fool, Love," who is Cupid; he becomes blind himself in his inability to see the truth.

The theme of believing one thing while seeing or knowing another to be true is carried through to the next sonnet, which begins, "When my love swears that she is made of truth, / I do believe her though I know she lies." Here, the poet admits in line 13 that, "In things right true my heart and eyes have erred." The word "things" could refer to the dark lady, whom the poet believed to be "right true," or it could be the fair lord, who actually was "true," but whom the poet abandoned in favor of the dark lady. The term "things" also carried a sexual slang meaning.



*Task* Describe the imagery of sea in the prescribed sonnet.

Ship imagery is employed in line 6 to suggest the woman's promiscuity. The phrase "anchored in the bay" used with "ride," implies a man having sexual intercourse; in this case, it is "all men" that are allowed to have sex with the dark lady. But the subject of this phrase is "eyes," implying that the poet is only visualizing having sex with the woman; thus, "all men" could really mean "all men's eyes," and rather than literally having sex with her, all men are just fantasizing about it like the poet does. The "forged hooks" into which Cupid makes the poet's eyes would be used to hoist sails and rigging on a ship, as well.

This imagery of the sea is foiled by imagery of the land used in lines 9-10, which compare the woman to a plot of land. The poet's heart believes the woman to be "a several plot," or a private plot of land for only him to enjoy. But in reality, that land is "the wide world's common place;" the woman is actually available to all men, either because she does not return the poet's love and remains unattached, or because she is promiscuous. The second meaning is more likely, since the word "common" is often tied to "whore;" its use here implies that the woman acts like a prostitute, and would be terribly unflattering and offensive to her.

### 23.4 Summary

- The Sonnets were the last of Shakespeare's non-dramatic works to be printed AND published in 1609.
- Shakespeare's Sonnets have fascinated and puzzled readers for 400 years.
- William Shakespeare is referred to as a Literary Genius and much of this praise is due to the wonderful words of his short sonnet poems and his extended poems.
- The Sonnets were the last of Shakespeare's non-dramatic works to be printed AND published in 1609.
- Shakespeare's sonnets comprise 154 poems in sonnet form that were published in 1609 but likely written over the course of several years.

### 23.5 Keywords

**Sonnet** : The sonnet is one of several forms of poetry originating in Europe, mainly Great Britain and Italy, and commonly has 14 lines.

**Shakespearean Sonnet** : Shakespeare's sonnets are 154 poems in sonnet form written by William Shakespeare, dealing with themes such as the passage of time, love, beauty and mortality.

- Notes**
- Italian Sonnet* : The Italian sonnet was created by Giacomo da Lentini, head of the Sicilian School under Frederick II.
- Spenserian Sonnet* : A variant on the English form is the Spenserian sonnet, named after Edmund Spenser (c.1552–1599) in which the rhyme scheme is, abab, bcbc, cdcd, ee.
- English Sonnets* : When English sonnets were introduced by Thomas Wyatt in the early 16th century, his sonnets and those of his contemporary the Earl of Surrey were chiefly translations from the Italian of Petrarch and the French of Ronsard and others.

### **23.6 Review Questions**

1. Write an essay on “Shakespeare as a poet”.
2. Describe the introduction to sonnets.
3. Explain different types of sonnets.
4. Discuss the sonnet-Being your slave what should I do but tend.
5. Discuss the Thou blind fool, that time of year thou mayst in me behold, what dost thou to mine eyes.

### **Answers: Self Assessment**

- |        |        |        |
|--------|--------|--------|
| 1. (a) | 2. (c) | 3. (a) |
| 4. (c) | 5. (c) | 6. (b) |
| 7. (c) | 8. (c) |        |

### **23.7 Further Readings**



*Books*

- |                                  |                           |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Sonnets                          | — William Shakespeare     |
| Sonnets: a poem of love          | — William Shakespeare     |
| The art of Shakespeare’s Sonnets | — Helen Hennessey Vendler |



*Online links*

- <http://www.cliffsnotes.com/WileyCDA/LitNote/id-169,pageNum-60.html>  
<http://www.shakespeares-sonnets.com/sonnet/57>

## Unit 24: Alexander Pope: The Rape of the Lock

Notes

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### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Explain the detailed analysis of Alexander Pope’s “*The Rape of the Lock*”
- Describe the use of supernatural machinery in Pope’s poems
- Consider Alexander Pope’s “*The Rape of the Lock*” as a social satire and as a mock epic.

## Notes

**Introduction**

Alexander Pope was born in London in 1688. As a Roman Catholic living during a time of Protestant consolidation in England, he was largely excluded from the university system and from political life, and suffered certain social and economic disadvantages because of his religion as well. He was self-taught to a great extent, and was an assiduous scholar from a very early age. He learned several languages on his own, and his early verses were often imitations of poets he admired. His obvious talent found encouragement from his father, a linen-draper, as well as from literary-minded friends. At the age of twelve, Pope contracted a form of tuberculosis that settled in his spine, leaving him stunted and misshapen and causing him great pain for much of his life. He never married, though he formed a number of lifelong friendships in London's literary circles, most notably with Jonathan Swift.

Pope wrote during what is often called the Augustan Age of English literature (indeed, it is Pope's career that defines the age). During this time, the nation had recovered from the English Civil Wars and the Glorious Revolution, and the regained sense of political stability led to a resurgence of support for the arts. For this reason, many compared the period to the reign of Augustus in Rome, under whom both Virgil and Horace had found support for their work. The prevailing taste of the day was neoclassical, and 18th-century English writers tended to value poetry that was learned and allusive, setting less value on originality than the Romantics would in the next century. This literature also tended to be morally and often politically engaged, privileging satire as its dominant mode.

*The Rape of the Lock* is one of the most famous English-language examples of the mock-epic. Published in its first version in 1712, when Pope was only 23 years old, the poem served to forge his reputation as a poet and remains his most frequently studied work. The inspiration for the poem was an actual incident among Pope's acquaintances in which Robert, Lord Petre, cut off a lock of Arabella Fermor's hair, and the young people's families fell into strife as a result. John Caryll, another member of this same circle of prominent Roman Catholics, asked Pope to write a light poem that would put the episode into a humorous perspective and reconcile the two families. The poem was originally published in a shorter version, which Pope later revised. In this later version he added the "machinery," the retinue of supernaturals who influence the action as well as the moral of the tale.

After the publication of *The Rape of the Lock*, Pope spent many years translating the works of Homer. During the ten years he devoted to this arduous project, he produced very few new poems of his own but refined his taste in literature (and his moral, social, and political opinions) to an incredible degree. When he later recommenced to write original poetry, Pope struck a more serious tone than the one he gave to *The Rape of the Lock*. These later poems are more severe in their moral judgments and more acid in their satire: Pope's *Essay on Man* is a philosophical poem on metaphysics, ethics, and human nature, while in the *Dunciad* Pope writes a scathing expose of the bad writers and pseudo-intellectuals of his day.

**24.1 Alexander Pope: The Rape of the Lock: Canto I–V****24.1.1 The Rape of the Lock: Canto I****Summary**

The Rape of the Lock opens with an invocation of a muse and establishes the poem's subject matter, specifically a "dire offense from amorous causes" and the "mighty contests [rising] from trivial things" (1-2). The speaker concludes his invocation by asking the muse to explain first why a lord of good-breeding would assault a lady and, secondly, why a lady would reject a lord.

The action of the poem begins with the rising sun awakening the residents of a wealthy household. Though everyone, including the lapdogs, has risen, Belinda remains asleep. She dreams of a handsome youth who informs her that she is protected by a "thousand bright inhabitants of air:" spirits that were once human women who now protect virgins.

The youth explains that after a woman dies; her spirit returns to elemental form; namely, to fire, water, earth, and air. Each element is characterized by different types of women. Termagants or

## Notes

scolds become fire spirits or Salamanders. Indecisive women become water spirits. Prudes or women who delight in rejecting men become Gnomes (earth spirits). Coquettes become Sylphs (air spirits).

The dream is sent to Belinda by Ariel, “her guardian Sylph” (20). The Sylphs are Belinda’s guardians because they understand her vanity and pride, having been coquettes when they were humans. They are devoted to any woman who “rejects mankind” (68). Their role is to guide young women through the “mystic mazes” of social interaction (92).

At the end of the dream, Ariel warns Belinda of an impending “dread event,” urging her to “Beware of all, but most beware of Man” (109, 114). Belinda is then awoken by her lapdog, Shock. Upon rising, she sees that a billet-doux, or a love-letter, has arrived for her, causing her to forget the details of the dream.

Now awake, Belinda begins her elaborate toilette. Pope endows every object from combs and pins to billet-doux and Bibles with significance in this ritual of dressing: “Each silver vase in mystic order laid” (122). Belinda herself is described as a “goddess,” looking at her “heavenly image” in the mirror (132, 125). The elegant language and importance of such objects thus elevate the process of dressing to a sacred rite.



*Notes* The Sylphs assist in Belinda’s dressing routine, setting her hair and straightening her gown. Fully arrayed, Belinda emerges from her chamber.

## Analysis

The opening of *The Rape of the Lock* establishes the poem’s mock-heroic tone. In the tradition of epic poetry, Pope opens the poem by invoking a muse, but rather than invoke one of the mythic Greek muses, Pope leaves the muse anonymous and instead dedicates the poem to John Caryll, the man who commissioned the poem. The first verse-paragraph also introduces Pope’s epic subject matter: a war arising from “amorous causes” (1). Unlike Menelaus’ fury at Paris’ theft of Helen or Achilles’ quarrel with Agamemnon over Briseis in *The Iliad*, however, the poem’s “mighty contests rise from trivial things” (2). Indeed, these “mighty contests” are merely flirtations and card games rather than the great battles of the Greek epic tradition.

The second verse-paragraph encapsulates Pope’s subversion of the epic genre. In lines 11-12 Pope juxtaposes grand emotions with unheroic character-types, specifically “little men” and women: “In tasks so bold can little men engage, / And in soft bosoms dwells such mighty rage.” The irony of pairing epic characteristics with lowly human characters contributes to Pope’s mock-heroic style. Furthermore, the “mighty rage” of women evokes the rage of Achilles at the outset of *The Iliad*, foreshadowing the comic gender-reversal that characterizes the rest of the poem. Rather than distinguish the subjects of the poem as in a traditional epic, Pope uses the mock-heroic genre to elevate and ridicule his subjects simultaneously, creating a satire that chides society for its misplaced values and emphasis on trivial matters.

Belinda’s dream provides the mythic structure of the poem. In this segment, Pope introduces the supernatural forces that affect the action of the poem, much the way that the gods and goddesses of *The Iliad* would influence the progress of the Trojan War. Just as Athena protects Diomedes and Aphrodite supports Paris during the Trojan War, Ariel is the guardian of Belinda. Unlike the Greek gods, however, Ariel possesses little power to protect his ward and preserve her chastity. In this initial canto, Belinda forgets Ariel’s warnings of impending dangers upon receiving a billet-doux. Though charged with protecting Belinda’s virtue, it seems that Ariel cannot fully guard her from the perils of love, unable to distract her even from a relatively harmless love letter. In the dream Ariel indicates that all women have patron sprites, depending on their personality type. Ariel explains that when women die, their spirits return “from earthly vehicles” to “their first elements” (50, 58).

## Notes

Each personality type—scolds, undecided women, prudes, coquettes—becomes a Salamander, Nymph, Gnome, or Sylph, respectively. These four types are associated with both the four humors and the four elements. Having been “light coquettes” as human women, the Sylphs are most closely affiliated with Belinda. Belinda herself is a coquette, and it is this aspect of femininity with which Pope is most concerned.



Task

Discuss two mock-heroic elements of the poem.

Pope explores the role of the coquette in this first canto. He demonstrates that womanly priorities are limited to personal pleasures and social aspirations. In his description of the Sylphs during the dream sequence, Pope enumerates coquettish vanities. As humans these women valued their “beauteous mold” and enjoyed frivolous diversions, which they continue to take pleasure in as sprites (48). The “joy in gilded chariots” suggests a preference for superficial grandeur and external signifiers of wealth (55). Similarly, their “love of ombre,” a popular card game featuring elements of bridge and poker, indicates a desire for fashionable entertainment (56). Through this love of finery and these trivial pastimes, Pope depicts a society that emphasizes appearances rather than moral principles. This focus on appearance extends to attitudes towards honor and virtue. Society dictates that women remain chaste while enticing suitable husbands. Of course, if a woman seemed to compromise herself, society would censure her as though she had lost her virtue. This concern about female sexuality represents the underlying anxiety in *The Rape of the Lock*: the theft of the lock (a metonymic substitution for Belinda’s chastity) creates the appearance of lost virtue.

At this point in the poem, however, Pope depicts Belinda not as a coquette but as a powerful figure, similar to the (male) heroes of epic poetry. Pope reimagines Belinda’s morning routine as a hero’s ritualized preparation before battle. Her toilette commences as a religious rite in praise of a goddess. Belinda’s reflection in the mirror becomes the image of the goddess while her maid is the “inferior priestess,” worshipping at the altar (127). These “sacred rites” perform a secondary purpose: once the sacraments are performed, the goddess should protect Belinda during her day’s adventures (128). Upon completion of the morning’s ceremony, Belinda begins to array herself, a scene which Pope figures within the epic paradigm as the ritualized arming of the hero. The combs, pins, “puffs, powders, patches” become the weapons and armor of this hero as the “awful Beauty [puts] on all its arms” (138, 139). This depiction of Belinda as an epic hero establishes the mock-heroic motifs that occur throughout the poem.

### 24.1.2 The Rape of the Lock: Canto II

#### Summary

Rivaling the sun in her beauty and radiance, Belinda sets off for Hampton Court Palace, traveling by boat on the River Thames. A group of fashionable ladies and gentlemen accompanies her, but “every eye was fixed on her alone” (6). Her “lovely looks” and “quick” eyes command the attention and adoration of those who see her (9, 10). Belinda’s glittering raiment includes a “sparkling cross,” which she wears on her “white breast,” inspiring the worship of her admirers (7). Her most striking attribute is the “two locks which graceful hung” in ringlets on her “ivory neck” (20, 22). Pope describes these curls as labyrinths of love intended for the “destruction of mankind,” imprisoning any hearts that get caught in their snares (19).

One of her devotees, the Baron, greatly admires her ringlets and has resolved to steal them for himself, “by force or by fraud” (32). On this particular morning he rose early to build an altar to Love at which to pray for success in this venture. He created a pyre and on it sacrificed “all the trophies of his former loves” (40). Fanning the flames with “three amorous sighs,” he burned “three garters, half a pair of gloves” and “tender billet-doux” (42, 39, 41). The powers heard his prayer and chose to grant half of it.

As the boat makes its way to Hampton Court, Belinda and her companions enjoy a lighthearted journey. Ariel, however, is anxious, remembering the foretold “impending woe” (54). Concerned for Belinda’s safety, he summons an army of Sylphs to protect her. The sprites assemble, their bodies incandescent in the glittering sunlight. Ariel addresses them, much the same as a general addressing his troops. He reminds them of their duties: guiding celestial bodies, regulating weather, guarding the British Throne, and “[tending] to the Fair” (91). As part of their responsibilities to the Fair, the sprites protect ladies’ powders, perfumes, curls, cosmetics, and hair, working to “assist their blushes, and inspire their airs” (98).

Because “some dire disaster” looms over Belinda, Ariel charges a phalanx of Sylphs to act as her bodyguards (103). He charges Zephyretta with the care of Belinda’s fan, Brillante her earrings, Momentilla her watch, and Crispissa her locks. Ariel himself will protect Shock, her lapdog. Above all, he is concerned that someone might “stain her honor” (107). He therefore chooses fifty select Sylphs to guard her petticoat, which sometimes fails to protect a woman’s virtue. Ariel warns that any sprite who neglects his duties “shall feel sharp vengeance” (125). The Sylphs report to their posts and wait for the “birth of Fate” (142).

## Analysis

In the second canto, Pope relies on martial language to situate his poem within the epic tradition and reinforce his satiric manipulation of the genre. Much like the combs, pins, and cosmetics that Pope assigns military value in the first canto, Belinda’s physical appearance is defined within militaristic terms. The beauty of her curls attracts admirers, which Pope compares to a trap meant to ensnare enemies. Similarly, he refigures Belinda’s seven-layered petticoat as a fortified wall meant to withstand the attacks of invading forces. As Pope establishes in his description of the coquette, a woman must attract a suitable husband but simultaneously refrain from so great an attraction that she compromises her virtue. Her curls thus perform the former duty, capturing the attention of men while her petticoat functions as an impediment to the loss of her chastity. Of course, as Ariel notes, “we have known that seven fold fence to fail,” and he commands an army of fifty Sylphs to take defensive positions around the petticoat, ready to defend Belinda’s virtue from amorous assailants (119). Pope, however, makes the Sylphs’ militaristic role ironic: they are not guarding against Belinda’s failure but rather protecting her from excessive success at attracting admirers. Pope thus critiques society’s contradictory expectations with regard to female sexuality.

As the irony of Pope’s military allusions suggests, Pope develops the poem’s sexual allegory in the second canto. From the outset of the poem, the theft of Belinda’s hair has sexual implications, specifically in the poem’s title: *The Rape of the Lock*. Pope’s use of the word “rape” denotes explicit sexuality in the cutting of Belinda’s curls. Pope’s word choice in the second canto strengthens this sexual imagery. The poem indicates that the Baron has resolved to steal the locks “by force to ravish” (32). The use of the words “force” and “ravish” emphasizes this theme of sexual violation. The phrase “by fraud betray” with regard to the Baron’s desire for the curls similarly equates the theft of the lock with a man taking advantage of a woman’s innocence (32).

Even Ariel suspects that the foretold “dire disaster” will take the form of a sexual assault (103). He speculates that Belinda might be fated to “break Diana’s law,” an allusion to the Roman goddess of chastity (105). In the following line he worries that “some frail china jar [will] receive a flaw” (106). Literary instances of broken pottery often indicate the loss of virginity. Ariel’s final anxiety is that Belinda might “stain her honor or her new brocade” (107). While the staining of Belinda’s honor is overtly sexual, the staining of her dress likewise has sexual implications, alluding both to female sexual maturity (menstruation) and to the tearing of the hymen (loss of virginity).

The sexual implications of *The Rape of the Lock* culminate with the locks themselves. Though Pope describes Belinda’s ringlets as hanging down her “smooth ivory neck,” the sexualized double-readings throughout the second canto suggest a more explicit secondary reading of Belinda’s curls (22). A sexualized reading of Belinda’s locks as pubic hairs reinforces Pope’s portrayal of their theft as rape.

## Notes



*Did u know?* The “rape” of the lock therefore represents a greater threat to Belinda’s virtue than the theft of her hair would suggest.

Just as it does in the first canto, religious imagery parallels the language of force in the second canto. Much like the ritualism of Belinda’s toilette in the first canto, Belinda’s charms become objects of worship. Of particular note, of course, are her locks, which draw the attention of many admirers, chief among them the Baron. The rituals he performs at dawn are an act of worship. He builds an altar—a feature of both pagan and Christian worship—to celebrate Belinda’s beauty. On the altar the Baron places “twelve vast French romances, neatly gilt” to honor Love, rather than gilded Bibles (38). This equation of religion and secular love echoes the presence of Bibles and billet-doux together on Belinda’s dressing table in the first canto and further serves Pope’s mock-heroic purposes. The ritual sacrifices performed by the Baron mimic the epic convention of sacrificing to the gods to secure their favor before a venture. The powers’ decision to grant only half of the Baron’s desire alludes to a common feature of the epic in which the interference of the gods is a mixed blessing. Yet Pope undercuts the traditional power of the gods. Their half-blessing does not have tragic consequences for the Baron; rather, he only succeeds at securing one of Belinda’s curls. Pope further undermines the piety of prayer, replacing it with the Baron’s “three amorous sighs” (42).

The poem’s comic attitude towards religion implies that the worship of beauty amounts to sacrilege. Pope crystallizes this religious perversion in the cross that Belinda wears. The cross seems to serve not a religious function but rather an ornamental one, much like the equation of the Bible with billet-doux and French romances. Indeed, this central symbol of Christianity remains secular, so “Jews might kiss” and “infidels adore” it just as easily as Christians (8). Pope even sexualizes this traditionally religious object, placing it on Belinda’s “white breast” and thereby suggesting that the Jews and infidels are instead admiring her breasts (7). By subverting established principles of religious worship, Pope critiques society’s willingness to value appearances and other insignificant matters over a moral lifestyle.

### 24.1.3 The Rape of the Lock: Canto III

#### Summary

The third canto begins with a description of Hampton Court Palace and the amusements of life at court. The palace’s towers rise up from the meadows overlooking the River Thames. Pope indicates that it is at this site that “Britain’s statesmen” deal with matters at home and abroad and where Queen Anne holds court (5). Belinda and her companions arrive at Hampton Court and disembark the boat to take part in the day’s activities. They first engage in gossip, discussing balls, fashion, and political matters. They punctuate their conversation with taking snuff and fluttering fans.

After the afternoon’s pleasant conversation, Belinda sits down to play cards with the Baron and another man. They play ombre, a three-handed bridge with some features of poker. Pope describes the game as a battle: the three players’ hands are “three bands [prepared] in arms,” troops sent to “combat on the velvet plain” of the card table (29, 44). Like the commander of an army, Belinda reviews her cards, declares spades trumps, and sends her cards into combat. She meets with early success, leading with her high trumps (49-56).

The suit breaks badly (54) when “to the Baron fate inclines the field” (66). He retains the queen of spades (67) with which he trumps her king of clubs (69). The Baron then leads high diamonds until he nearly sets (beats) Belinda, who is “just in the jaws of ruin” (92). On the last trick, however, Belinda takes the Baron’s ace of hearts with the king, who “spring to vengeance with an eager pace, / And falls like thunder on the prostrate Ace” (97-8). By recovering the last trick, Belinda wins back the amount she bid and therefore takes the game. Thrilled at her victory, Belinda “fills with shouts the sky” (99). The speaker then interjects to remind the reader that Fate holds some disaster for Belinda.

After the game, coffee is served to the ladies and gentlemen at Hampton Court. The vapors of the coffee inspire the Baron with new strategies for stealing Belinda's locks. With the assistance of Clarissa, who presents him with her scissors, he endeavors to cut Belinda's hair. He fails three times to clip her lock from behind, without her knowledge; the Sylphs frustrate his every attempt. They intervene by blowing the hair out of danger and tugging on her earrings to make her turn around. In a last-ditch effort to protect his charge, Ariel accesses Belinda's mind with the intent to warn her, but he is shocked to find "an early lover lurking at her heart" (144). Belinda's strong attraction to the Baron places her beyond Ariel's control, and he retreats, defeated. The scissors' blades finally close on the curl. As the shears close, a Sylph gets in the way and is cut in two. As a supernatural being the Sylph is easily repaired; the curl, however, cannot be restored. The Baron celebrates his victory while Belinda's "screams of horror rend the affrighted skies" (156).

## Analysis

Pope's rendering of the card game as a heroic battle advances his epic parody and foreshadows the scuffle over the lock in the fifth canto. He again figures Belinda as an epic hero, and the extended metaphor of the game as a battle reinforces her masculine approach. During the game, Belinda's strategy is aggressive and ambitious, and Pope shows Belinda's desire for the recognition that the "battle" will bring to her: "Belinda now, whom thirst of fame invites, / Burns to encounter two adventurous knights / And swells her breast with conquests yet to come" (25-8). In keeping with the martial theme, Pope portrays Belinda as a cunning general: "The skillful nymph reviews her force with care" (45). He further depicts her cards—her army—as virile male characters: "Now move to war her sable Matadores / In show like leaders of the swarthy Moors" (47-8). Pope emphasizes this hyper-masculine depiction of Belinda when she wins the game. Rather than graciously acknowledge her victory with modest reserve, Belinda gloats over the losers: "The nymph exulting fills with shouts the sky" (99). Unlike the ten years of violent combat over Troy in *The Iliad*, however this evening's card game is the pastime of young aristocrats. By elevating this trivial amusement with the language of the epic struggle between two civilizations, Pope suggests that the bravery once exhibited on the battlefield by Greek and Trojan heroes is now limited to the petty games and flirtations of the upper classes.

The heroic theme extends to the severing of the lock. The Baron's three attempts to cut Belinda's hair mirror the hero's trials before completing his quest, which Pope emphasizes at the end of the canto by comparing the Baron's victory to the conquest of Troy. Likewise Clarissa's arming of the Baron with her sewing scissors evokes the tradition of lovers' farewells before battle. Of course, the theft of Belinda's hair is an insignificant squabble in comparison to the abduction of Helen and a decade of war.

With the complicity of Clarissa in the severing of Belinda's lock, Pope introduces a criticism of the relationships between women, which he explores in the poem's sexual allegory. Clarissa's willingness to participate in the metaphoric "rape" of Belinda suggests that rather than a sisterhood united against male sexual advances, women seek to undermine each other in the competition to find a suitable husband. Belinda's sexual fall would remove her from the marriage market, ensuring less competition for rich or titled young men such as the Baron. Of course, a woman does not have to compromise her virtue to lose her honor, which Pope depicts during the gossip at the beginning of the canto: "At every word a reputation dies" (16). In this society, the loss of reputation has much the same result as sexual transgression. Pope's depiction of unkind womanly attitudes towards each other serves to criticize society's sexual double-standard in which a woman must attract a husband without compromising her virtue.

In the third canto Pope expands his social critique beyond the trivial entertainments and petty squabbles of the aristocracy. Using the structure of the heroic couplet (rhyming pairs of lines in iambic pentameter), he creates parallel constructions that expose the harsh realities of life outside of the amusements of Hampton Court Palace. He describes Hampton Court as the place where Queen Anne "dost sometimes counsel take—and sometimes tea" (8). Here Pope employs a zeugma, a

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rhetorical device in which a word modifies two other words or phrases in a parallel construction, modifying each according to a different sense. In this instance, “take” modifies both “counsel” and “tea,” but one does not take counsel and tea in the same way. The zeugma thus reveals Hampton Court as a palace that hosts both matters of state and social diversions. Similarly, in the second verse-paragraph, some of Belinda’s companions discuss balls and visits while another “speaks the glory of the British Queen, / And one describes a charming Indian screen” (13-4). While some members of the party relate stories about their social engagements, the references to the “British Queen” and “Indian screen” serve as reminders of the world outside of Hampton Court. In particular the words “British” and “Indian” evoke the British Empire, worlds away from the comfort of Hampton Court. The serving of coffee, “which makes the politician wise, / And see through all things with his half-shut eyes” likewise suggests British trade and a political world beyond the amusements of this aristocratic party (117-8). Pope’s use of parallel constructions within the heroic couplet thus reveals the serious matters that exist outside of the lords’ and ladies’ gossip.

#### 24.1.4 The Rape of the Lock: Canto IV

##### Summary

Belinda’s “anxious cares” and “secret passions” at the loss of her hair eclipse the “rage, resentment, and despair” felt by captured kings, scorned virgins, tragic lovers, and unrepentant tyrants (1, 2, 9). After the Sylphs withdraw, weeping at their failure to protect Belinda, a Gnome named Umbriel descends to the center of the earth to the Cave of Spleen. (During the eighteenth century, the spleen was associated with the passions, melancholy and discontentment in particular.) During his descent, he passes “a grotto, sheltered close from air,” in which Belinda reclines, afflicted by pain and a migraine (21). Two handmaidens attend to Belinda in her distress: Ill-Nature and Affectation.

Mists and vapors shroud the palace of Spleen. Grotesque figures of fiends and specters line Umbriel’s path, their “bodies changed to various forms by Spleen” (48). In this splenic world everything is upside-down or inverted: “Men prove with child” (53). Carrying a sprig of “spleenwort” for protection against these fantastic figures, Umbriel arrives safely in the depths of the cave and addresses the Goddess of Spleen. Umbriel enumerates his mischievous acts which range from causing a beautiful woman to break out in pimples to convincing men that their wives are cuckolding them. He asks the goddess to “touch Belinda with chagrin” (77). Though dismissive, the goddess grants his wish. She gives the Gnome a bag containing “sighs, sobs, and passions, and the war of tongues” and a vial with “fairing fears, / Soft sorrows, melting griefs, and flowing tears (84, 85). Umbriel takes the goddess’ gifts and ascends from the Cave of Spleen to Hampton Court Palace.

The Gnome returns to find Belinda in a disheveled and dejected state while being comforted by her friend Thalestris. (In Greek mythology, Thalestris was an Amazon; Pope’s use of the name suggests a fierce, combative woman.) Umbriel empties the contents of the goddess’ bag on the two women, fueling Belinda’s ire. Now outraged, Thalestris attempts to convince Belinda to avenge the wrongs committed by the Baron. In a speech full of rhetorical flourishes, Thalestris warns Belinda that the Baron will display her hair for the amusement of others, which will thereby endanger Belinda’s honor and reputation: “I / Already hear the horrid things they say, / Already see you a degraded toast, / And all your honor in a whisper lost” (107-10).

Unable to rouse Belinda, Thalestris goes in a rage to Sir Plume, her own beau, asking him to demand the return of the hair. Sir Plume addresses the Baron in an unintelligible speech filled with eighteenth-century slang. The Baron mocks his manner of speaking and haughtily refuses to honor the request. He vainly displays the honors he has won, claiming that “this hand, which won it, shall forever wear” (138).

Upon the Baron’s refusal, Umbriel releases the contents of the goddess’ vial. The contents of the vial cause Belinda to cry self-piteously and languish in her “beauteous grief” (143). She curses the day’s events and bemoans her fate, wishing that she had never entered fashionable society but rather

“unadmired remained / In some lone isle, or distant northern land” (153-4). She articulates her regret at not having listened to the Sylph’s warning or the morning’s evil omens. Belinda then laments the state of the lonely curl that remains, the sister of the severed lock.

## Analysis

The fourth canto opens with Belinda languishing in “rage, resentment, and despair,” eclipsing the sorrows of kings imprisoned after battle, scornful women who become spinsters, lovers robbed of their happiness, medieval women refused kisses, tyrants who die without repenting, and a woman whose dress is unkempt (9). Pope places each of these individuals in their own line so that their sorrows have equal footing and none is subordinate. Of course, the despair of a captured king far outweighs the aggravation of a woman who appears disheveled. By placing all of these figures subordinate to Belinda, Pope accentuates the excess and impropriety of her grief after the theft of her hair, a minor setback. He thus chastises those who place excessive significance on trivial problems. Furthermore, by equating the disparate sorrows enumerated in this first verse-paragraph, Pope emphasizes the importance of a moral code with which to evaluate the validity of these emotions.

Umbriel’s descent into the Cave of Spleen evokes the journeys to the underworld made by Odysseus in *The Odyssey* and Aeneas in *The Aeneid*. This sequence perverts the traditional epic justifications for visiting the underworld. Usually the hero requires guidance for his quest and travels to the underworld to consult a deceased friend or relative. Overcome with despair, Belinda has retired to her bed, so instead of the hero’s visit to the underworld, Pope depicts the descent of a trouble-making Gnome. Of course, Umbriel has no intention of assisting Belinda in recovering the lock; rather, he travels to the Cave of Spleen for methods to exacerbate Belinda’s pain. The use of the “spleen” sequence also allows Pope to explore Belinda’s emotional distress. In her sorrow Belinda is attended by Ill-Nature and Affectation whose presence suggests that the heroine’s grief is affected rather than a true reflection of her emotion. Her anguish is thus equally as decorative as her locks, completely undermining the elevation of her misery in the first verse-paragraph.

Pope further emphasizes the epic tradition in Thalestris’ speech. She figures the severing of the lock as an affront to Belinda’s honor, encouraging her friend to avenge this insult. Offended honor is a common theme in epic poetry; at the outset of *The Iliad*, Achilles is enraged at Agamemnon for insulting him. Thalestris’ attempts to rouse Belinda’s anger serve as a reminder of the behavior Belinda should be demonstrating as the epic hero. In Belinda’s place, Thalestris is outraged. Her presence reinforces Pope’s manipulation of the epic genre, borrowing the Amazon from Greek mythology. Here Pope also draws on chivalric ideals from the romance genre. She asks Sir Plume to defend Belinda’s honor by demanding that the Baron return the lock. Sir Plume fails utterly, muttering only slang terms in his confrontation with the Baron. His failure to restore Belinda’s honor demonstrates the degree to which chivalry has declined.

Pope’s discussion of honor in this canto reemphasizes the poem’s sexual allegory. Though the poem’s title figures the severing of Belinda’s hair as an overt sexual violation, Thalestris intimates that Belinda’s ultimate concern should be what the Baron will do with the ringlet. She worries that the Baron will display the curl to the public and thereby endanger Belinda’s honor and reputation. She envisions the Baron’s triumphant exhibition of the hair: “Methinks already I your tears survey, / Already hear the horrid things they say, / Already see you a degraded toast, / And all your honor in a whisper lost” (107-10). Thalestris’ depiction of Belinda’s humiliation demonstrates society’s emphasis on the external appearance of morality (i.e., reputation). Pope reinforces this focus on appearances at the end of the canto when Belinda laments her lost curl: “Oh, hadst though, cruel! Been content to seize / hairs less in sight, or any hairs but these!” (175-6). The “hairs less in sight” suggest her pubic hairs, which are more explicitly sexual than the ringlet that the Baron stole. Belinda’s preference for the theft of her public hairs indicates that she would rather compromise

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her virtue than suffer damage to her looks. Pope thus demonstrates the misplaced significance and value that society places on external appearances.

### 24.1.5 The Rape of the Lock: Canto V

#### Summary

Despite Belinda's tears and Thalestris' reproaches, the Baron remains unmoved, refusing to relinquish the curl. Clarissa then waves her fan to gather the attention of those present. She asks the assembled group why society places so much value on beauty when it is not tempered by good sense. She notes that men often call women angels and worship them as such without assessing their moral character. She observes that beauty is ephemeral: "Curled or uncurled, since locks will turn to gray; / Since Painted, or not painted all shall fade" (26-7). Because "frail beauty must decay," women must have other qualities, good sense in particular, to guide them after beauty fades (25). Consequently Clarissa tries to convince Belinda that when tantrums ("airs, and flights, and screams, and scolding") fail to restore her looks, it is "good humor" that will win the day (32, 31). Clarissa's moralizing fails to comfort Belinda, and Thalestris calls her a prude.

Not pacified by Clarissa's speech, Belinda and Thalestris prepare the other women to launch an attack on the men to regain the curl. Umbriel sits perched on a scone, presiding over the epic struggle with mischievous glee. The humans fight "like Gods nor dread a mortal wound" (44). The women quickly overpower many of the men: "A beau and witling perished in the throng, / One died in metaphor, and one in song" (59-60). Dapperwit falls in a faint, and Sir Fopling prays for mercy before falling as well. Sir Plume nearly overcomes Clarissa, but Chloe saves her, killing Sir Plume "with a frown" (68). When she smiles to see him fall, he quickly revives.

Belinda flies at the Baron, and the two lock in combat. She gains the upper hand, throwing snuff at his nose which causes his eyes to tear. She draws a "deadly bodkin" (here, an ornamental hairpin) and holds it at the Baron's throat (88). (This is not, however, just any hairpin but rather has a mystical history. It was once three seal rings that Belinda's great-great-grandfather wore, which were melted down after his death to make a belt buckle for his widow. The buckle was transformed into a whistle for her grandmother before it was melted into a hairpin for her mother, a hairpin which she, in turn, inherited.) Having defeated the Baron, Belinda again demands the return of her hair, her roar shaking the "vaulted roofs" (104). The lock, however, has been lost in the scuffle and cannot be found.

Though the humans cannot find Belinda's lock, the Muse saw it rise towards the sky, for "none but quick, poetic eyes" could see it (124). The curl becomes "a sudden star / And drew behind a radiant trail of hair" (127-8). The poem finally addresses Belinda, urging her not to "mourn thy ravished hair" (141). As a star, her ringlet adds "new glory to the shining sphere," and stargazers for years to come can admire it (142). Long after Belinda herself dies and "all those tresses shall be laid in dust," the star will remain a testament to her beauty (148).

#### Analysis

Some critics have interpreted Clarissa's moralizing as the voice of Pope, articulating the poem's moral, but this is a gross misreading of the poem. Though Clarissa's speech would certainly serve Pope's basic purpose of reconciling the families of Arabella Fermor and Lord Petre, Pope's satire achieves a broader and more complex social critique, ranging from the idleness of the upper classes to the sexual double-standard for women. Clarissa's warnings about the ephemeral nature of beauty are valid but provide an interpretive problem. Although she assumes the voice of moral superiority at this point in the poem, it was she who provided the weapon that severed Belinda's hair. She has therefore undermined Belinda's honor and is largely responsible for the present quarrel. Thus Clarissa cannot claim moral authority as she attempts to do in this speech.

## Notes

Clarissa's failure to pacify Belinda creates an occasion for the poem's second epic battle. Unlike the card game in the third canto, the struggle over the lock has erotic implications, which befit the sexual allegory of the poem. The din made during the fight—rustling clothing and confused shouts—more closely resembles erotic sounds than the noises of battle: "Fans clap, silks rustle, and tough whalebones crack; Heroes' and heroines' shouts confusedly rise" (40-1). The postures of the combatants likewise take on sexual connotations. During the fight, Sir Plume "draw[s] Clarissa down," suggesting a sexual act rather than the striking down of an enemy (67). Similarly, Belinda basically sits on the Baron when she overcomes him, an obviously sexual position. The eroticism of the battle culminates with the sexual double meaning of the word "die." Though "die" can refer to physical death, it is clear that the men are not actually expiring during the fight. Rather, Pope uses the word "die" as a metaphor for orgasm, in the sense of *la petite mort* (the little death). Most significantly, the Baron, who stole Belinda's sexually-charged lock of hair, fights unafraid because he "sought no more than on his foe to die" (78). This suggests that his goal throughout the poem has been sexual gratification.

Despite its erotic overtones, the battle over the lock is also the culmination of Pope's heroic parody. Following the epic paradigm, Pope invokes the martial Greek and Roman gods: "'Gainst Pallas, Mars; Latona, Hermes arms;/ And all Olympus rings with loud alarms; / Jove's thunder roars / Blue Neptune storms" (47-50). Pope simultaneously undermines these lofty allusions by killing the men in rather ridiculous fashions. Dapperwit and Sir Fopling faint as the women overcome them, while Chloe kills Sir Plume "with a frown" (68). She smiles when he dies, and at her smile, Sir Plume "revive[s] again" (70). The absurdity of these deaths demonstrates the triviality of the scuffle and emphasizes Pope's mock-heroic tone. The reversal of gender roles also contributes to Pope's parody of the epic. In this battle, the women are the aggressors. Pope calls Thalestris "the fierce virago," and she easily overcomes many of the men (37). While Thalestris is the most vicious of the female combatants, Belinda remains the heroic figure, flying to her enemy "with more than usual lightning in her eyes" (76). She abandons all pretext of lady-like grace. In a shout that echoes her victorious cry at the end of the card game, Belinda demands for the return of the lock: "Not fierce Othello in so loud a strain / Roared for the handkerchief that caused his pain" (105-6). Her rage thus turns her into a swarthy warrior, and she easily overcomes the Baron. At this point, Pope diffuses the epic tone of the poem. Belinda's use of snuff trivializes the fight, causing the Baron to sneeze, a most unheroic action.



*Notes* Pope provides a final epic flourish by relating the history of Belinda's bodkin. He relates an elaborate tale that memorializes the bodkin's evolution from three signet rings to a buckle to a whistle and finally to an ornamental hairpin. This history imbues the hairpin with the same significance as Agamemnon's scepter or Achilles' shield in *The Iliad*.

Pope concludes the poem with a final compliment to Arabella Fermor, the historical inspiration for Belinda. By depicting the lost curl as a star in the firmament, he refuses to chastise Belinda's behavior and instead celebrates Miss Fermor and Belinda. The poem's conclusion indulges female vanity, immortalizing Miss Fermor's experience in verse just as the heavens become an eternal testament to Belinda's beauty. Despite the poem's social critiques, the poem ends with little moral development. Belinda's hair will grow back, and her beauty will be admired even after her death. The poem is thus an example of Horatian satire; rather than exposing the evils of the aristocracy, the poem provides a gentle critique that generally sympathizes with the characters in spite of their follies.

## 24.2 Alexander Pope: An Essay on Man: Epistle I–IV

### 24.2.1 An Essay on Man: Epistle I

#### Summary

The subtitle of the first epistle is “Of the Nature and State of Man, with Respect to the Universe,” and this section deals with man’s place in the cosmos. Pope argues that to justify God’s ways to man must necessarily be to justify His ways in relation to all other things. God rules over the whole universe and has no special favorites, not man nor any other creature. By nature, the universe is an order of “strong connexions, nice dependencies, / Gradations just” (30-1). This order is, more specifically, a hierarchy of the “Vast chain of being” in which all of God’s creations have a place (237). Man’s place in the chain is below the angels but above birds and beasts. Any deviation from this order would result in cosmic destruction. Because the universe is so highly ordered, chance, as man understands it, does not exist. Chance is rather “direction, which thou canst not see” (290). Those things that man sees as disparate or unrelated are all “but parts of one stupendous whole, / Whose body nature is, and God the soul” (267-8). Thus every element of the universe has complete perfection according to God’s purpose. Pope concludes the first epistle with the statement “Whatever is, is right,” meaning that all is for the best and that everything happens according to God’s plan, even though man may not be able to comprehend it (294).

#### Here is a section-by-section explanation of the first epistle:

Introduction (1-16): The introduction begins with an address to Henry St. John, Lord Bolingbroke, a friend of the poet from whose fragmentary philosophical writings Pope likely drew inspiration for *An Essay on Man*. Pope urges his friend to “leave all meaner things” and rather embark with Pope on his quest to “vindicate the ways of God to man (1, 16).

Section I (17-34): Section I argues that man can only understand the universe with regard to human systems and constructions because he is ignorant of the greater relationships between God’s creations.

Section II (35-76): Section II states that man is imperfect but perfectly suited to his place within the hierarchy of creation according to the general order of things.

Section III (77-112): Section III demonstrates that man’s happiness depends on both his ignorance of future events and on his hope for the future.

Section IV (113-30): Section IV claims that man’s sin of pride—the attempt to gain more knowledge and pretend to greater perfection—is the root of man’s error and misery. By putting himself in the place of God, judging perfection and justice, man acts impiously.

Section V (131-72): Section V depicts the absurdity of man’s belief that he is the sole cause of the creation as well as his ridiculous expectation of perfection in the moral world that does not exist in the natural world.

Section VI (173-206): Section VI decries the unreasonableness of man’s complaints against Providence; God is good, giving and taking equally. If man had the omniscience of God, he would be miserable: “The bliss of man / Is, not to act of think beyond mankind” (189-90).

Section VII (207-32): Section VII shows that throughout the visible world, a universal order and gradation can be observed. This is particularly apparent in the hierarchy of earthly creatures and their subordination to man. Pope refers specifically to the gradations of sense, instinct, thought, reflection, and reason. Reason is superior to all.

Section VIII (233-58): Section VIII indicates that if God’s rules of order and subordination are broken, the whole of creation must be destroyed.

Section IX (259-80): Section IX illustrates the madness of the desire to subvert God’s order.

Section X (281-94): Section X calls on man to submit to God’s power. Absolute submission to God will ensure that man remains “Safe in the hand of one disposing Pow’r” (287). After all, “Whatever is, is right” (294).

## Analysis

## Notes

Pope's first epistle seems to endorse a sort of fatalism, in which all things are fated. Everything happens for the best, and man should not presume to question God's greater design, which he necessarily cannot understand because he is a part of it. He further does not possess the intellectual capability to comprehend God's order outside of his own experience. These arguments certainly support a fatalistic world view. According to Pope's thesis, everything that exists plays a role in the divine plan. God thus has a specific intention for every element of His creation, which suggests that all things are fated. Pope, however, was always greatly distressed by charges of fatalism. As a proponent of the doctrine of free will, Pope's personal opinions seem at odds with his philosophical conclusions in the first epistle. Reconciling Pope's own views with his fatalistic description of the universe represents an impossible task.

The first epistle of *An Essay on Man* is its most ambitious. Pope states that his task is to describe man's place in the "universal system" and to "vindicate the ways of God to man" (16). In the poem's prefatory address, Pope more specifically describes his intention to consider "man in the abstract, his Nature and his State, since, to prove any moral duty, to enforce any moral precept, or to examine the perfection or imperfection of any creature whatsoever, it is necessary first to know what condition and relation it is placed in, and what is the proper end and purpose of its being." Pope's stated purpose of the poem further problematizes any critical reading of the first epistle. According to Pope's own conclusions, man's limited intellect can comprehend only a small portion of God's order and likewise can have knowledge of only half-truths. It therefore seems the height of hubris to presume to justify God's ways to man. His own philosophical conclusions make this impossible. As a mere component part of God's design and a member of the hierarchical middle state, Pope exists within God's design and therefore cannot perceive the greater logic of God's order. To do so would bring only misery: "The bliss of man / Is, not to act or think beyond mankind" (189-90).

Though Pope's philosophical ambitions result in a rather incoherent epistle, the poem demonstrates a masterful use of the heroic couplet. Some of the most quoted lines from Pope's works actually appear in this poem. For example, the quotation "Hope springs eternal in the human breast: / Man never is, but always to be blest" appears in the problematic first epistle (95-6). Pope's skill with verse thus far outweighs his philosophical aspirations, and it is fortunate that he chose to write in verse rather than prose. Indeed, eighteenth-century critics saw *An Essay on Man* as a primarily poetic work despite its philosophical themes.

### 24.2.2 An Essay on Man: Epistle II

#### Summary

The subtitle of the second epistle is "Of the Nature and State of Man, with Respect to Himself as an Individual" and treats on the relationship between the individual and God's greater design.

**Here is a section-by-section explanation of the second epistle:**

Section I (1-52): Section I argues that man should not pry into God's affairs but rather study himself, especially his nature, powers, limits, and frailties.

Section II (53-92): Section II shows that the two principles of man are self-love and reason. Self-love is the stronger of the two, but their ultimate goal is the same.

Section III (93-202): Section III describes the modes of self-love (*i.e.*, the passions) and their function. Pope then describes the ruling passion and its potency. The ruling passion works to provide man with direction and defines man's nature and virtue.

Section IV (203-16): Section IV indicates that virtue and vice are combined in man's nature and that the two, while distinct, often mix.

**Notes**

Section V (217-30): Section V illustrates the evils of vice and explains how easily man is drawn to it.

Section VI (231-294): Section VI asserts that man's passions and imperfections are simply designed to suit God's purposes. The passions and imperfections are distributed to all individuals of each order of men in all societies. They guide man in every state and at every age of life.

**Analysis**

The second epistle adds to the interpretive challenges presented in the first epistle. At its outset, Pope commands man to "Know then thyself," an adage that misdescribes his argument (1). Although he actually intends for man to better understand his place in the universe, the classical meaning of "Know thyself" is that man should look inwards for truth rather than outwards. Having spent most of the first epistle describing man's relationship to God as well as his fellow creatures, Pope's true meaning of the phrase is clear. He then confuses the issue by endeavoring to convince man to avoid the presumptuousness of studying God's creation through natural science. Science has given man the tools to better understand God's creation, but its intoxicating power has caused man to imitate God. It seems that man must look outwards to gain any understanding of his divine purpose but avoid excessive analysis of what he sees. To do so would be to assume the role of God.

The second epistle abruptly turns to focus on the principles that guide human action. The rest of this section focuses largely on "self-love," an eighteenth-century term for self-maintenance and fulfillment. It was common during Pope's lifetime to view the passions as the force determining human action. Typically instinctual, the immediate object of the passions was seen as pleasure. According to Pope's philosophy, each man has a "ruling passion" that subordinates the others. In contrast with the accepted eighteenth-century views of the passions, Pope's doctrine of the "ruling passion" is quite original. It seems clear that with this idea, Pope tries to explain why certain individual behave in distinct ways, seemingly governed by a particular desire. He does not, however, make this explicit in the poem.

Pope's discussion of the passions shows that "self-love" and "reason" are not opposing principles. Reason's role, it seems, is to regulate human behavior while self-love originates it. In another sense, self-love and the passions dictate the short term while reason shapes the long term.

**24.2.3 An Essay on Man: Epistle III**

**Summary**

The subtitle of the third epistle is "Of the Nature and State of Man, with Respect to Society," and this section discusses man's relation to family, government, and religion. Pope states that love connects the universe and that all creatures exchange services in a symbiotic relationship. Individual instances of human tyranny, however, offend nature. Instinct and reason are the guiding principles of man's behavior and have dictated man's trajectory since creation.

**Here is a section-by-section explanation of the third epistle:**

Introduction (1-6): The introduction simply reiterates the points Pope made in the first two epistles.

Section I (7-78): Section I suggests that the whole universe is one system of society. Nothing is made wholly for the benefit to itself, nor wholly for the benefit of others. Instead, everything is bound together in a neighboring embrace and all "parts relate to whole" (21). Those who fail to perform the role that nature has ordained will not be aided by society.

Section II (79-108): Section II states that all creatures are given either reason or instinct, whichever is best suited to the individual. Reason or instinct operates all society in both man and the animals.

Section III (109-46): Section III first demonstrates how far society can be carried by instinct, then shows how much farther society can be carried by reason. In society, creatures are instinctively united by mutual need. Reason extends that instinct into emotional connection.

Section IV (147-98): Section IV discusses the state of man at the time of creation, in particular the harmony between all elements of society. Initially bound by instinct, man looked to other creatures for instruction on how to act and develop their own forms of society, using reason to teach themselves.

Section V (199-214): Section V explains the development of political societies, especially the origins of monarchy and patriarchal government.

Section VI (215-318): Section VI examines the roles of religion and government in society. According to Pope's argument, the origin of both true religion and government is the principle of love: faith is the love of God and government is the love of man. By contrast, superstition and tyranny both originate from the same principle of fear. Thus self-love, through just and unjust means, can either drive man's ambition or restrain him. Pope then describes man's efforts to restore true religion and government on their first principle. Both religion and government take many forms, but their ultimate ends are to govern the soul and to govern society.

## Analysis

The third epistle treats on man's social contract with family, government, and religion, and Pope focuses on the bonds that unite man with others. While the second epistle shows that self-love governs man's actions, love governs the universe, binding its disparate elements. Modern readers might be inclined to interpret this to mean erotic or familial love, but Pope actually refers to a sort of contractual love, which forms a building-block of God's design and the chain of being. Atoms, for example, attract and are attracted to each other, which ensures that they remain in their proper place. Likewise, dirt sustains the growth of plants, and when a plant dies, it returns to dirt to nourish its fellow plants. Man's grass and flowers provide food for antelope while antelope also nourish man. All parts in the circle of life thus "relate to whole," and love "connects each being, greatest with the least / Made beast in aid of man, and man of best; / All serv'd, all serving: nothing stands alone" (21, 23-5). Love provides a convenient way for Pope to describe symbiosis in the relationship between God's creatures, indicative of God's greater design.

Pope goes on to discuss the effects that instinct and reason have on God's creation. All creatures are imbued with either instinct or reason, whichever is best suited to their nature. According to Pope's argument, instinct tends to characterize beasts while man serves reason. Those governed by instinct are largely complacent, needing no assistance from "pope or council" (84). By contrast, reason seems to result in more calculated behavior and these creatures must labor at happiness which instinct quickly secures. While these are hardly original observations, Pope implies that instinct is the work of God while reason is that of man. This conclusion accounts for the development of man. In man's infancy humans were governed by instinct. Man then learned various behaviors—ploughing from the mole, political arts from the bees, etc.—by copying animals, thus developing human reason.

Through observations of his fellow creatures, man began to build his own cities, demonstrating sociability through government and religion. Man's early societies were patriarchal, featuring mild and natural rulers. Everyone conducted themselves virtuously and celebrated God until patriarchs directed self-love towards personal ambition and priests perverted religious worship. It was not until man redirected self-love towards its natural sociability through restraint, namely "government and laws," that man formed a social contract, which established good government and laws by rational agreement for mutual security (272). Pope's conclusion, therefore, is that private good is best achieved by preventing a conflict with public good: "Thus God and nature link'd the general frame, / And bade self-love and social be the same" (317-8).

### 24.2.4 An Essay on Man: Epistle IV

#### Summary

The subtitle of the fourth epistle is "On the Nature and State of Man, with Respect to Happiness" and depicts man's various attempts to achieve true human happiness. Pope endeavors to prove that virtue alone can generate such happiness.

Notes

**Here is a section-by-section explanation of the fourth epistle:**

Introduction (1-18): The introduction identifies happiness as man's ultimate aim and establishes man's search for happiness as the theme of the fourth epistle.

Section I (19-28): Section I enumerates the popular and philosophical false notions of happiness.

Section II (29-92): Section II suggests that happiness is man's end and that it can be attained by all. Happiness is therefore equal which means that it must also be social since, as Pope establishes in the third epistle, man is governed by general, not specific laws. Because happiness is social, it is necessary for the order, peace, and welfare of society. It cannot, however, be located in external goods since these can be unequal. God balances the happiness of mankind by the two passions of hope and fear.

Section III (93-110): Section III shows that the happiness of individuals is in accordance with God's greater plan and is consistent with the equality of man. Man, however, might question why a virtuous man dies while a sinful man lives.

Section IV (111-30): Section IV answers man's concerns in Section III. Pope chastises man's presumption to question the ways of God; it is absurd to expect God to alter his laws to favor particular individuals.

Section V (131-48): Section V demonstrates that man cannot judge the goodness and righteousness of other men. This is the purview of God alone. Whichever men are most good and righteous must be the happiest.

Section VI (149-308): Section VI elucidates the conflict between vice and virtue. Though sometimes vice seems to prevail, it is part of God's order; man should be content to be virtuous. External goods, for example, are not the proper rewards for virtue and are often inconsistent with or destructive of virtue. All the riches, honors, nobility, greatness, fame, and superior talents cannot make man happy without likewise having virtue.

Section VII (309-98): Section VII deals specifically with the relationship between virtue and happiness. Virtue can only provide a happiness which seeks to rise above the individual and embrace the universal. Happiness thus born will exist eternally. This perfection of virtue and happiness conforms to God's order and represents the ultimate purpose of mankind.

**Analysis**

Despite the significant interpretive problems of the first two epistles, the fourth epistle provides an appropriate conclusion to *An Essay on Man*, knitting the poem's arguments together and ostensibly demonstrating man's relation to and purpose in the universe. According to Pope's argument, happiness is man's ultimate goal and can only be attained through virtuous behavior. Of course, as he indicates earlier in the poem, the lines between virtue and vice are often blurred. It is therefore important to assign an appropriate reward for virtue: "What nothing earthly gives, or can destroy, / The soul's calm sunshine, and the heart-felt joy, / Is virtue's prize: a better would you fix? / Then give humility a coach and six" (167-70). Pope shows this reward to be a composed serenity free of earthly desires. Indeed, such serenity cannot derive from riches or fame, material goods or currencies which usually serve as an impediment to virtue anyway.

The "soul's calm sunshine" that Pope describes allows man to transcend his earthly prison and look "through nature up to nature's God," allowing man to pursue "that chain which links th'immense design, / Joins heav'n and earth, and mortal and divine" (332). Serenity is thus the natural end of judicious self-love: "God loves from whole to parts; but human soul / Must rise from individual to the whole. / Self-love but serves the virtuous mind to wake" (261-3). This is not, of course, the momentary pleasure that basic self-love and the passions provide but rather the happiness that derives from knowing one is part of a divine plan and accepting one's place and role in it. In other words, trust God and all will be well because "Whatever is, is right" (l.294).

Although the fourth epistle provides a successful conclusion to Pope's ambitious philosophical project, this section is not without its problems. Perhaps most distressing is Pope's argument in Section IV, which dismisses man's concern that too often virtue appears to be punished while vice is rewarded. While this is addressed to an extent in Pope's discussion of material goods, Pope also asserts that God acts by general and not specific laws which apply to the whole, not individual parts. This suggests that all men are treated exactly equally by God. Experience obviously contradicts this assertion, but so does Pope himself. He declares that to satisfy God's hierarchical order as well as man's social order, there must be differences of wealth and rank. He claims that equality of wealth is opposed to God's ways because it would breed discontent among those who deserve greater wealth and status. Though Pope qualifies this by suggesting redress in Heaven, this disparity of wealth and rank—a part of reality—undermine Pope's thesis.

### **24.3 The Use of Supernatural Machinery in the Rape of the Lock**

The *Rape of the Lock* is Pope's best expression of poetic and satirical genius. The 1st version of *The Rape of the Lock* was in two cantos, in which Pope tried to reconcile two families about a quarrel. But the immense popularity of the poem inspired Pope to enlarge it in five cantos, in which he used supernatural machinery extensively.

The supernatural machinery of the poem is derived from the Rosicrucian doctrine as formulated by Le Comte in Germany in the 17th Century. According to this theory, four elements fire, water, earth and air, were inhabited by four kinds of spirits—Salamanders, Nymphs, Gnomes and sylphs. In this poem Pope does not put all these spirits to function but simply Sylphs and an evil spirit Umbrid are put in action. The sylphs are presented as tiny good spirit with wings. They can change their shape and sex can see the future can inspect the heart of the human being. They are airy and invisible to the human eyes. These good spirits try to protect Belinda. Their head sylph is Ariel.

In the 1st canto the sylph causes a dream to Belinda, the heroine of the poem. The sylph appears in the form of a handsome young man in her dream at the noon time. The guardian sylph addresses Belinda as 'Fairest of mortals' and she is told that she is protected by thousands of spirits who wanders in airy regions. The sylph has caused sleep and dream to Belinda with a special purpose as he wants to convey certain secret truths. The sylph says the Belinda should not consider herself as a common girl but she is someone special. Certain secrets are not revealed to them who are intellectual and skeptics. The secret truths are revealed to women and children who by nature are very innocent. Thousands of sylphs are protecting Belinda so she should feel proud. The first truth the sylph reveals is about the next birth of women. All sylphs before their present existence were beautiful women. When a woman dies, it is only her physical death. Her vanities interest, taste remain the same. Even after their death the interest to play the game of card, to move in decorated chariot, survive as they accompany the beautiful lady for the purpose of protecting her. The sylph further says that basically there are four kinds of women.

1. The women who are quarrelsome after their death, their soul goes to fire and such women become Salamander.
2. Those women who are polite submissive, after their death their soul returns to water and they become Nymphs.
3. Those women who are proud, serious minded, their soul go to Earth and they become Gnome.
4. Those women who are flirt and coquette, after their death, their soul go to air and they become Sylphs.

The second truth is that a woman should not reject the proposal of a man because a time comes when she falls in love with the sylph as the sylph can assume any shape. The third secret truth which the sylph reveals is that women are tempted on some occasions to part with their chastity.

## Notes

When they go to the club for ball dance, masquerades, theatre with some treacherous friend on such occasions her virginity is protected by the guidance of the Sylphs but a woman thinks that her sense of honour protects her from parting with virtue. The fourth secret is that some beautiful girls reject the proposal of men and dreams of lords and noblemen imagines themselves as duchess. These women corrupt their minds and heart.

The fifth secret revealed to Belinda is that when women go astray, they are guided by the Sylphs falling from the follies by introducing new temptations to them. The Sylph introduces himself that he is also one such Sylph and he has come to warn her, protect her. The name of this Sylph is Ariel. The Sylph reveals his purpose by saying that while wandering in the air he saw governing star of Belinda, which shows the shadow of some dreadful event which will take place on that day before sunset. It has not been revealed what will happen or where will happen. As a guardian Sylph of Belinda, he gives one warning to her and vanishes from her dream.



Task

What function does the poem's supernatural machinery serve?

One reason of the success of the poem is the use of supernatural machinery by Pope. The speech of the sylph echoes Satan's speeches in *Paradise Lost*, and the heroes speech in the classical epics. The name of the Sylph- Ariel reminds the mischievous airy spirit of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Through the speech of the Sylph Pope satirizes the fashionable women of 18th century, whose virtue seems easily assailable and the Sylph must protect them.

Ariel is not simply satisfied with this. The major function of the sylph is their meeting. The head sylph Ariel calls all sylphs from different earthly regions and first describes their original function. Then he says that they have to do a special function on that day because the virtue of one lady is in danger. To each Sylph he assigns a special job. Brillante, is asked to take care of Belinda's hair and Ariel himself will take care of her lap-dog. Through this Pope passes satire that being the head Sylph he should think of protecting her virtue but he decides to protect her lap-dog.

The presence of the Sylphs also serves the purpose of comic effect. Their attempt to create a mild blow of wind with the help of their wings sounds comic. One Sylph who is overenthusiastic comes in between when Baron is cutting the lock of hair. It gets cut into two but being an airy spirit it is reunited. They also sit on the cards of Ombre so that Belinda may win.

Pope has successfully utilized supernatural machinery not simply by incorporating good spirit but also by incorporating an evil spirit like Umbrid. If good spirit tries to protect Belinda, evil spirit harms Belinda. If Belinda is in melancholy, half of the world is in melancholy so to cause despair and melancholy to Belinda, Umbrid goes to the Cave of Spleen. Umbrid's visit to the under world serves the purpose of one important epic convention. An ideal epic should display some characters visiting either heaven or underworld. This convention is observed by Pope through this supernatural element. His visit also serves the purpose of mock element. In that cave he finds tea-pots walking and talking which is comic. His collecting sighs, sorrows, sobs, tears, and then showering all on Belinda also add to the mock-effect of the poem. The way the Sylphs sit on the cards of Belinda, Umbrid and other evil spirits sit on the weapons of women so that they can use those weapons effectively.



Did u know?

The presence of the Sylphs and Umbrid make the reading of the poem interesting. Though they are supernatural, they appear as if they are human beings with flesh and blood.

## 24.4 Alexander Pope: The Rape of the Lock; As a Social Satire N as a Mock Epic

### 24.4.1 The Rape of the Lock–Social Satire

As Shakespeare is the poet of man, Pope is a poet of society. “The Rape of the Lock” is a social document because it mirrors contemporary society and contains a social satire, too. Pope paints about England in 18th century. The whole panorama of “The Rape of the Lock” revolves around the false standard of 18th century. Pope satirizes the young girls and boys, aristocratic women and men, their free time activities, nature of husbands and wives, the professional judges and politicians of the day.

Pope clearly depicts the absurdities and the frivolities of the fashionable circle of the 18th century England. The world of Belinda – the world of fashion is a trivial world. The whole life of Belinda is confined to sleeping, make-up, enjoyment and alluring the lords. There are no transcendental elements in her life. This life is marked by ill-nature, affection, mischievousness, coquetry, yielding and submissive nature, fierce and unruly nature, infidelity, cheapness, meanness, trivialities and frivolities etc. Belinda represents all the fashion struck women, busy in such stupidities.

The gallants of the time have not been spared by Pope. Baron not only represents Peter but also typifies the aristocratic gallants of the age.



*Did u know?* Pope satirizes man’s nature that is always weak at beauty. Men sacrifice everything at the altar of beauty and even the most intelligent man behaves foolishly when he fall a victim to beauty.

In order to make his satire sharper and all the more effective, Pope introduces the aerial machinery, which facilitates the satire. Through this weapon, the poet throws in contrast the weaknesses of the fashionable women of that age. He satirizes women who are interested in fashionable life and its pursuits and who go on exercising their evil influence even after their death. For the sake of worldly grandeur, they can bid farewell even to their chastity and honour. He satirizes women of fiery, coquettish mischievous and yielding nature and gives them different names. It also provides the poet with an opportunity to satirize the class consciousness of women.

All the women and beaus gather at the place where they exchange talks on trivial things e.g. visits, balls, films, motions, looks, eyes, etc. and “at every word, a reputation dies”.

“A beau and witling perished in the throng,

One died in metaphor, and one in song.”

Man’s favourite activity is to take suffered women to play with fan. There is singing, dancing, laughing, ogling, etc. and nothing else. Women are busy alluring the dukes and lords. The poet reflects the hollowness of men in the character of Sir Plume who is coward, foolish and senseless, lacking courage. Women are on the whole irresolute and they have made toyshops of their hearts. They have even illicit relations with the beaus. Women are meant only for the entertainment of men, who play toy with them.

Pope also satirizes of the husbands and wives of the day. Husbands always suspect their wives. They think that their wives have been merry making with their lovers.

Wives are also not virtuous at all. They love their lap-dogs more than their husbands. And the death of husbands is not more shocking than the death of a lap dog or the breakage of a china vessel.

## Notes

So through the medium of satire, Pope paints a picture of 18th century English society. His satire is didactic and impersonal. It is not inflicted against any person or individual, rather against the society and that, too, owing to some moral faults. He is dissatisfied with the society around which he wants to reform. The society he pictured is the aristocratic group of 18th century fashionable English society. But there are several allied subjects, too, on which he inflicts his satire. For example, he satirized the judges that make hasty decisions.

"The hungry judges soon the sentence sign,  
And wretches hang that jurymen may dine"

He also satirized those friends whose friendship is but lust, those politicians who do not have a deeper insight and cannot see beyond the shows and take steps just for their own interests and ends etc.

To sum up, the poem is a reflection of this artificial and hollow life, painted with a humorous and delicate satire. Pope's satire is intellectual and full of wit and epigram. His picture of Addison as Atticus though unjust and prompted by malice, is a brilliant piece of satire.

#### 24.4.2 The Rape of the Lock as a Mock Epic Poem

Pope demonstrates two quite separate influences in *The Rape of the Lock*: mock epic and Horatian satire. But since these two are quite antipodal—at least in terms of style and conventions—we shall examine not only instances of their presence, but the manner in which they are combined.

Just as history provides the most suitable material for the epic poem, Pope's use of a contemporary history—necessarily of lesser import—is equally befitting the mock epic. Accordingly, rather than depicting kings or majestic men and their distinguished deeds, intending to provoke our admiration, with perfect irony, Pope takes for his mock epic a vain female as hero, displaying her lowly trials and provoking our scorn. Here then we find our first common element, for Horace also is concerned with contemporary issues, though he certainly chooses an entirely different form for its exposition. Indeed, when Trebatius warns him away from satire, suggesting, ". . . if such great love of writing grips you, think big; /sing about unbeaten Caesar's deeds, and be rewarded," which certainly smacks of contemporary epic, Horace politely declines: "I'm insufficient; we all can't write of battle lines."

Another instance in which *The Rape of the Lock* makes use of epic convention and differs from Horace's *Satires*, is the introductory invocation of the Muse. Though this has no parallel in the *Satires*, Horace does begin the first epistle, in Book I of *Epistles* with: "My very first Muse sang of you." Its inclusion, by Pope, is not only necessitated by the mock epic form, but also by the ending of the work: Belinda wins immortality by means of the poem itself—muse related—as well as by the lock rising to form a new heavenly body: "But trust the Muse—she saw it upward rise, /Tho' mark'd by none but quick Poetic Eyes," which is essentially saying the same thing: her immortality is owing to poetry.

Even Horace himself acknowledges, also in the *Epistles*: "It is the Muse who gives immortality." Pope also uses the initial reference to the Muse to establish the presence of the supernatural, though instead of the classical gods providing the machinery, inciting to battle and protecting the mortal hero—as would be the case in epic convention—we find the Sylphs of Rosicrucian Philosophy. The Sylphs, of course, proved a perfect choice, for not only do they lack the reverence of classical gods, thus proving more suitable protectors of our unworthy hero, but they also brought with them a literary connection with erotica, particularly in *Le Comte de Gabalis*.

The foulness of language, in Book I *Satire 2* is in no way indicative of Horace's other satires, but it does, nevertheless, demonstrate by exaggeration—just as Book II teaches by exaggeration—that the language of Horace is the language of the street: ". . . my things are more like conversation," as well as ". . . talk is all it is." This is Horace himself speaking, in Book I, of his own work. In the final *Satire* of that book, written at a later date, this idea had been slightly modified:

The work must be concise . . .

The language should be grave at times, but often funny, sometimes rhetorical and poetic, sometimes urbanely smooth.

Here we see something slightly more reminiscent of *The Rape of the Lock*, but nevertheless, the style of language found in Horace's *Satires*— even in the most poetic instance, is far below that of Pope's mock epic. This is hardly surprising, for the foundation of the former is Old Greek Comedy and the latter Greek Epic. If there is no similarity in diction, the low, mundane content described by that diction, in *The Rape of the Lock*, is certainly reminiscent of Horace.

We might now turn to Belinda. We have already said that she is a character whose heroic propensities are a belittlement of the epic hero, and thus ideal for the mock epic, but now we shall examine her thematic importance.

"Still, false desires fool a large proportion of mankind, / they'll tell you, 'Nothing's enough. What we own we are."

Although here Horace refers to money, it seems wholly appropriate to see this as applicable to Belinda, for her lock represents not only her vanity, but the vanity of women, and so "what we own we are" clearly explains the importance of the theft. And yet, since that importance is but shallowness, the reader is witness to the irony of the affair. Likewise, those guilty of the numerous foibles exposed by Horace are often ignorant not only of their guilt but of the foibles themselves. It is this exposure which is key to Horace's method, and which we find also in *The Rape of the Lock*.

Certainly, Belinda—and the general woman she represents—is as much ignorant of her own guilt as of the crime itself. Indeed, the stand Pope seems to be taking is one which can be seen all through both books of Horace's *Satires*, namely that happiness comes not from external but internal sources—and only then when the doctrine of moderation is present: "Eating's highest pleasure lies in you, / not in the flavour of your food." In fact, the "simple life," (moderation in all things) takes on great thematic importance for it unifies all eight satires of Book II. And it is Belinda's vanity, her concern with the pleasures of the external world which ties, thematically, *The Rape of the Lock* with the *Satires* of Horace.

Another connection which Belinda brings to mind between *The Rape of the Lock* and the *Satires* is the idea that bad example teaches. This is essential to both Pope and Horace. Because of the implicit nature of the lesson in *The Rape of the Lock*, the poem itself must stand as testament to the above maxim. Horace though, in typical conversational and autobiographical clarity, declares: . . . if perhaps I laugh too much at people, grant me my right and your indulgence. The best of father's made me this way. By the use of bad examples he taught me how to live.

We should also bear in mind that Belinda is young, and that Pope, in the introductory letter to Mrs. Arabella Fermor—the real life Belinda— says of his poem: . . . it was intended only to divert a few young ladies, who have good sense and good humour enough to laugh not only at their sex's unguarded follies, but at their own.

Certainly, Pope is being extremely diplomatic here, for if the young ladies had good sense, then the source of *The Rape of the Lock* would never have existed. The point though is that Pope speaks of "young ladies," (my italics). This satire not only targets the young as its subject, but also the young as its audience, who should learn from the work. This too is reminiscent of Horace: "if someone now decreed the tastiness of roasted gull, / Rome's youth, docile students of debauchery, would obey." Here Horace not only depicts the young as being impressionable, but logically, because of that impressionability, they are in most need of moral lesson; and Horatian satire—with its aim not so much to attack vice but to present vice and thus the lesson, as well as the absence of causticity—is the perfect vehicle for that lesson, as well as for that group of people.

As we have seen, even though style and conventions separate mock epic from Horace's satires, Pope has managed, in *The Rape of the Lock*, to fuse the two. From epic we have high language,

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supernatural machinery, battle and war, the journey to the underworld and all the rest, transported down to the level of mock epic and becoming, there, high language-low content, Sylphs, drawing room wars of the sexes and a battle of frowns, snuff and a bodkin, and a journey to the Cave of Spleen.

From Horace we have the exposing of folly not with malice or anger, but with an authorial smile: "But tell me, what law is violated if someone laughs/while speaking truth?" (S.1) Secondly, though Book I of Satires is almost obtuse in its directness, Book II, representing a more artistically mature Horace—and so best exemplifying his style, demonstrates a more indirect and more comic method of teaching. This is achieved by exaggerating the moral instruction, and by using comic sometimes absurd characters to voice those lessons. We might conclude, at risk of oversimplification, that *The Rape of the Lock* is composed of mock epic elements and style and the Horatian attitude.

When Pope called the poem "an heroicomic poem", he intended to mean it a mock-epic. He could assume that his eighteenth century readers, educated in the classical and knowledgeable about epic, would recognise that it was a mockery. Besides, the mock-epic, which Boileau had established as a distinctive poetic genre with his poem *Le Lutrin*, was well-suited to the eighteenth century. Unlike the burlesque, which lampoons the epic, it plays off a high sense of the heroic against the diminished scale of contemporary life. In this confrontation, Pope might be expected to have a clear allegiance to the classical epic poets. His veneration of the classical antiquity is on record in the *Essay on Criticism*, and his low opinion of the general character of contemporary life is evident in the *Moral Essays and Intimations of Horace*. It is worthy of remark therefore that in *The Rape of the Lock* Pope presents a world dominated by trivialities in terms of an epic grandeur. The fashionable society of the beaux and belles is not only allowed the defects but also the advantages of its scale. In the midst of its ironies the poem delights in the exotic preparations and instruments of Belinda's toilet and in the exquisiteness of the sylphs. It extends rapturous complimentary to Belinda and expresses genuine sympathy for the pathetic fate of the belles it mocks.

Many of Pope's jokes in the poem derive their significance from the epic tradition. Epic subjects were grand; for instance, the Trojan War (*Iliad*), the founding theme (*Aeneid*), the Fall of Man (*Paradise Lost*) were narrated at length in twelve or more books, each consisting of several hundred lines. The epic hero also traversed a wide geographical area encountering battles, romantic interludes, journeyed by land and sea and even descended into the underworld. From on high the gods watched the human drama, intervening when they chose at critical moments. Success for the hero was dependent upon the subplot of divine intrigue as well as his own courage and skill. The mock heroic imitated the most recognisable aspects of the epic, its form and elevated language. It used an inflated style to ridicule the pretensions and pomposity of minor quarrel. Pope also borrowed elaborate phrases and similes from the great epics of the western tradition. The joke lies in his applying this elevated language to "the life of the modern ladies in the idle town", as he deprecatingly described the subject of "*The Rape of the Lock*" in a letter to a lady friend.

Pope consciously imitates the epic opening in his first twelve lines, which may be called the invocation in the approved epic manner. He too will 'sing' his subject whose importance he indicates by inverted syntax and elevated language: "dire offence", "mighty contest", "tasks so bold". He addresses the muse in order to invoke inspiration. His tone does gather declamatory epic ring as he commands the goddess: "Say what strange motive...?" At some points we begin to sense that Pope is not mocking the epic form so much as laughing at his subject. Once we realise that we are reading a mock-epic, it casts a different light on the apparent solemnity and dignity of Pope's propositions and invocation. The first hint of the mock-epic comes from the third line of the poem when Pope credits a human being, Caryll, rather than the muse with inspiring his poem. The lines from five to six have the effect of an anticlimax:

"Slight is the subject, but not so the praise  
If she inspire and approve my lays."

As for the supernatural machinery, which neoclassical criticism considers indispensable for an epic, Pope reveals remarkable inventiveness. The sylphs of "*The Rape of the Lock*" are Pope's mocking recreation of the gods who watch over the heroes of epics and guide their fortune. It is nicely fitting

that Pope's supernatural beings, who are supposed to imitate Homer's deities and Milton's angels, are tiny, frail and powerless. Although they are an amalgam of epic machinery, Rosicrucian lore, an English tale..., they are essentially Pope's inventions. As for epic battles, the game of ombre at the centre of the poem is presented in terms of a mighty epic contest, catching repeated echoes of Trojan War and the war in the heavens. As for the epic underworld, there is an effective counterpart in the Cave of Speen in "The Rape of the Lock", which is contrasted with the Golden glittering beauty of Belinda's delightful environment.

Pope was also mindful of the fact that a mock-epic should have a moral just as an epic does. Clarissa's speech in "The Rape of the Lock" opens out the moral of the poem about the fashionable society. The speech can be taken as an attempt to redefine for contemporary women a concept of honour, which apply to male epic heroes. In the world of belles, honour becomes courage to face decay with humour and duty, to use the power of beauty well.

Pope's age is known as the "Augustan age," the first half of the eighteenth century saw an explosive rise in literary production. Due to the influence of Enlightenment thought, literary works during this period often focused on explicitly political and social themes, allowing for an increase in the production of political writings of all genres. Among the most popular genres were both moral works (sermons, essays, dialogues, etc.) and satire. Satire in particular flourished in a variety of forms: prose, poetry, drama. Some of the satires produced during this period commented on the general flaws of the human condition while others specifically critiqued certain individuals and policies. All, however, were transparent statements about the greater political and social environment of the eighteenth century.

During the neoclassical impulse of the period, eighteenth-century satirists described themselves as the heirs of the Roman poets Horace and Juvenal. Horatian satire tends to take a gentle and more sympathetic approach towards the satiric subject, which it identifies as folly. Augustan examples of Horatian satire include Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* (1714) and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). By contrast Juvenalian satire identified the object of its satire as evil, launching a contemptuous invective to ridicule it. Characterized by irony and sarcasm, this satiric mode rejected humor in favor of moral outrage. Eighteenth-century examples of Juvenalian satire include Swift's *A Modest Proposal* (1729) and his misogynist poems such as "A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed" (1731), "The Progress of Beauty" (1719-20), and "The Lady's Dressing Room" (1732).

One of the most popular satiric modes during the Augustan period was the mock epic, a literary form that creates a burlesque of the classical epic. The satirist imports the formula characteristic of the epic—the invocation of a deity, supernatural machinery, etc.—to discuss a trivial subject. The use of classical epic devices thereby establishes an ironic contrast between the work's structure and its content, exposing the triviality of the satirical subject. The best-known mock epics in the English language are John Dryden's *MacFlecknoe* (1676), an attack on Thomas Shadwell and Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*. Pope's *The Dunciad* (1728, 1742) also took mock-heroic form and drew on Dryden's satire on Shadwell to attack Lewis Theobald (1728) and, later, Colley Cibber (1742).

Several like-minded Augustan satirists formed the Scriblerus Club, founded in 1712. Its members included Jonathan Swift; Alexander Pope; John Gay; John Arbuthnot; Henry St. John, Lord Bolingbroke; and Thomas Parnell. Their professed object was to satirize the abuses of learning, which led to the publication of *The Memoirs of Martinus Scriblerus* (1741). Both Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and Pope's *The Dunciad* grew out of projects for this group.

## Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

- Who is Shock?
  - Belinda's horse
  - Belinda's lapdog
  - The Baron's horse
  - The poet's muse

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2. At what time do “sleepless lovers” awake in this poem?
  - (a) Dawn
  - (b) Noon
  - (c) Tea-time
  - (d) Midnight
3. Who inspires Belinda’s dream in the first canto?
  - (a) The muse
  - (b) The Baron
  - (c) Ariel
  - (d) Umbriel
4. To what are Belinda’s eyes repeatedly compared?
  - (a) The sun
  - (b) Stars
  - (c) Flames
  - (d) Gems
5. To what do the four types of supernatural beings correspond?
  - (a) Spades, hearts, clubs, and diamonds
  - (b) Ace, king, queen, and jack
  - (c) Earth, air, fire, and water
  - (d) North, south, east, and west
6. What does Belinda wear around her neck?
  - (a) A cross
  - (b) A locket
  - (c) A ribbon
  - (d) A ruby
7. Where is the party held?
  - (a) Cheapside
  - (b) St. James Park
  - (c) The Tower of London
  - (d) Hampton Court Palace
8. Who wins the hand of ombre?
  - (a) Belinda
  - (b) The Baron
  - (c) Ariel
  - (d) The Queen
9. What beverage is served after the card game ends?
  - (a) Tea
  - (b) Coffee
  - (c) Wine
  - (d) Brandy
10. Who arms the Baron with a pair of scissors?
  - (a) Belinda
  - (b) Sir plume
  - (c) Lord Petre
  - (d) Clarissa
11. Who gets accidentally cut by the scissors?
  - (a) The Baron
  - (b) Clarissa
  - (c) One of the Sylphs
  - (d) Shock
12. Whither does Umbriel journey?
  - (a) Hades
  - (b) The Cave of Spleen
  - (c) The Cave of Despair
  - (d) The Cave of Envy
13. What does Thalestris think the Baron will do with the lock?
  - (a) Show it off to all their friends
  - (b) Have it set into a ring
  - (c) Neither of the above
  - (d) Both of the above
14. What effect does Sir Plume’s speech have on the Baron?
  - (a) It convinces him to return the lock
  - (b) It makes him feel guilty for what he has done
  - (c) It encourages him to propose to Belinda
  - (d) It has no effect

15. What happens to the lock of hair at the end of the poem?
- It is returned to its rightful owner
  - It is set into a ring
  - It is offered to the poet as a token of gratitude
  - It is turned into a constellation

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## 24.5 Summary

- Alexander Pope was born in London in 1688. As a Roman Catholic living during a time of Protestant consolidation in England.
- The action of the poem begins with the rising sun awakening the residents of a wealthy household.
- The opening of *The Rape of the Lock* establishes the poem's mock-heroic tone.
- Pope relies on martial language to situate his poem within the epic tradition and reinforce his satiric manipulation of the genre.
- Pope has successfully utilized supernatural machinery not simply by incorporating good spirit but also by incorporating an evil spirit like Umbrid.
- Pope demonstrates two quite separate influences in *The Rape of the Lock*: mock epic and Horatian satire.

## 24.6 Keywords

*Vanity* : Excessive pride in or admiration of one's own appearance.

*Amorous* : Feeling sexual desire.

*Anxious* : Experiencing worry, nervousness or unease.

*Culminate* : Reach or be at the meridian.

## 24.7 Review Questions

- What are some of the images that recur through the poem and what significance do they have?
- Is Pope being ironic when he treats Belinda's beauty as something almost divine?
- To what degree can the poem be read as a sexual allegory?
- What are the distinctive formal features of Pope's poetry?
- How is the heroic couplet suited to Pope's subject matter, or to satire more generally?

## Answers: Self Assessment

- |         |         |         |
|---------|---------|---------|
| 1. (b)  | 2. (b)  | 3. (c)  |
| 4. (a)  | 5. (c)  | 6. (a)  |
| 7. (d)  | 8. (a)  | 9. (b)  |
| 10. (d) | 11. (c) | 12. (b) |
| 13. (d) | 14. (d) | 15. (d) |

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**24.8 Further Readings**



*Books*

- |   |                  |
|---|------------------|
| Alexander Pope: Selected poetry and prose | — Alexander Pope |
| Alexander Pope                            | — Paul Baines    |
| Thomas Gray: a life                       | — Robert L Mack  |
| Elegy written in a Country Church Yard    | — Thomas Gray    |
| William Blake                             | — G.K.Chesterton |



*Online links*

- <http://www.sparknotes.com/poetry/rapeofthelock/context.html>  
<http://theotherpages.org/poems/locknote.html>

## Unit 25: Thomas Gray: The Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

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### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Know about the biography of Thomas Gray
- Discuss the analysis and summary part of the poem "Elegy written in a country church yard"
- Explain theme of "Elegy written in a country churchyard".

### Introduction

The title *Far from the Madding Crowd* comes from Thomas Gray's famous 18th-century poem "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard": "Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife, Their sober wishes never learned to stray; Along the cool sequestered vale of life they kept the noiseless tenor of Their way." By alluding to Gray's poem, Hardy evokes the rural culture that, by Hardy's lifetime had become threatened with extinction at the hands of ruthless industrialization. His novel thematizes the importance of man's connection to, and understanding of, the natural world. Gabriel Oak embodies Hardy's ideal of a life in harmony with the forces of the natural world.

The novel also contemplates the relationship between luck, or chance, and moral responsibility: Why should we live a morally upright life if tragedy strikes us all equally anyway? While some characters, like Gabriel, are always responsible and cautious, others, like Sergeant Troy, are careless

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and destructive. Hardy was very much influenced by the ideas of Charles Darwin, who maintained that the development of a biological species and, by extension, of human society and history is shaped by chance and not by the design of a God.

Another theme is the danger and destruction inherent in romantic love and marriage; Hardy exposes the inconsistencies, irrationalities, and betrayals that often plague romantic relationships. Bathsheba begins the novel an independent woman, but by falling in love with Troy, she nearly destroys her life. Similarly, Hardy presents us with many couples in which one partner is more in love than the other, and he shows what disastrous events result from this inequality.

### 25.1 Introduction to the Author

Thomas Gray (26 December 1716–30 July 1771) was a poet, letter-writer, classical scholar and professor at Cambridge University.

Thomas Gray was born in Cornhill, London, the son of an exchange broker and a milliner. He was the fifth of 12 children and the only child of Philip and Dorothy Gray to survive infancy. He lived with his mother after she left his abusive father. He was educated at Eton College where his uncle was one of the masters. He recalled his schooldays as a time of great happiness, as is evident in his Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College. Gray was a delicate and scholarly boy who spent his time reading and avoiding athletics. It was probably fortunate for the sensitive Gray that he was able to live in his uncle's household rather than at college. He made three close friends at Eton: Horace Walpole, son of Prime Minister Robert Walpole, Thomas Ashton, and Richard West. The four prided themselves on their sense of style, their sense of humour, and their appreciation of beauty.

In 1734 Gray went up to Peterhouse, Cambridge. He found the curriculum dull. He wrote letters to his friends listing all the things he disliked: the masters ("mad with Pride") and the Fellows ("sleepy, drunken, dull, illiterate Things.") Supposedly he was intended for the law, but in fact he spent his time as an undergraduate reading classical and modern literature and playing Vivaldi and Scarlatti on the harpsichord for relaxation.

In 1738 he accompanied his old school-friend Walpole on his Grand Tour of Europe, possibly at Walpole's expense. The two fell out and parted in Tuscany, because Walpole wanted to attend fashionable parties and Gray wanted to visit all the antiquities. However, they were reconciled a few years later.

Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" was first published in 1751. Gray may, however, have begun writing the poem in 1742, shortly after the death of his close friend Richard West. An elegy is a poem which laments the dead. Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" is noteworthy in that it mourns the death not of great or famous people, but of common men. The speaker of this poem sees a country churchyard at sunset, which impels him to meditate on the nature of human mortality. The poem invokes the classical idea of *memento mori*, a Latin phrase which states plainly to all mankind, "Remember that you must die." The speaker considers the fact that in death, there is no difference between great and common people. He goes on to wonder if among the lowly people buried in the churchyard there had been any natural poets or politicians whose talent had simply never been discovered or nurtured. This thought leads him to praise the dead for the honest, simple lives that they lived.

Gray did not produce a great deal of poetry; the "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," however, has earned him a respected and deserved place in literary history. The poem was written at the end of the Augustan Age and at the beginning of the Romantic period, and the poem has characteristics associated with both literary periods. On the one hand, it has the ordered, balanced phrasing and rational sentiments of neoclassical poetry. On the other hand, it tends toward the emotionalism and individualism of the Romantic poets; most importantly, it idealizes and elevates the common man.

## 25.2 Text of the Poem: Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

Notes

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,  
The lowing herd winds slowly o'er the lea,  
The ploughman homeward plods his weary way,  
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.

Now fades the glimmering landscape on the sight,  
And all the air a solemn stillness holds,  
Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,  
And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds:

Save that from yonder ivy-mantled tower  
The moping owl does to the moon complain  
Of such as, wandering near her secret bower,  
Molest her ancient solitary reign.

Beneath those rugged elms, that yew-tree's shade,  
Where heaves the turf in many a mouldering heap,  
Each in his narrow cell for ever laid,  
The rude Forefathers of the hamlet sleep.

The breezy call of incense-breathing morn,  
The swallow twittering from the straw-built shed,  
The cock's shrill clarion, or the echoing horn,  
No more shall rouse them from their lowly bed.

For them no more the blazing hearth shall burn,  
Or busy housewife ply her evening care:  
No children run to lisp their sire's return,  
Or climb his knees the envied kiss to share,

Of t did the harvest to their sickle yield,  
Their furrow oft the stubborn glebe has broke;  
How jocund did they drive their team afield!  
How bow'd the woods beneath their sturdy stroke!

Let not Ambition mock their useful toil,  
Their homely joys, and destiny obscure;  
Nor Grandeur hear with a disdainful smile  
The short and simple annals of the Poor.

The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power,  
And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,

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Awaits alike th' inevitable hour:  
The paths of glory lead but to the grave.

Nor you, ye Proud, impute to these the fault  
If Memory o'er their tomb no trophies raise,  
Where through the long-drawn aisle and fretted vault  
The pealing anthem swells the note of praise.

Can storied urn or animated bust  
Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?  
Can Honour's voice provoke the silent dust,  
Or Flattery soothe the dull cold ear of Death?

Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid  
Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire;  
Hands, that the rod of empire might have sway'd,  
Or waked to ecstasy the living lyre:

But Knowledge to their eyes her ample page,  
Rich with the spoils of time, did ne'er unroll;  
Chill Penury repress'd their noble rage,  
And froze the genial current of the soul.

Full many a gem of purest ray serene  
The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear:  
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,  
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

Some village-Hampden, that with dauntless breast  
The little tyrant of his fields withstood,  
Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest,  
Some Cromwell, guiltless of his country's blood.

The applause of list'ning senates to command,  
The threats of pain and ruin to despise,  
To scatter plenty o'er a smiling land,  
And read their history in a nation's eyes,

Their lot forbad: nor circumscribed alone  
Their growing virtues, but their crimes confined;  
Forbad to wade through slaughter to a throne,  
And shut the gates of mercy on mankind,

The struggling pangs of conscious truth to hide,  
To quench the blushes of ingenuous shame,

Or heap the shrine of Luxury and Pride  
With incense kindled at the Muse's flame.

Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife,  
Their sober wishes never learn'd to stray;  
Along the cool sequester'd vale of life  
They kept the noiseless tenour of their way.

Yet e'en these bones from insult to protect  
Some frail memorial still erected nigh,  
With uncouth rhymes and shapeless sculpture deck'd,  
Implores the passing tribute of a sigh.

Their name, their years, spelt by th' unletter'd Muse,  
The place of fame and elegy supply:  
And many a holy text around she strews,  
That teach the rustic moralist to die.

For who, to dumb forgetfulness a prey,  
This pleasing anxious being e'er resign'd,  
Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day,  
Nor cast one longing lingering look behind?

On some fond breast the parting soul relies,  
Some pious drops the closing eye requires;  
E'en from the tomb the voice of Nature cries,  
E'en in our ashes live their wonted fires.

For thee, who, mindful of th' unhonour'd dead,  
Dost in these lines their artless tale relate;  
If chance, by lonely contemplation led,  
Some kindred spirit shall inquire thy fate,

Haply some hoary-headed swain may say,  
Oft have we seen him at the peep of dawn  
Brushing with hasty steps the dews away,  
To meet the sun upon the upland lawn;

'There at the foot of yonder nodding beech  
That wreathes its old fantastic roots so high,  
His listless length at noontide would he stretch,  
And pore upon the brook that babbles by.

'Hard by yon wood, now smiling as in scorn,  
Muttering his wayward fancies he would rove;

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Now drooping, woeful wan, like one forlorn,  
Or crazed with care, or cross'd in hopeless love.

'One morn I miss'd him on the custom'd hill,  
Along the heath, and near his favourite tree;  
Another came; nor yet beside the rill,  
Nor up the lawn, nor at the wood was he;

'The next with dirges due in sad array  
Slow through the church-way path we saw him borne,-  
Approach and read (for thou canst read) the lay  
Graved on the stone beneath yon aged thorn.'

The Epitaph

Here rests his head upon the lap of Earth  
A youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown.  
Fair Science frowned not on his humble birth,  
And Melancholy marked him for her own.  
Large was his bounty, and his soul sincere,  
Heaven did a recompense as largely send:  
He gave to Misery all he had, a tear,  
He gained from Heaven ('twas all he wish'd) a friend.  
No farther seek his merits to disclose,  
Or draw his frailties from their dread abode  
(There they alike in trembling hope repose),  
The bosom of his Father and his God.

### 25.2.1 Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard Summary

In the first stanza, the speaker observes the signs of a country day drawing to a close: a curfew bell ringing, a herd of cattle moving across the pasture, and a farm laborer returning home. The speaker is then left alone to contemplate the isolated rural scene. The first line of the poem sets a distinctly somber tone: the curfew bell does not simply ring; it “knells”—a term usually applied to bells rung at a death or funeral. From the start, then, Gray reminds us of human mortality.



*Did u know?* The second stanza sustains the somber tone of the first: the speaker is not mournful, but pensive, as he describes the peaceful landscape that surrounds him. Even the air is characterized as having a “solemn stillness.”

The sound of an owl hooting intrudes upon the evening quiet. We are told that the owl “complains”; in this context, the word does not mean “to whine” or “grumble,” but “to express sorrow.” The owl’s call, then, is suggestive of grief. Note that at no point in these three opening stanzas does Gray directly refer to death or a funeral; rather, he indirectly creates a funereal atmosphere by describing just a few mournful sounds.

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It is in the fourth stanza that the speaker directly draws our attention to the graves in the country churchyard. We are presented with two potentially conflicting images of death. Line 14 describes the heaps of earth surrounding the graves; in order to dig a grave, the earth must necessarily be disrupted. Note that the syntax of this line is slightly confusing. We would expect this sentence to read “Where the turf heaves”—not “where heaves the turf.” Gray has inverted the word order. Just as the earth has been disrupted, the syntax imitates the way in which the earth has been disrupted. But by the same token, the “rude Forefathers” buried beneath the earth seem entirely at peace: we are told that they are laid in “cells,” a term which reminds us of the quiet of a monastery, and that they “sleep.”

If the “Forefathers” are sleeping, however, the speaker reminds us that they will never again rise from their “beds” to hear the pleasurable sounds of country life that the living do. The term “lowly beds” describes not only the unpretentious graves in which the forefathers are buried, but the humble conditions that they endured when they were alive.



*Notes* The speaker then moves on to consider some of the other pleasures the dead will no longer enjoy: the happiness of home, wife, and children.

The dead will also no longer be able to enjoy the pleasures of work, of ploughing the fields each day. This stanza points to the way in which the “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” contains elements of both Augustan and Romantic poetry. Poetry that describes agriculture—as this one does—is called georgic. Georgic verse was extremely popular in the eighteenth century. Note, however, that Gray closely identifies the farmers with the land that they work. This association of man and nature is suggestive of a romantic attitude. The georgic elements of the stanza almost demand that we characterize it as typical of the eighteenth century, but its tone looks forward to the Romantic period.



*Task* Write down the significant features of the poem, “Elegy written on a country churchyard”.

The next four stanzas caution those who are wealthy and powerful not to look down on the poor. These lines warn the reader not to slight the “obscure” “destiny” of the poor—the fact that they will never be famous or have long histories, or “annals,” written about them.

This stanza invokes the idea of *memento mori* (literally, a reminder of mortality). The speaker reminds the reader that regardless of social position, beauty, or wealth, all must eventually die.

The speaker also challenges the reader not to look down on the poor for having modest, simple graves. He suggests, moreover, that the elaborate memorials that adorn the graves of the “Proud” are somehow excessive. In this context, the word “fretted” in line 39 has a double meaning: on the one hand, it can refer to the design on a cathedral ceiling; on the other hand, it can suggest that there is something “fretful,” or troublesome, about the extravagant memorials of the wealthy.

The speaker observes that nothing can bring the dead back to life, and that all the advantages that the wealthy had in life are useless in the face of death. Neither elaborate funeral monuments nor impressive honors can restore life. Nor can flattery in some way be used to change the mind of death. Note here Gray’s use of personification in characterizing both “flattery” and “death”—as though death has a will or mind of its own.

### 25.3 Thomas Gray: The Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard: Discussion and Analysis

The elegy is the most natural form of poetry because of its disassociation with metrical form, and lack of requirement of pattern, cadence or repetition. Within the elegy, Strand and Boland point out how the poet is permitted to express loss, mourn for the dead, and list the deceased person's virtues, while seeking consolations beyond the momentary event.

The elegy is the most natural form of poetry because it heeds to customs and is guided by laws and codes, which are part of the history and tradition of the society in which the poem has evolved. The works of Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" demonstrate how the elegy is written in a natural form because of the forces guiding this type of poetic writing.

Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" is a poem clearly demonstrating the history and tradition of the society. Roberts and Jacobs express how religious, personal, political, and philosophical thought can become integrated into poetry. To begin with, these settings-religious, personal, political, and philosophical thought-become evident clearly by Gray who is able to write freely within his Elegy.



*Did u know?* Gray is able to express how all must die, and it does not matter if one is rich or poor, noble or a commoner, or a poet or a politician. Gray is also able to elevate the common man with the use of the elegy and freedom of wording and poetic style.

Gray gives clues within the first four stanzas of death by writing about the approaching night. Stanza one states, "The curfew tolls the knell of parting day. The Ploughman homeward plods and leaves the world to darkness and to me." Stanza two reads, "Now fades the glimmering landscape and drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds," which are more clues to the approaching darkness.



*Task* Define the term Elegy.

Then in stanza four Gray writes, "Save that from yonder ivy-mantled tower/the moping owl does to the moon complain," which demonstrates the night approaching because owls come out into the darkness, and also signifying the wealthy people because of the ivy-mantled tower. Then within stanza four, Gray continues, "Each in his narrow cell for ever laid/The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep."

This undoubtedly and naturally demonstrates the death of the forefathers and the men being put to rest within their tombs. Also, the use of the term forefathers gives clues that these men were of various backgrounds-farmers, politicians, fathers, rich, and poor.

Thomas Gray (1716–1771) was born in London and studied at Eton and Cambridge. With such a scanty production, Gray holds a key position in the history of English poetry. It is universally believed that Thomas Gray is well popular because of 'Elegy.' The composition began after the death of a very close associate of him, his school friend West.

It is about a simple unnamed village people who lie buried in a quiet churchyard, in the village of Stoke Poges. Gray sums up his entire experience of life in this poem- the melancholy, the boredom, the obscurity and lack of achievement, as yet presents itself in a what which seems tolerable and appreciable too. In this poem, you will find a complete set of expressions of his personal life, his despairs and frustrations.

**Stanza 1**

The evening bell ringing in the church marked the departure of the day. The cattle were slowly moving to shelter, as they passed through the fields, and so did the farmers, who were walking heavily after the day's hard work. As they went home, they left the poet who was sitting in the churchyard also in the growing darkness of the advancing evening.

Curfew- In medieval times, curfew refers to- the ringing of a bell to prompt people to extinguish fires and lights. The ringing of the evening bell in the church marks the end of the day (feel the expression: the parting day).

The first paragraph sets the mood of the poem, gray leaves a cliché of romanticism blended with satire.

**Stanza 2**

The faintly lighted landscape is slowly fading and becoming invisible to the eye. The evening breeze has stopped and the air holds stillness, except the beetles, making a monotonous humming sound. Also one could hear the jingling sound of the bells round the neck of the sleepy cattle when they move their head.

**Stanza 3**

As the evening sets in, the owl complains to the moon about her inconvenience. She complained about the disturbance created as someone was passing by its nest from her ancient reign, an ivy mantled tower.

**Stanza 4**

Beneath the shade of the yew tree and elm tree, gnarled and knotted through the ages, lies the narrow burials of the rustic villagers of Hamlet. Each of them sleeps for an eternal period of time in their narrow grave surrounded by grassy plot and heaps of earth.

**Stanza 5**

The poet laments over the fact that these men and women, use to wake up by listening to the chirping of the birds, the trumpet sounds made by the cock and their echoes. But now, not even the mist of the morning breeze and the call of the birds and animals shall make them rise from their grave.

**Stanza 6**

No more shall one find the hearth (fireplace) burning. Those beautiful glimpses of children climbing to their father's knees to have the first kiss, the affectionate show of love and the envied kiss shall never to be seen again.

**Stanza 7**

These rustic men had done a lot of harvesting in their lifetime. The hard lumps of earth succumbed to heir sickle, as they merrily ploughed the fields with their strong stroke of axe.

**Stanza 8**

Let not Greatness and ambition mock these people by saying that they were totally useless. They were very happy and content with their 'homely joys'.

**Stanza 9**

Let not Grandeur (referring to grand people) look at them with contempt and smile at the petty records of life of these people.

**Stanza 10**

All those fame and power which great people always boast off, the beauty, the riches and the wealth they possess finally becomes the same during the last moments of life. They to die in the same were as these rustics have died. All the glories finally find its eternal way into the grave.

Notes

**Stanza 11**

These people are not to be blamed, if no ornamental edifice rises over their graves. Like the graves of great men, they do not possess the arch and the majestic decorations, neither thousands of people gather and praises about them.

Beautiful decoration across the graves of great men and praise worthy speeches will not bring them back to their mansions. The breath of life has left them and they are all dead, neither words of honor nor the tricks of flattery will entertain the cold ears of the dead.

**Stanza 12**

There must have been in this unnoticed place, amongst the myriad villagers filled with spiritual, moral and heavenly inspiration capable of ruling and Empire or write excellent poetry , only if had been patronized fully.

**Stanza 13**

However the intellectual capabilities of these dead rustics never had the chance to bloom. They died strange to all riches. Poverty was the reason that froze down all the noble inspirations and ambition.

**Stanza 14**

The dead rustics of the village are compared to the bright gems and pearls that lay hidden and unseen in the depths of ocean. They are akin to the beautiful flowers that bloom in the jungles whose fragrance gets wasted and they fade away unnoticed.

**Stanza 15**

The graves of this village might shelter brave heroes like Hampden, the famous parliamentarian and a martyr, who faced the tyrant King Charles I. Here may also lay, someone akin to the talent of Milton or Cromwell.

**Stanza 16**

Some of them might have been great legislatures, greeted with the loud cheers of the morally pure senators. Some would bring prosperity to the country by eliminating poverty and thus their great deeds would be recorded in the history of their nation.

**Stanza 17**

Their bad luck not only forbade their virtue or talents to grow, but also their vices and crime. They never thought of killing their brothers for the throne and keep themselves away from works of charity.

**Stanza 18**

These poor rustics were denied by destiny to shine in life by means of tricks. Ambitious people try to obtain great favor and praise by writing words of price or means of flattery. Thus they were escaped from 'killing their conscience" for the sake of getting patronage.

**Stanza 19**

The villagers led a very simple and secluded life; they kept themselves away from the bustle of city life where people compete for wealth, power and fame. They never cherished high aspirations or ambition. They lived in peace and solitude and didn't hanker after fame and prosperity.

**Stanza 20**

No ornamental decorations could be raised over their trophies; these memorials didn't have any rhymes of praise and lacked beautiful sculpture. Yet to protect their honor from an insult they were put forth on their graveyards so that passerby may show some respect towards their grave.

**Stanza 21**

The records of life that could be found on their tombs were written by some educated person of their village. Texts and sayings from Bible were scattered over their tombs which gave some spiritual consolidation to the rustics to enable them to meet death cheerfully.

**Stanza 22**

The poets explain the reason of memorials raised over the grave of the poor rustics. No one wishes to get an oblivion curse. Life is full of struggle, people love to live and no one wishes to die without casting a regretful look behind. Even the poor when they die wish to be remembered long after their death.

**Stanza 23**

Even the parting soul wants his dear ones to shed some tears. This happens to be a natural wish, the longing of man when he closes his eyes to confront death. Even when these rustics had turned into ashes they wished that their account of life and death is inscribed in their tombs.

**Stanza 24**

The poet who was sympathetic towards these villagers gave an account of their life. They were not honored in their life, but the poet related their entire tale of life in these lines. What would happen if someone close to the poet would inquire about him after his death?

**Stanza 25**

The poet visualizes that after his departure from this world some white haired peasants might say, "Often he was seen at daybreak, walking fast and sweeping the dew drops with his feet and reaching the churchyard at daybreak.

**Stanza 26**

At the foot of that bending tree, which has grown old with the passage of time and having its roots risen out from earth? The poet stretches himself in a lazy manner during the noon, and ponders over the dead rustic by looking at the soft murmuring brook.

**Stanza 27**

The poet, Thomas Gray wondered close by the woods (the he would loiter aimlessly, sad and depressed. He was lonely, as appeared from his face. He was terribly worried about the hopelessness of love which made him go crazy.

**Stanza 28**

Some old peasant might say some morning that he could not be found on the hills which he used to walk along, nor could he to walk along the heath. Another morning came and he was not found resting under the shade of the old tree near the brook, neither in the lawn not in the woods.

**Stanza 29**

On the final morning, his dead body was carried in a funeral procession with funeral lamentation, slowly leading its way to the church. Let the passerby read the epitaph on his grave stone beneath the old hawthorn tree.

**Stanza 30**

Here the poet lies buried upon the lap of Earth. He was neither famous nor fortunate enough to acquire wealth. He was knowledgeable although he was born in a modest family. His life was devoid of happiness as he was destined to live a life of sorrow and misery.

**Stanza 31**

He was indeed a sincere soul, liberal and charitable. He was well rewarded from God. He gifted and left all that he had at the disposal of the miserable and poor people. In return, he received the love and affection of God and also of his fellow friends.

**Stanza 32**

No one need to further inquire about his merits and faults at the same time. His merits lies in the bosom of God waiting to be rewarded with his faults and weaknesses waits for the Judgment Day when he will be punished for his treason.

Notes

**Self Assessment**

Multiple Choice Questions:

1. When was Thomas Gray born?  
(a) 3 June 1688 (b) 1 January 1701  
(c) 21 July 1714 (d) 26 December 1716
2. Where was Thomas Gray born?  
(a) Bristol (b) Cardiff  
(c) Liverpool (d) London
3. Where did Thomas Gray have his education in 1725-1734?  
(a) Queen Mary School (b) Kilkenny Grammar School  
(c) Eton College (d) Holy Family School
4. Which of the following subjects did Thomas Gray dislike?  
(a) French (b) Greek  
(c) Latin (d) Mathematics
5. Which poem of Thomas Gray has the words, "where ignorance is bliss,/' Tis folly to be wise" ?  
(a) Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College  
(b) Ode on the Spring  
(c) Ode to Adversity  
(d) A Long Story
6. Who was with Thomas Gray during European tour 1739–1741 and quarrelled and separated in Italy?  
(a) Richard West (b) Horace Walpole  
(c) Horace Mann (d) Thomas Ashton
7. When was *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* published?  
(a) 1751 (b) 1702  
(c) 1738 (d) 1712
8. In whose praise did Thomas Gray compose *Installation Ode*?  
(a) King of England (b) Archbishop of Canterbury  
(c) Duke of Grafton (d) Prince of Wales
9. When did Thomas Gray die?  
(a) 9 March 1780 (b) 5 June 1778  
(c) 30 July 1771 (d) 21 October 1775
10. What caused Thomas Gray's death?  
(a) Gout (b) Drowning  
(c) Malaria (d) Pneumonia

**25.4 Thomas Gray: The Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard: Theme**

Death Gray's "Elegy" is one of the best-known poems about death in all of European literature. The poem presents the reflections of an observer who, passing by a churchyard that is out in the country, stops for a moment to think about the significance of the strangers buried there. Scholars of medieval times sometimes kept human skulls on their desktops, to keep themselves conscious of the fact that

someday they, like the skulls' former occupants, would die: from this practice we get the phrase *memento mori*, which we say to this day to describe any token one uses to keep one's mortality in mind. In this poem, the graveyard acts as a *memento mori*, reminding the narrator to not place too much value on this life because someday he too will be dead and buried. The speaker of the poem is surrounded by the idea of death, and throughout the first seven stanzas there are numerous images pointing out the contrast between death and life. After mentioning the churchyard in the title, which establishes the theme of mortality, the poem itself begins with images of gloom and finality. The darkness at the end of the day, the forlorn moan of lowing cattle, the stillness of the air (highlighted by the beetle's stilted motion) and the owl's nocturnal hooting all serve to set a background for this serious meditation. However, it is not until the fourth stanza that the poem actually begins to deal with the cemetery, mentioned as the place where the village forefathers "sleep." In the following stanzas, the speaker tries to imagine what the lives of these simple men might have been like, touching upon their relations with their wives, children, and the soil that they worked. They are not defined by their possessions, because they had few, and instead are defined by their actions, which serves to contrast their lives with their quiet existence in the graveyard. This "Elegy" presents the dead in the best light: their families adored them and they were cheerful in their work, as they "hummed the woods beneath their steady stroke." The speaker openly admits that they are spoken of so well precisely because they are dead, because death is such a terrible thing that its victims deserve the respect of the living. In line 90, the poet explains, "Some pious drops the closing eye requires," explaining that the living should show their respect for death with their sorrow.



*Task* Enumerate the themes of Thomas Gray: The Elegy written in a Country Church yard.

### 25.4.1 Search for Self

The speaker of this poem goes through a process of recognizing what is important to him and choosing how to live his life (which leads to the epitaph with which he would like to be remembered). In stanza 8, the poem begins naming the attributes that are normally considered desirable but are now considered pointless when compared with the lives of the rustic dead in the country graveyard. Ambition and Grandeur, according to the speaker, should not think less of these people because of their simple accomplishments. He goes on to assert that Pride and Memory have no right to ignore them, and that Honor and Flattery will be as useless to the rich as to the poor when they are dead. The speaker, an educated person, gives much consideration to the subject of Knowledge, and whether the lack of it made the lives of these country people less significant. Their poverty blocked the way to knowledge, he decides, and the lack of knowledge separated them from vices as well as virtues, so that in the end he does not consider his education a factor in making him better or worse than them either. In the end, having eliminated all of the supposed benefits of the wealthy, educated world that he comes from, the speaker identifies himself with the graveyard inhabitants to such a degree that he winds up in this humble graveyard after his death. In contrast to the simple graves that he pondered over throughout his life, though, the speaker's grave is marked with a warm-hearted memorial, the "Epitaph" at the end of the poem. Assuming that such a thoughtful person would not have been so immodest as to write this epitaph for himself, there must have been some other literate person to remember him. He is also remembered by an illiterate member of the farm community, the "hoary-headed swain" who has to ask someone to read the epitaph. Before the death of the poem's narrator, this Swain established a nonverbal relationship with him, observing him from afar, wondering about him just as the narrator wondered about the country people buried there.

## Notes

**25.4.2 Class Conflict**

A superficial reading of this poem might leave the impression that the author intends to present members of the lower class as being more worthy of praise than their upper-class counterparts. This would be a reasonable assumption, since so much of the poem is devoted to praising the simple virtues of the poor. In the larger scope, though, the position that Gray takes is that all people, poor or rich, are equal. This is a meditation on death, which has been called the “great equalizer” because no can avoid it. The reason that the poem seems to favor one class over the other is that it is working against the assumption that only those of the upper class are worthy of attention when they die. It is the humble condition of the country churchyard, with gravestones unmarked or possibly marked just with names by illiterate people unable to read, that draws attention to the virtues of the poor and uneducated (which society often forgets), and so much of the poem is spent praising their moral strength. The virtues of the wealthy and famous are not denied, they just are not explored in this poem because they are already so familiar. Evidence of the poem’s evenhandedness about the different classes can be seen in the fact that, while praising the poor country people throughout, Gray also acknowledges that education, which may give them opportunity to develop moral excellence, may also lead them to corruption: as he says in stanza 17, the humble circumstances of the poor limited the growth not only of their virtues but also of their crimes. The poem thus leaves open the question of superiority. Society glorifies the rich, and the poem’s narrator glorifies the poor, but, as he reminds us, “The paths of glory lead but to the grave.”

**25.5 Summary**

- Thomas Gray was born in Cornhill, London, the son of an exchange broker and a milliner.
- In 1738 he accompanied his old school-friend Walpole on his Grand Tour of Europe, possibly at Walpole’s expense.
- Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” was first published in 1751.
- Gray did not produce a great deal of poetry; the “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard,” however, has earned him a respected and deserved place in literary history.
- Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” is a poem clearly demonstrating the history and tradition of the society.
- Death Gray’s “Elegy” is one of the best-known poems about death in all of European literature.

**25.6 Keywords**

**Churchyard** : An enclosed area surrounding a church, especially as used for burials.

**Impute** : Ascribe to someone by virtue of a similar quality in another.

**Bounty** : A reward paid for killing or capturing someone

**Tribute** : An act, statement, or gift intended to show gratitude, respect or admiration.

**25.7 Review Questions**

1. The poem’s title implies that the poem was actually *written* in a country churchyard, not merely that it is an imaginative reconstruction of such a scene. Why is this claim significant to any interpretation of the poem’s meaning?
2. How does the pastoral environment affect the narrator’s emotional state?

3. The purpose of this poem is to memorialize and reflect upon the memorialization of otherwise unremarkable people. What ties still bind the living and the dead in the churchyard? What does the speaker most regret about their passing, and what lessons does he draw from that passing?
4. An Elegy is by definition about someone else, but how does the speaker fold himself into this poem, making himself as much an object of reflection as the scene and those buried in the cemetery?

Notes

### Answers: Self Assessment

- |         |        |        |
|---------|--------|--------|
| 1. (d)  | 2. (d) | 3. (c) |
| 4. (d)  | 5. (a) | 6. (b) |
| 7. (a)  | 8. (c) | 9. (c) |
| 10. (a) |        |        |

### 25.8 Further Readings



Books

- |   |                  |
|---|------------------|
| Alexander Pope: Selected poetry and prose | — Alexander Pope |
| Alexander Pope                            | — Paul Baines    |
| Thomas Gray: a life                       | — Robert L Mack  |
| Elegy written in a Country Church Yard    | — Thomas Gray    |
| William Blake                             | — G.K.Chesterton |



Online links

- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elegy\\_Written\\_in\\_a\\_Country\\_Churchyard](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elegy_Written_in_a_Country_Churchyard)  
<http://www.thomasgray.org/cgi-bin/display.cgi?text=elcc#pagebottom>

## Unit 26: William Blake: Songs of Innocence and Experience

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### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Explain the biography of William Blake
- Discuss briefly the analysis, summary and commentary of songs of Innocence and songs of Experience.

### Introduction

Songs of Innocence and Experience is an illustrated collection of poems by William Blake. It appeared in two phases. A few first copies were printed and illuminated by William Blake himself in 1789; five years later he bound these poems with a set of new poems in a volume titled Songs of Innocence and Experience Showing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul. "Innocence" and "Experience" are definitions of consciousness that rethink Milton's existential-mythic states of "Paradise" and the "Fall." Blake's categories are modes of perception that tend to coordinate with a chronology that would become standard in Romanticism: childhood is a time and a state of protected "innocence," but not immune to the fallen world and its institutions. This world sometimes impinges on childhood itself, and in any event becomes known through "experience," a state of being marked by the loss of childhood vitality, by fear and inhibition, by social and political corruption, and by the manifold

oppression of Church, State, and the ruling classes. The volume's "Contrary States" are sometimes signaled by patently repeated or contrasted titles: in Innocence, Infant Joy, in Experience, Infant Sorrow; in Innocence, The Lamb, in Experience, The Fly and The Tyger.

Songs of Experience is a poetry collection of 26 poems forming the second part of William Blake's Songs of Innocence and Experience. The poems were published in 1794. Some of the poems, such as The Little Boy Lost and The Little Boy Found were moved by Blake to Songs of Innocence, and were frequently moved between the two books. In this collection of poems, Blake contrasts Songs of Innocence, in which he shows how the human spirit blossoms when allowed its own free movement with Songs of Experience, in which he shows how the human spirit withers after it has been suppressed and forced to conform to rules, and doctrines. In fact, Blake was an English Dissenter and actively opposed the doctrines of the Anglican Church, which tells its members to suppress their feelings.

## 26.1 Introduction to the Author

William Blake is one of the most renowned poets in the history of English literature. Born to the owners of a hosiery shop on Broad Street in the center of London in 1757, William Blake developed into a toddler of extraordinary imagination. While only a young boy (around the age of four), he spoke to his parents of seeing angels playing amongst him, encountering visions of heaven and hell throughout London and the nearby countryside, and spotting God keeping a close eye on him during tasks and chores. It was not long before the young Blake began to stencil out the visions from his imagination, and as an eleven year old, he enlisted in Pars' Drawing School to learn the art of printing and plaster casting.

Soon thereafter, Blake began to apprentice under London artist James Basire, and as a fourteen-year-old, he was assigned to drawing monuments in Westminster Abbey, which led to a lifelong admiration for Gothic art and religious illustration. While working with Basire, Blake befriended contemporary apprentice James Parker. Parker and Blake would later become partners in a jointly owned print shop on Broad Street, right next door to the Blake hosiery shop and household, a partnership that only lasted one year (1784-85).



Task

Comment on Blake as a social critic.

One must recall the historical context of Blake's development from a young artist to a poet in his mid-twenties. In 1775, America began a revolution of independence from England, igniting tense controversy in London, and the young artist witnessed an angry society torn apart by liberal sympathizers with the American revolutionaries and conservative loyalists to the colonial empire.

In 1782, William Blake married Catherine Boucher, and one year later, he published his first book of poems, *Poetical Sketches*, at the encouragement of the Reverend Anthony Stephen Matthew and his wife, owners of a salon which was a frequent drinking spot for the twenty-six year old.

In the mid to late 1780s, two events came into Blake's life that would change his method of expression and alter his artistic voice forever, while setting him up as one of the most unique and most referenced poetic geniuses of the English language. First, he began to read and study the works of Scandinavian poet Swedenborg, a philosophical rebel who refused and refuted the semi-materialistic philosophy that had grown so widespread in the late eighteenth century. Second, he began to draw and write on copper plates before dipping them into a corrosive acid that would allow for his words and images to stand out from the plate itself, ready to be colored and inked for easier printing. William Blake, the plating artist with a revolutionary voice, was born.

## Notes



*Did u know?* In 1789, Blake published *Songs of Innocence* and *The Book of Thel*, which displayed the range of his talents, for one was a collection of short and witty rhymed stanzas and the other a lengthy epic “prophetic book.” This year also saw the beginning to the French Revolution, which further widened the cleavage in English society.

The next ten years (1790-1800) were arguably the most peaceful and successful times for the Blake couple. It was during this period that Blake completed iconic works like *Songs of Experience*, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, *America: A Prophecy*, *Europe: A Prophecy*, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, *The Song of Los*, and *The Book of Urizen*, all of which discernibly demonstrate Blake’s support of the Revolution.

As the French Revolution disintegrated into a war for national power and lost sight of its original mission of liberating idealism, Blake began to question his faith in humanity and in the revolutionary spirit. In 1800, the Blakes moved to a cottage in Felpham, on the coast of Sussex, next door to William Hayley, a long-time Blake companion. It was during this time that Blake completed most of the work on *Vala*, another one of his epic prophecies.

In 1803, William Blake reentered the world of religious doctrine, calling himself a re-born “soldier of Christ” in a letter to a friend. It is then that Blake began his work on his final epic prophecy, *Jerusalem*. Blake soon returned to London, where a series of events began a downward spiral into wretchedness and despair for William Blake. First, Napoleon crowned himself Emperor of France in 1804, removing any hope for the revolutionary spirit that Blake once promoted. Second, a series of Blake’s illustrations were stolen and plagiarized by engraver and publisher Robert Cromek, which outraged Blake and broke him financially. In a final effort for Blake to gain fame and earn the respect from his contemporaries he deserved, he summoned friends Henry Crabb Robinson and Charles Lamb to finance an exhibition of his life works. Unfortunately, few were interested, and the exhibition even caused the well-respected periodical, *The Examiner*, to denounce the work as nothing more than art of “an unfortunate lunatic.”

In Blake’s final years of poverty and despair, he completed two of his most famous and respected religious works, *Jerusalem* and *Milton*. In 1818, William Blake began to be recognized by a new group of poets and artists for the revolutionary genius that he was. Among one of his highest enthusiasts was John Linnell, who summoned Blake to provide detailed illustrations to both the *Book of Job* and *Dante’s Divine Comedy*. William Blake died suddenly on August 12, 1827, before either of the works was completed.

## **26.2 William Blake: Songs of Innocence**

### **26.2.1 The Lamb**



*Notes* “The Lamb” is a poem by William Blake, published in *Songs of Innocence* in 1789. Like many of Blake’s works, the poem is about Christianity.

Like the other *Songs of Innocence* and *Experience*, *The Lamb* was intended to be sung; William Blake’s original melody is now lost. It was made into a song by Vaughan Williams. It was also set to music by Sir John Tavener, who explained, “The Lamb came to me fully grown and was written in an afternoon and dedicated to my nephew Simon for his 3rd birthday.” American poet Allen Ginsberg set the poem to music, along with several other of Blake’s poems.

The Lamb can be compared to a more grandiose Blake poem: The Tyger in Songs of Experience.

Notes

**Text**

Little Lamb, who made thee?  
Dost thou know who made thee?  
Gave thee life, and bid thee feed,  
By the stream and o'er the mead;  
Gave thee clothing of delight,  
Softest clothing, woolly, bright;  
Gave thee such a tender voice,  
Making all the vales rejoice?  
Little Lamb, who made thee?  
Dost thou know who made thee?

Little Lamb, I'll tell thee,  
Little Lamb, I'll tell thee.  
He is called by thy name,  
For He calls Himself a Lamb.  
He is meek, and He is mild;  
He became a little child.  
I a child, and thou a lamb,  
We are called by His name.  
Little Lamb, God bless thee!  
Little Lamb, God bless thee!

**Poetic Structure**

This poem has a simple rhyme scheme : AA BB CC DD AA AA EF GG FE AA

The layout is set up by two stanzas with the refrain: "Little Lamb who made thee?/Dost thou know who made thee?"

In the first stanza, the speaker wonders who the lamb's creator is; the answer lies at the end of the poem. Here we find a physical description of the lamb, seen as a pure and gentle creature. In the second stanza, the lamb is compared with the infant Jesus, as well as between the lamb and the speaker's soul. In the last two lines the speaker identifies the creator: God.

**Summary**

The poem begins with the question, "Little Lamb, who made thee?" The speaker, a child, asks the lamb about its origins: how it came into being, how it acquired its particular manner of feeding, its "clothing" of wool, its "tender voice." In the next stanza, the speaker attempts a riddling answer to his own question: the lamb was made by one who "calls himself a Lamb," one who resembles in his gentleness both the child and the lamb. The poem ends with the child bestowing a blessing on the lamb.

**Detailed Analysis**

Blake asks if we know who gave us life and made us eat this sweet, sweet grass as we roam through fields and next to streams. He asks if we know who gave us our "clothing woolly bright" and our pleasant voices.

**Notes**

Then he says he's going to tell us who made him. He says our creator is also called a "Lamb" because he was so "meek" and "mild". Despite being a lamb, this creator also "became a little child". Finally, he blesses us twice in the name of God and runs away.

**Stanza I Summary**

**Line 1**

Little lamb, who made thee?

The speaker addresses the lamb and asks, "Who made thee?" The speaker is not someone who takes things as they are. He wants to know where they come from. He sounds genuinely curious, but he also places himself above the lamb by calling it "little."

**Line 2**

Does thou know who made thee,

The speaker repeats his question in a slightly different way. He's all about using those old-sounding English words like "dost" and "thee." Unlike in line 1, where the speaker seems curious, here he sounds like he knows the answer to the question – "Who made thee?" – and is quizzing the lamb. We get the sense that we're going to learn the answer before too long.

**Lines 3-4**

Gave thee life, and bid thee feed

By the stream and o'er the mead;

These lines extend the question of "Who?" The speaker wants to know who gave the lamb life and that voracious appetite for greenery that leads it to travel by streams and over meadows, or "mead." Put this way, the lamb sounds kind of like a zombie. Instead of busting through windows and shouting, "Braiiins!" it runs through flowery fields and bleats, "Graaaaass!" In other words, the lamb didn't create its own desires and appetites. They come from a higher power.

**Lines 5-6**

Gave thee clothing of delight,

Softest clothing, woolly, bright;

The lamb has a creator who gave it "clothing of delight," which sounds like the next high-end fashion line. This clothing is advertised as "the softest" and "woolly bright." The speaker doesn't seem to mind the redundancy of describing lamb's wool as "wooly." That's like calling someone's hair "hairy." Not too helpful. The wool looks "bright" because it gleams in the sun.

**Lines 7-8**

Gave thee such a tender voice,

Making all the vales rejoice?

Line 7 is the third in this stanza to begin with the word "Gave." This is one lucky little lamb. As if its fancy clothing weren't enough, it also has a voice so "tender" that it makes the valleys happy as its baaing echoes through them. A "vale" is just a word for valley. When the lamb speaks, the valleys seem to reply with the same joyful voice.

**Lines 9-10**

Little lamb, who made thee?

Does thou know who made thee?

In the words of Mr. Justin Timberlake, "Bring it to the chorus!" That's right, you might be shocked to learn, but the "Songs of Innocence" are actually structured like...songs! These lines repeat word for word the first two lines of the poem. Everybody sing along now.

### Stanza II Summary

#### *Lines 11-12*

Little lamb, I'll tell thee;

Little lamb, I'll tell thee:

Having just rhymed the one-syllable "thee" with, um, "thee," Blake doubles down and does it again. The speaker announces that he will tell the lamb who its creator is. For those of you keeping track at home, here's the box score for lines 9-12: "Little Lamb": 3, "thee": 4. "Thee" takes the lead!

#### *Lines 13-14*

He is called by thy name,

For He calls Himself a Lamb

Having promised to say outright who the lamb's creator is, the speaker now starts talking in riddles that avoid a clear answer. The creator, he says, shares the same name as the lamb. And what is the lamb's name? In fact, the lamb's name is "Lamb," and so is the creator's.

#### *Lines 15-16*

He is meek, and He is mild,

He became a little child.

OK, we can put it off no longer: the Lamb is a symbol for Jesus Christ. In John 29 of the Bible, Jesus is called "The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." What this poem about innocence doesn't mention is that Christ is a like a lamb because lambs get sacrificed. Gulp.

In the English Christian tradition, Jesus has been called "meek" and "mild" for the way he submitted to God's will and for his gentle treatment of sinful humans. He "became a little child" when he was born into the world (which Christians celebrate on Christmas).

Blake's poem seems to borrow from the words of Englishman Charles Wesley, who published a hymn called "Gentle Jesus, Meek and Mild" in 1742. Charles's brother, John Wesley, founded the Methodist Church. The hymn includes the line, "Lamb of God, I look to Thee." If you read the whole thing, you'll see just how much Blake's Songs of Innocence and Experience resemble church songs.

#### *Lines 17-18*

I a child, and thou a lamb,

We are called by His name.

The speaker reveals himself to be a child. And the lamb...is still a lamb. In fact, all the characters in this poem can be viewed as lambs: child, real lamb, and Jesus. They can also be seen as children – children of God. Got that?

#### *Lines 19-20*

Little lamb, God bless thee!

Little lamb, God bless thee!

**Notes**

In these lines, we imagine the child patting the lamb on the head and running off to find some new adventure. He seems to have been instructing the lovable farm animal on the basics of the Christian religion. He blesses the lamb twice, completing the pattern in which the lamb is addressed as “thee” two times at the beginning and end of each stanza.

**Form**

“The Lamb” has two stanzas, each containing five rhymed couplets. Repetition in the first and last couplet of each stanza makes these lines into a refrain, and helps to give the poem its song-like quality. The flowing l’s and soft vowel sounds contribute to this effect, and also suggest the bleating of a lamb or the lisping character of a child’s chant.

*Task*

What are Blake’s favorite image of innocence, and how does he use them?

**Commentary**

The poem is a child’s song, in the form of a question and answer. The first stanza is rural and descriptive, while the second focuses on abstract spiritual matters and contains explanation and analogy. The child’s question is both naive and profound. The question (“who made thee?”) is a simple one, and yet the child is also tapping into the deep and timeless questions that all human beings have, about their own origins and the nature of creation. The poem’s apostrophic form contributes to the effect of naiveté, since the situation of a child talking to an animal is a believable one, and not simply a literary contrivance. Yet by answering his own question, the child converts it into a rhetorical one, thus counteracting the initial spontaneous sense of the poem. The answer is presented as a puzzle or riddle, and even though it is an easy one—child’s play—this also contributes to an underlying sense of ironic knowingness or artifice in the poem. The child’s answer, however, reveals his confidence in his simple Christian faith and his innocent acceptance of its teachings.

The lamb of course symbolizes Jesus. The traditional image of Jesus as a lamb underscores the Christian values of gentleness, meekness, and peace. The image of the child is also associated with Jesus: in the Gospel, Jesus displays a special solicitude for children, and the Bible’s depiction of Jesus in his childhood shows him as guileless and vulnerable. These are also the characteristics from which the child-speaker approaches the ideas of nature and of God. This poem, like many of the Songs of Innocence, accepts what Blake saw as the more positive aspects of conventional Christian belief. But it does not provide a completely adequate doctrine, because it fails to account for the presence of suffering and evil in the world. The pendant (or companion) poem to this one, found in the Songs of Experience, is “The Tyger”; taken together, the two poems give a perspective on religion that includes the good and clear as well as the terrible and inscrutable. These poems complement each other to produce a fuller account than either offers independently. They offer a good instance of how Blake himself stands somewhere outside the perspectives of innocence and experience he projects.

**26.2.2 The Little Black Boy****Text**

My mother bore me in the southern wild,  
 And I am black, but oh my soul is white!  
 White as an angel is the English child,  
 But I am black, as if bereaved of light.  
 My mother taught me underneath a tree,

And, sitting down before the heat of day,  
 She took me on her lap and kissed me,  
 And, pointed to the east, began to say:  
 "Look on the rising sun: there God does live,  
 And gives His light, and gives His heat away,  
 And flowers and trees and beasts and men receive  
 Comfort in morning, joy in the noonday.  
 "And we are put on earth a little space,  
 That we may learn to bear the beams of love  
 And these black bodies and this sunburnt face  
 Is but a cloud, and like a shady grove.  
 "For when our souls have learn'd the heat to bear,  
 The cloud will vanish; we shall hear His voice,  
 Saying, 'Come out from the grove, my love and care  
 And round my golden tent like lambs rejoice,'"  
 Thus did my mother say, and kissed me;  
 And thus I say to little English boy.  
 When I from black and he from white cloud free,  
 And round the tent of God like lambs we joy  
 I'll shade him from the heat till he can bear  
 To lean in joy upon our Father's knee;  
 And then I'll stand and stroke his silver hair,  
 And be like him, and he will then love me.

### Summary

A black child tells the story of how he came to know his own identity and to know God. The boy, who was born in "the southern wild" of Africa, first explains that though his skin is black his soul is as white as that of an English child. He relates how his loving mother taught him about God who lives in the East, who gives light and life to all creation and comfort and joy to men. "We are put on earth," his mother says, to learn to accept God's love. He is told that his black skin "is but a cloud" that will be dissipated when his soul meets God in heaven. The black boy passes on this lesson to an English child, explaining that his white skin is likewise a cloud. He vows that when they are both free of their bodies and delighting in the presence of God, he will shade his white friend until he, too, learns to bear the heat of God's love. Then, the black boy says, he will be like the English boy, and the English boy will love him.

### Detailed Analysis

At first glance, Blake's, "The Little Black Boy," ends on a note of subjugation. The speaker holds fast to a desire of acceptance by the white English child. While this desire remains in place, closer examination reveals a subtle position of modest authority as opposed to a submissive stance.

The speaker no doubt longs for validation from the white opposition to his blackness. The exclamation "but O! My soul is white," (2) indicates despair and genuine longing to be recognized and understood.

Notes

Enough so that he colorizes his spirit in a desperate attempt to convince himself it is necessary to be something other to receive his desire. Another seemingly dire example of this primary idea is the final line, "And be like him and he will then love me." (28) This child searches out the love of the white boy so much as to acknowledge the necessity to assimilate.

There is, however, a restrained sense of naive authority in the speaker after his mother explains God's plan. He changes the way he refers to the English child. Instead of "the English child," (3) he refers to him as "little English boy." (22) Little on one hand indicates age and maybe stature, but also represents the newly projected inferiority placed on the English child because he does not have this newfound wisdom. The little black boy who once felt small in spirit now is in a position to impart spiritual knowledge upon he who may have put him there.

His authority is exerted in that he makes concrete actions to attain his goal; to be accepted. He is no longer crying out "O!" in the face of his desperation, but is taking direct action: "Ill shade him" (25) "I'll stand and stroke"(27) "And be like him"(28). The initiators of these actions are not dependent on the desires of the English boy, but solely on the wants and needs of the speaker. If the speaker asked for permission to do these things, or said "And I may be like him," his reluctance would continue to show the balance between the two; he takes charge though, and simply dictates what he will do to achieve the ultimate goal; the English boy's acceptance.

The authoritative stance he takes is colored with naivety. First, the speaker's actions become inconsistent with the idea he is trying to represent. "When I from black and he from white cloud free," (23) indicates the readiness to meet with God and the ability to withstand Him. The speaker's first course of action, however, is to shade the English boy until he is ready to bear the heat. Logically, if they are with God, then the English boy is already prepared to bear the heat. The speaker either unnecessarily doting on the English boy, or implying that the English boy needs the speaker to realize a true relationship with God. The major sense of naivety comes from the conditional nature of the love the speaker is pursuing. It is only if he takes care of the English boy and assimilates himself that he will find his satisfaction.

Once the speaker receives the wisdom of God's plan, he becomes armed with a knowledge that allows him to imagine a situation that he has control over. Although the wisdom is understood from an immature perspective, it gives the speaker the control he needs to cope with such a complicated matter.

'The Little Black Boy' is drawn from the 'Songs of Innocence'. The lyrics composing the 'Songs of Innocence' have the stamp of pastoral innocence and an inspired note of truth and conviction. This poem thus breathes a spirit of innocence, joy and harmony. He looked as black as though he was deprived of light. The mother of this black boy bore him in the wild and backward settlements of the South of the United States of America. Even though his body is black, the boy knows that his soul is white and that he is not essentially different from an English boy who is white. There is a close bond between the child and nature, the mother and the child and the pervading imagery of love, innocence and joy.

Each day his mother would take him beneath a tree and made him sit on her lap and before teaching him anything, she would kiss him. Throughout the heat of the day both would interact with each other in the most sacred of conversations. His pious mother has taught him about the Lord who gives both light and heat and everything we see on this earth. Each morning she would point towards the east and both would watch the sun rise. The East is believed to be the residence of God. Through the sun, God gives His light and heat away in which all the flowers, trees, beast and men receive. The sun according to the boy's mother provides comfort in the morning and joy in the afternoon. She has taught him that in God's eyes there is no difference between a black boy and a white boy, the bodies being immaterial and God's love being universal.

God has put all of us mortal human beings here on earth for a little while that we may learn the true implications of god-like love towards each other. Hence the black bodies and sun burnt face of the boy and his mother are like a dark cloud and a shady grove. If we love each other and bear ourselves

with understanding and compassion, we will be called to God's presence when all distinctions will have gone and will rejoice around him like laments.

The lesson that the mother provides for her little son ends each time with an affectionate kiss. The little black boy has finally regained his confidence and is bold enough to tell the white little English boy that they are both clouds-like spirit coming from different coloured background. Like two little lambs of different colours, they can sing and dance with joy around the tent of God in Heaven.

The little black boy promised to take care of the little white English boy and protect him from the scorching heat of the sun till he himself learn to bear it for himself. Both shall prostrate before The Father in Heaven's knees. Then he would stand and stroke the Father's silvery hair and he would be like the Father and be loved by Him.

### Form

The poem is in heroic quatrains, which are stanzas of pentameter lines rhyming ABAB. The form is a variation on the ballad stanza, and the slightly longer lines are well suited to the pedagogical tone of this poem.

### Commentary

This poem centers on a spiritual awakening to a divine love that transcends race. The speaker is an African child who has to come to terms with his own blackness. Blake builds the poem on clear imagery of light and dark. The contrast in the first stanza between the child's black skin and his belief in the whiteness of his soul lends poignancy to his particular problem of self-understanding. In a culture in which black and white connote bad and good, respectively, the child's developing sense of self requires him to perform some fairly elaborate symbolic gymnastics with these images of color. His statement that he is "black as if bereav'd of light" underscores the gravity of the problem. The gesture of his song will be to counteract this "as if" in a way that shows him to be as capable and deserving of perfect love as a white person is.

The child's mother symbolizes a natural and selfless love that becomes the poem's ideal. She shows a tender concern for her child's self-esteem, as well as a strong desire that he know the comfort of God. She persuades him, according to conventional Christian doctrine, that earthly life is but a preparation for the rewards of heaven. In this context, their dark skin is similarly but a temporary appearance, with no bearing on their eternal essence: skin, which is a factor only in this earthly life, becomes irrelevant from the perspective of heaven. Body and soul, black and white, and earth and heaven are all aligned in a rhetorical gesture that basically confirms the stance of Christian resignation: the theology of the poem is one that counsels forbearance in the present and promises a recompense for suffering in the hereafter.

The black boy internalizes his mother's lesson and applies it in his relations with the outer world; specifically, Blake shows us what happens when the boy applies it to his relationship with a white child. The results are ambivalent. The boy explains to his white friend that they are equals, but that neither will be truly free until they are released from the constraints of the physical world. He imagines himself shading his friend from the brightness of God's love until he can become accustomed to it. This statement implies that the black boy is better prepared for heaven than the white boy, perhaps because of the greater burden of his dark skin has posed during earthly life. This is part of the consoling vision with which his mother has prepared him, which allows his suffering to become a source of pride rather than shame. But the boy's outlook, and his deference to the white boy, may strike the reader (who has not his innocence) as containing a naive blindness to the realities of oppression and racism, and a too-passive acceptance of suffering and injustice. We do not witness the response of the white boy; Blake's focus in this poem is on the mental state of the black child. But the question remains of whether the child's outlook is servile and self-demeaning, or exemplifies Christian charity. The poem itself implies that these might amount to the same thing.

## 26.3 William Blake: Songs of Experience

### 26.3.1 A Poison Tree

#### Text

I was angry with my friend.  
 I told my wrath, my wrath did end.  
 I was angry with my foe.  
 I told it not, my wrath did grow;  
  
 And I water'd it in fears,  
 Night and morning with my tears;  
 And I sunned it with smiles,  
 And with soft deceitful wiles;  
  
 And it grew both day and night  
 Till it bore an apple bright,  
 And my foe beheld it shine,  
 And he knew that it was mine,  
  
 And into my garden stole  
  
 When the night had veil'd the pole.  
 In the morning glad I see  
 My foe outstretched beneath the tree.

"A Poison Tree" is one of the lesser-known of the twenty-six poems William Blake published in 1793 as *Songs of Experience*, which also contains "The Tyger," "Ah, Sun-flower," and "London." *Songs of Experience* is the companion volume to Blake's *Songs of Innocence*, published in 1789. Blake printed *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* in one volume in 1794, adding the descriptive subtitle "Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul." One of the best sources of "A Poison Tree" is *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (1982), edited by David V. Erdman and published by Doubleday.

In the poems of *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*, Blake contrasts how the human spirit blossoms when allowed its own free movement, which he calls a state of "innocence," and how it turns in on itself after it has been suppressed and forced to conform to rules, systems, and doctrines, which he calls a state of "experience." The two states recall one of the principal events in the Judeo-Christian story, the fall from innocence caused by Adam and Eve when they eat fruit from the forbidden Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Garden of Eden. The poison tree of Blake's poem suggests that biblical tree.



*Task* Comment of Blake's use of the ballad form.

Although it can be read by itself, "A Poison Tree" benefits significantly from being read as a further expression of the poems immediately preceding it in *Songs of Experience*, especially "The Garden

of Love" and "The Human Abstract." In the three poems, Blake criticizes the imposition of religious and social morality on the human sensibility, suggesting that it stifles the goodness and love inherent in a spirit not fettered by such rules. In Blake's Notebook, the original title of "A Poison Tree" is "Christian Forbearance," which the poem criticizes as the cause of hypocrisy.

## Analysis

### Stanza 1

William Blake speaks of someone, his friend and his foe, whom he is angry with.

When he says 'I told my wrath, my wrath did end' after he said he was angry with his friend, he is saying he was able to get over being angry with his friend and forgot about it. Although, it is quite the opposite when he mentions 'I told it not, and my wrath did grow'. Blake is saying that with his enemy, he allowed himself to get angry, and therefore, his wrath did grow.

### Stanza 2

In this stanza, Blake begins to make his anger grow and he takes pleasure in it, comparing his anger with something, in this case, a tree or plant. The speaker says he 'sunned it with smiles' and 'and with soft, deceitful wiles'. This means he is creating an illusion with his enemy saying he is pretending to be friendly to seduce and bring him closer.

### Stanza 3

'And it grew both day and night' and 'til it bore an apple bright' are meaning that his illusion with his enemy is growing and growing until it became a strong and tempting thing. His illusion has a metaphor and it is an apple. After, his foe believes it shines, which means he thinks it's true and means something, and takes Blake illusion seriously. 'And he knew it was mine' suggests that he really thinks Blake is his friend.

### Stanza 4

Being the last stanza, Blake needed to come up with a conclusion. He has used the two lines 'in the morning glad I see' and 'my foe outstretched beneath the tree' to say that his foe finally fell to his tempting illusion and metaphorically, consumed his poison apple and died. So, obviously, his malicious intentions were hidden behind illusion and he prevailed over his enemy.

## 26.3.2 The Tyger

### Text

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright  
 In the forests of the night,  
 What immortal hand or eye  
 Could frame thy fearful symmetry?  
 In what distant deeps or skies  
 Burnt the fire of thine eyes?  
 On what wings dare he aspire?  
 What the hand dare seize the fire?  
  
 And what shoulder, & what art  
 Could twist the sinews of thy heart?

**Notes**

And when thy heart began to beat,  
What dread hand? & what dread feet?  
What the hammer? what the chain?  
In what furnace was thy brain?  
What the anvil? what dread grasp  
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

When the stars threw down their spears,  
And watered heaven with their tears,  
Did he smile his work to see?  
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?  
Tyger! Tyger! burning bright  
In the forests of the night,  
What immortal hand or eye  
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

**Summary**

The poem begins with the speaker asking a fearsome tiger what kind of divine being could have created it: "What immortal hand or eye/ Could frame thy fearful symmetry?" Each subsequent stanza contains further questions, all of which refine this first one. From what part of the cosmos could the tiger's fiery eyes have come, and who would have dared to handle that fire? What sort of physical presence, and what kind of dark craftsmanship, would have been required to "twist the sinews" of the tiger's heart? The speaker wonders how, once that horrible heart "began to beat," its creator would have had the courage to continue the job. Comparing the creator to a blacksmith, he ponders about the anvil and the furnace that the project would have required and the smith who could have wielded them. And when the job was done, the speaker wonders, how would the creator have felt? "Did he smile his work to see?" Could this possibly be the same being who made the lamb?

**Form**

The poem is comprised of six quatrains in rhymed couplets. The meter is regular and rhythmic, its hammering beat suggestive of the smithy that is the poem's central image. The simplicity and neat proportions of the poems form perfectly suit its regular structure, in which a string of questions all contribute to the articulation of a single, central idea.

**Commentary**

The opening question enacts what will be the single dramatic gesture of the poem, and each subsequent stanza elaborates on this conception. Blake is building on the conventional idea that nature, like a work of art, must in some way contain a reflection of its creator. The tiger is strikingly beautiful yet also horrific in its capacity for violence. What kind of a God, then, could or would design such a terrifying beast as the tiger? In more general terms, what does the undeniable existence of evil and violence in the world tell us about the nature of God, and what does it mean to live in a world where a being can at once contain both beauty and horror?

The tiger initially appears as a strikingly sensuous image. However, as the poem progresses, it takes on a symbolic character, and comes to embody the spiritual and moral problem the poem explores: perfectly beautiful and yet perfectly destructive, Blake's tiger becomes the symbolic center for an investigation into the presence of evil in the world. Since the tiger's remarkable nature exists

## Notes

both in physical and moral terms, the speaker's questions about its origin must also encompass both physical and moral dimensions. The poem's series of questions repeatedly ask what sort of physical creative capacity the "fearful symmetry" of the tiger bespeaks; assumedly only a very strong and powerful being could be capable of such a creation.

The smithy represents a traditional image of artistic creation; here Blake applies it to the divine creation of the natural world. The "forging" of the tiger suggests a very physical, laborious, and deliberate kind of making; it emphasizes the awesome physical presence of the tiger and precludes the idea that such a creation could have been in any way accidentally or haphazardly produced. It also continues from the first description of the tiger the imagery of fire with its simultaneous connotations of creation, purification, and destruction. The speaker stands in awe of the tiger as a sheer physical and aesthetic achievement, even as he recoils in horror from the moral implications of such a creation; for the poem addresses not only the question of who could make such a creature as the tiger, but who would perform this act. This is a question of creative responsibility and of will, and the poet carefully includes this moral question with the consideration of physical power. Note, in the third stanza, the parallelism of "shoulder" and "art," as well as the fact that it is not just the body but also the "heart" of the tiger that is being forged. The repeated use of word the "dare" to replace the "could" of the first stanza introduces a dimension of aspiration and willfulness into the sheer might of the creative act.

The reference to the lamb in the penultimate stanza reminds the reader that a tiger and a lamb have been created by the same God, and raises questions about the implications of this. It also invites a contrast between the perspectives of "experience" and "innocence" represented here and in the poem "The Lamb." "The Tyger" consists entirely of unanswered questions, and the poet leaves us to awe at the complexity of creation, the sheer magnitude of God's power, and the inscrutability of divine will. The perspective of experience in this poem involves a sophisticated acknowledgment of what is unexplainable in the universe, presenting evil as the prime example of something that cannot be denied, but will not withstand facile explanation, either. The open awe of "The Tyger" contrasts with the easy confidence, in "The Lamb," of a child's innocent faith in a benevolent universe.

### Analysis

The Tyger belongs to Songs of Experience which was written by William Blake. The Romantic poet published his collection of poems himself in London, in 1794. The poet came up with a technique called 'relief etching' to be able to add his illustrations.

The poem contains six quatrains; and its rhyme is assonant, and follows perfectly the pattern aabb due to, in the case of the first and the sixth stanzas, the word 'symmetry' is pronounced in such a way that it rhymes with 'eye'.

With regard to the semantic fields, there are words related to the tools used by an ironsmith like, for instance, 'hammer', 'chain', 'furnace', and 'anvil', in the fourth stanza. Also, we can find a semantic field related to Nature like, for example, 'forests' (line 2), 'skies' (line 5), 'Tyger' (lines 1 and 21), and 'Lamb' (line 20). But, above all, the poet used a semantic field related to Creation when he writes words or phrases like:

'What immortal hand and eye  
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?'



*Did u know?* The simple structure and the vocabulary help the reader to understand the main topics or concepts, which are Evil, Good, and God.

The first impression that William Blake gives is that he sees a terrible tiger in the night, and, as a result of his state of panic, the poet exaggerates the description of the animal when he writes:

Notes

'Tyger! Tyger! Burning bright  
In the forests of the night...'

However, paying more attention to what comes next, the author talks about Evil, and Good, as I said above. These two essential ideas are symbolised in the 'Tyger' and the 'Lamb', respectively (notice that both words have capital letters).

Immediately after seeing the 'Tyger' in the forests, the poet asks it what deity could have created it:

'What immortal hand and eye,  
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?'

The word 'immortal' gives the reader a clue that the poet refers to God. Then, in the second stanza, the author wonders in what far-away places the tiger was made, maybe, referring that these places cannot be reached by any mortal. In the third stanza, the poet asks again, once the tiger's heart began to beat, who could make such a frightening and evil animal. Next, in the fourth stanza, William Blake asks questions about the tools used by God. And he names the hammer, the chain, the furnace, and anvil. All these elements are used by an ironsmith. Thus, according to the poet, God is a kind of craftsman. After that, in the fifth stanza, the poet asks two significant questions. The first one refers to God's feelings:

'Did he smile his work to see?'

In other words, was God happy with his creation? The second question is:

'Did he who made the Lamb make thee?'

William Blake does not understand why or how the deity who is responsible for good and innocence, is, at the same time, the same who inserts violence and evil in this world. However, the poet does not make any statement at any moment. He only asks questions which invite the reader to think about. Finally, the last stanza is the same as the first one which may indicate that the author is not able to understand the world where we live.

To conclude, William Blake wrote the poem with a simple structure and a perfect rhyme to help the reader see the images he wanted to transmit. Above all, the description of the tiger is glaringly graphic due to essentially the contrast between fire and night.

### 26.3.3 The Sick Rose

Text

O Rose, thou art sick!  
The invisible worm  
That flies in the night,  
In the howling storm,  
  
Has found out thy bed  
Of crimson joy:  
And his dark secret love  
Does thy life destroy.

Summary

The speaker, addressing a rose, informs it that it is sick. An "invisible" worm has stolen into its bed in a "howling storm" and under the cover of night. The "dark secret love" of this worm is destroying the rose's life.

**Form**

The two quatrains of this poem rhyme ABCB. The ominous rhythm of these short, two-beat lines contributes to the poem's sense of foreboding or dread and complements the unflinching directness with which the speaker tells the rose she is dying.

**Notes****Commentary**

While the rose exists as a beautiful natural object that has become infected by a worm, it also exists as a literary rose, the conventional symbol of love. The image of the worm resonates with the Biblical serpent and also suggests a phallus. Worms are quintessentially earthbound, and symbolize death and decay. The "bed" into which the worm creeps denotes both the natural flowerbed and also the lovers' bed. The rose is sick, and the poem implies that love is sick as well. Yet the rose is unaware of its sickness. Of course, an actual rose could not know anything about its own condition, and so the emphasis falls on the allegorical suggestion that it is love that does not recognize its own ailing state. This results partly from the insidious secrecy with which the "worm" performs its work of corruption—not only is it invisible, it enters the bed at night. This secrecy indeed constitutes part of the infection itself. The "crimson joy" of the rose connotes both sexual pleasure and shame, thus joining the two concepts in a way that Blake thought was perverted and unhealthy.



*Notes* The rose's joyful attitude toward love is tainted by the aura of shame and secrecy that our culture attaches to love.

**Analysis**

The poem describes a sick rose and a worm that manages to locate the roses's "bed of crimson joy." The worm destroys the rose with his "dark secret love," a not so subtle reference to some kind of destructive sexuality.

**Lines 1-4: Summary****Line 1**

O rose thou art sick

The poem opens with the speaker addressing the rose. The speaker tells the rose that it is sick.

**Lines 2-4**

The invisible worm,  
That flies in the night  
In the howling storm

The speaker describes as "invisible worm" that flies. The worm can also fly when it's raining. We don't know what this worm is doing in the poem or even what kind of worm it is. An invisible worm that can fly? Is it some kind of butterfly?

**Lines 5-6**

Has found out thy bed  
Of crimson joy:

The speaker tells us more about the worm; it has found the rose's bed. The status of this "bed" is ambiguous. It could be just a place where the rose sleeps that happens to be "crimson". It could also be a "bed" of something, like a "bed of roses" or something else that's red. This would make the rose a gardener of some kind.

## Notes

*Lines 7-8*

And his dark secret love  
Does thy life destroy.

The speaker tells us that the worm's "love" kills the rose. It's strange the "love" is killing something here, since we usually associate love with life. "Dark secret love" could mean three things. It could mean the worm's love, as in "My love for you will never die".

It could also refer to something that the worm loves, as in, "Hello, my love, I'm home". It might even refer to the act of making love, or sex.

**Self Assessment**

Multiple Choice Questions:

- Which of the following is not one of Blake's major prophetic books?
  - The Four Zoas
  - Songs of Innocence
  - Milton
  - Jerusalem
- Which of these poems is probably about sexually transmitted disease?
  - The Garden of Love
  - The Sick Rose
  - Little Girl Lost
  - The Chimney Sweep
- William Blake received formal education in only one subject. Which?
  - Art
  - Greek
  - Literature
  - Blacksmithing
- Which book is subtitled "Showing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul"?
  - Songs of Innocence and Experience
  - Poetical Sketches
  - The Marriage of Heaven and Hell
  - Jerusalem
- Whose mother died when he "was very young," and who was sold before his "tongue/ Could scarcely cry"?
  - The Little Black Boy
  - The Chimney Sweeper
  - The Little Boy Lost
  - The School-Boy
- Did Blake teach his wife to read?
  - Yes
  - No
- Who says, "And then I'll stand and stroke his silver hair,/ And be like him, and he will then love me"?
  - The Little Black Boy
  - The Little Boy Found
  - The Little Girl Lost
  - The Chimney Sweeper
- Blake once pushed a soldier out of his garden and all the way to a nearby inn, where the soldier was quartered. The soldier then charged Blake with what?
  - Blasphemy
  - Assault
  - Sedition
  - Battery
- Complete this line from "The Tyger": "Did he smile his work to see? Did he who made the ..... make thee?"
  - Lamb
  - Heart
  - World
  - Brain

10. Blake was a rousing success not only as a poet but also as a painter, with his one-man show drawing enormous crowds. Is this statement true or false?  
 (a) True (b) False
11. Which work contains a title page depicting a naked man throwing himself upon a scantily clad woman, while another woman looks on?  
 (a) The Four Zoas (b) The Marriage of Heaven and Hell  
 (c) The Book of Thel (d) Visions of the Daughters of Albion
12. When he died, Blake had been working on illustrations for the writing of which author?  
 (a) Byron (b) Boccaccio  
 (c) Shelley (d) Dante
13. Whose sigh “runs in blood down Palace walls”?  
 (a) The Happless Soldier’s (b) The Little Vagabond’s  
 (c) The Little Black Boy’s (d) The Chimney Sweep’s
14. Which of the following books, according to Blake, contained all he knew?  
 (a) The Bible (b) The Talmud  
 (c) The Inferno (d) The Canterbury Tales
15. Who was “binding with briars” the poet’s “joys and desires” in “The Garden of Love”?  
 (a) His Wife (b) Priests  
 (c) The Constable (d) Christ

## 26.4 Summary

- Songs of Innocence and of Experience is an illustrated collection of poems by William Blake.
- The lamb of course symbolizes Jesus. The traditional image of Jesus as a lamb underscores the Christian values of gentleness, meekness, and peace.
- At first glance, Blake’s, “The Little Black Boy,” ends on a note of subjugation.
- In the poems of Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience, Blake contrasts how the human spirit blossoms.
- The meter is regular and rhythmic, its hammering beat suggestive of the smithy that is the poem’s central image.
- The rose’s joyful attitude toward love is tainted by the aura of shame and secrecy that our culture attaches to love.

## 26.5 Keywords

- Sermon** : A sermon is an oration by a prophet or member of the clergy.
- Irony** : Irony is a rhetorical device, literary technique, or situation in which there is a sharp incongruity or discordance that goes beyond the simple and evident intention of words or actions.
- Restoration** : Restoration literature is the English literature written during the historical period commonly referred to as the English Restoration (1660–1689), which corresponds to the last years of the direct Stuart reign in England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland.
- Mock-heroic** : Mock-heroic, mock-epic or heroic-comic works are typically satires or parodies that mock common Classical stereotypes of heroes and heroic literature.

Notes

**26.6 Review Questions**

1. How does Blake portray nature? How does the conception of nature differ in the *Songs of Innocence* and the *Songs of Experience*?
2. Are Blake's poems symbolic? Explain your answer.
3. How does Blake use repetition in the *Songs of Innocence and Experience*?
4. How does Blake portray childhood?
5. What can you discern from these poems about Blake's views on religion?

**Answers: Self Assessment**

- |         |         |         |         |         |
|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| 1. (b)  | 2. (b)  | 3. (a)  | 4. (a)  | 5. (b)  |
| 6. (a)  | 7. (a)  | 8. (c)  | 9. (a)  | 10. (b) |
| 11. (c) | 12. (d) | 13. (a) | 14. (a) | 15. (b) |

**26.7 Further Readings**



*Books*

Alexander Pope: Selected Poetry and Prose	— Alexander Pope
Alexander Pope	— Paul Baines
Thomas Gray: a life	— Robert L Mack
Elegy written in a Country Church Yard	— Thomas Gray
William Blake	— G.K.Chesterton



*Online links*

<http://www.gradesaver.com/songs-of-innocence-and-of-experience/>  
<http://eview.anu.edu.au/cross-sections/vol1/pdf/ch12.pdf>

## Unit 27: William Wordsworth: Ode to Intimations of Immortality

Notes

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### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Discuss the text, summary and analysis of ode: Intimations of Immortality.

### Introduction

Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood is a poem by William Wordsworth, completed in 1804 and published in *Poems, in Two Volumes* (1807). The poem was completed in two parts, with the first four stanzas written among a series of poems composed in 1802 about childhood. The first part of the poem was completed on 27 March 1802 and a copy was provided to Wordsworth's friend and fellow poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who responded with his own poem, *Dejection: An Ode*, in April. The fourth stanza of the ode ends with a question, and Wordsworth was finally able to answer it with 7 additional stanzas completed in early 1804. It was first printed as *Ode* in 1807, and it was not until 1815 that it was edited and reworked to the version that is currently known, *Ode: Intimation of Immortality*.

The poem is an irregular Pindaric ode in 11 stanzas that combines aspects of Coleridge's Conversation poems, the religious sentiments of the Bible and the works of Saint Augustine, and aspects of the elegiac and apocalyptic traditions. It is split into three movements: the first of 4 stanzas discusses concerns about lost vision, the second of 4 stanzas describes how age causes man to lose sight of the divine, and the third of 3 stanzas is hopeful in that the memory of the divine allows us to sympathise

**Notes**

with our fellow man. The poem relies on the concept of pre-existence, the idea that the soul existed before the body, to connect children with the ability to witness the divine within nature. As children mature, they become more worldly and lose this divine vision, and the ode reveals Wordsworth's understanding of psychological development that is also found in his poems *The Prelude* and *Tintern Abbey*. Wordsworth's praise of children as the "best philosopher" was criticised by Coleridge and became the source of later critical discussion.

Modern critics sometimes referred to Wordsworth's poem as the "Great Ode" and ranked it among his best poems, but this wasn't always the case. Contemporary reviews of the poem were mixed, with many reviewers attacking the work or, like Lord Byron, dismissing the work without analysis. The critics felt that Wordsworth's subject matter was too "low" and some felt that the emphasis on childhood was misplaced. Among the Romantic poets, most praised various aspects of the poem however. By the Victorian period, most reviews of the ode were positive with only John Ruskin taking a strong negative stance against the poem. The poem continued to be well received into the 20th-century, with few exceptions. The majority ranked it as one of Wordsworth's greatest poems.

## **27.1 Ode: Intimations of Immortality**

### **27.1.1 Text**

#### **I**

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,  
The earth, and every common sight,  
    To me did seem  
    Apparelled in celestial light,  
The glory and the freshness of a dream.  
It is not now as it hath been of yore;  
    Turn wheresoe'er I may,  
    By night or day,  
The things which I have seen  
I now can see no more.

#### **II**

    The Rainbow comes and goes,  
    And lovely is the Rose,  
    The Moon doth with delight  
Look round her when the heavens are bare,  
    Waters on a starry night  
    Are beautiful and fair;  
    The sunshine is a glorious birth;  
    But yet I know, where'er I go,  
That there hath past away a glory from the earth.

#### **III**

Now, while the birds thus sing a joyous song,  
    And while the young lambs bound  
    As to the tabor's sound,

To me alone there came a thought of grief:  
A timely utterance gave that thought relief,  
    And I again am strong:  
The cataracts blow their trumpets from the steep;  
No more shall grief of mine the season wrong;  
I hear the Echoes through the mountains throng,  
The Winds come to me from the fields of sleep,  
    And all the earth is gay;  
    Land and sea  
Give themselves up to jollity,  
    And with the heart of May  
Doth every Beast keep holiday;  
    Thou Child of Joy,  
Shout round me, let me hear thy shouts, thou happy  
    Shepherd-boy!

IV

Ye blessed Creatures, I have heard the call  
    Ye to each other make; I see  
The heavens laugh with you in your jubilee;  
    My heart is at your festival,  
    My head hath its coronal,  
The fulness of your bliss, I feel—I feel it all.  
    Oh evil day! if I were sullen  
    While Earth herself is adorning,  
    This sweet May-morning,  
And the Children are culling  
    On every side,  
In a thousand valleys far and wide,  
    Fresh flowers; while the sun shines warm,  
And the Babe leaps up on his Mother's arm:  
    I hear, I hear, with joy I hear!  
    But there's a Tree, of many, one,  
A single Field which I have looked upon,  
Both of them speak of something that is gone:  
    The Pansy at my feet  
    Doth the same tale repeat:  
Whither is fled the visionary gleam?  
Where is it now, the glory and the dream?

Notes

V

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:  
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,  
    Hath had elsewhere its setting,  
    And cometh from afar:  
Not in entire forgetfulness,  
    And not in utter nakedness,  
But trailing clouds of glory do we come  
    From God, who is our home:  
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!  
Shades of the prison-house begin to close  
    Upon the growing Boy,  
But He beholds the light, and whence it flows,  
    He sees it in his joy;  
The Youth, who daily farther from the east  
    Must travel, still is Nature's Priest,  
    And by the vision splendid  
    Is on his way attended;  
At length the Man perceives it die away,  
And fade into the light of common day.

VI

Earth fills her lap with pleasures of her own;  
Yearnings she hath in her own natural kind,  
    And, even with something of a Mother's mind,  
And no unworthy aim,  
    The homely Nurse doth all she can  
To make her Foster-child, her Inmate Man,  
    Forget the glories he hath known,  
And that imperial palace whence he came.

VII

Behold the Child among his new-born blisses,  
A six years' Darling of a pigmy size!  
See, where 'mid work of his own hand he lies,  
Fretted by sallies of his mother's kisses,  
With light upon him from his father's eyes!  
See, at his feet, some little plan or chart,  
Some fragment from his dream of human life,  
Shaped by himself with newly-learned art;  
    A wedding or a festival,

A mourning or a funeral;  
    And this hath now his heart,  
And unto this he frames his song:  
    Then will he fit his tongue  
To dialogues of business, love, or strife;  
    But it will not be long  
    Ere this be thrown aside  
    And with new joy and pride  
The little Actor cons another part;  
Filling from time to time his "humorous stage"  
With all the Persons, down to palsied Age,  
That Life brings with her in her equipage;  
    As if his whole vocation  
    Were endless imitation.

VIII

Thou, whose exterior semblance doth belie  
    Thy Soul's immensity;  
Thou best Philosopher, who yet dost keep  
Thy heritage, thou Eye among the blind,  
That, deaf and silent, read'st the eternal deep,  
Haunted for ever by the eternal mind,  
    Mighty Prophet! Seer blest!  
    On whom those truths do rest,  
Which we are toiling all our lives to find,  
In darkness lost, the darkness of the grave;  
Thou, over whom thy Immortality  
Broods like the Day, a Master o'er a Slave,  
A Presence which is not to be put by;  
Thou little Child, yet glorious in the might  
Of heaven-born freedom on thy being's height,  
Why with such earnest pains dost thou provoke  
The years to bring the inevitable yoke,  
Thus blindly with thy blessedness at strife?  
Full soon thy Soul shall have her earthly freight,  
And custom lie upon thee with a weight  
Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life!

IX

O joy! that in our embers  
    Is something that doth live,  
That nature yet remembers

Notes

What was so fugitive!  
The thought of our past years in me doth breed  
Perpetual benediction: not indeed  
For that which is most worthy to be blest  
Delight and liberty, the simple creed  
Of Childhood, whether busy or at rest,  
With new-fledged hope still fluttering in his breast:  
    Not for these I raise  
    The song of thanks and praise;  
But for those obstinate questionings  
Of sense and outward things,  
Fallings from us, vanishings;  
Blank misgivings of a Creature  
Moving about in worlds not realised,  
High instincts before which our mortal Nature  
Did tremble like a guilty Thing surprised:  
    But for those first affections,  
    Those shadowy recollections,  
    Which, be they what they may,  
Are yet the fountain light of all our day,  
Are yet a master light of all our seeing;  
    Uphold us, cherish, and have power to make  
Our noisy years seem moments in the being  
Of the eternal Silence: truths that wake,  
    To perish never;  
Which neither listlessness, nor mad endeavour,  
    Nor Man nor Boy,  
Nor all that is at enmity with joy,  
Can utterly abolish or destroy!  
    Hence in a season of calm weather  
    Though inland far we be,  
Our Souls have sight of that immortal sea  
    Which brought us hither,  
    Can in a moment travel thither,  
And see the Children sport upon the shore,  
And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore.  
    X  
Then sing, ye Birds, sing, sing a joyous song!  
    And let the young Lambs bound  
    As to the tabor's sound!

We in thought will join your throng,  
Ye that pipe and ye that play,  
Ye that through your hearts to-day  
Feel the gladness of the May!  
What though the radiance which was once so bright  
Be now for ever taken from my sight,  
Though nothing can bring back the hour  
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;  
We will grieve not, rather find  
Strength in what remains behind;  
In the primal sympathy  
Which having been must ever be;  
In the soothing thoughts that spring  
Out of human suffering;  
In the faith that looks through death,  
In years that bring the philosophic mind.

XI

And O, ye Fountains, Meadows, Hills, and Groves,  
Forebode not any severing of our loves!  
Yet in my heart of hearts I feel your might;  
I only have relinquished one delight  
To live beneath your more habitual sway.  
I love the Brooks which down their channels fret,  
Even more than when I tripped lightly as they;  
The innocent brightness of a new-born Day  
Is lovely yet;  
The Clouds that gather round the setting sun  
Do take a sober colouring from an eye  
That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality;  
Another race hath been, and other palms are won.  
Thanks to the human heart by which we live,  
Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,  
To me the meanest flower that blows can give  
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears

### 27.1.2 Summary

"Ode; Intimations of Immortality" is a long and rather complicated poem about Wordsworth's connection to nature and his struggle to understand humanity's failure to recognize the value of the natural world. The poem is elegiac in that it is about the regret of loss. Wordsworth is saddened by

## Notes

the fact that time has stripped away much of nature's glory; depriving him of the wild spontaneity he exhibited as a child.

As seen in "The world is too much with us," Wordsworth believes that the loss stems from being too caught up in material possessions. As we grow up, we spend more and more time trying to figure out how to attain wealth, all the while becoming more and more distanced from nature. The poem is characterized by a strange sense of duality. Even though the world around the speaker is beautiful, peaceful, and serene, he is sad and angry because of what he (and humanity) has lost. Because nature is a kind of religion to Wordsworth, he knows that it is wrong to be depressed in nature's midst and pulls himself out of his depression for as long as he can.



Task

Explain briefly the summary of William Wordsworth "Ode on intimations of immortality".

In the seventh stanza especially, Wordsworth examines the transitory state of childhood. He is pained to see a child's close proximity to nature being replaced by a foolish acting game in which the child pretends to be an adult before he actually is.

*Did u know?*

Wordsworth wants the child to hold onto the glory of nature that only a person in the flush of youth can appreciate.

In the ninth, tenth and eleventh stanzas Wordsworth manages to reconcile the emotions and questions he has explored throughout the poem. He realizes that even though he has lost his awareness of the glory of nature, he had it once, and can still remember it. The memory of nature's glory will have to be enough to sustain him, and he ultimately decides that it is. Anything that we have, for however short a time, can never be taken away completely, because it will forever be held in our memory.

### 27.1.3 Form

Wordsworth's Immortality Ode, as it is often called, is written in eleven variable ode stanzas with variable rhyme schemes, in iambic lines with anything from two to five stressed syllables. The rhymes occasionally alternate lines, occasionally fall in couplets, and occasionally occur within a single line (as in "But yet I know, where'er I go" in the second stanza).

### 27.1.4 Commentary

If "Tintern Abbey" is Wordsworth's first great statement about the action of childhood memories of nature upon the adult mind, the "Intimations of Immortality" ode is his mature masterpiece on the subject. The poem, whose full title is "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," makes explicit Wordsworth's belief that life on earth is a dim shadow of an earlier, purer existence, dimly recalled in childhood and then forgotten in the process of growing up. (In the fifth stanza, he writes, "Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting.../Not in entire forgetfulness, / And not in utter nakedness, /But trailing clouds of glory do we come / From God, who is our home....")

While one might disagree with the poem's metaphysical hypotheses, there is no arguing with the genius of language at work in this Ode. Wordsworth consciously sets his speaker's mind at odds

with the atmosphere of joyous nature all around him, a rare move by a poet whose consciousness is so habitually in unity with nature. Understanding that his grief stems from his inability to experience the May morning as he would have in childhood, the speaker attempts to enter willfully into a state of cheerfulness; but he is able to find real happiness only when he realizes that “the philosophic mind” has given him the ability to understand nature in deeper, more human terms—as a source of metaphor and guidance for human life. This is very much the same pattern as “Tintern Abbey”’s, but whereas in the earlier poem Wordsworth made himself joyful, and referred to the “music of humanity” only briefly, in the later poem he explicitly proposes that this music is the remedy for his mature grief.



*Task* Write a short note on poem, Ode to intimations of immortality.

The structure of the Immortality Ode is also unique in Wordsworth’s work; unlike his characteristically fluid, naturally spoken monologues, the Ode is written in a lilting, songlike cadence with frequent shifts in rhyme scheme and rhythm. Further, rather than progressively exploring a single idea from start to finish, the Ode jumps from idea to idea, always sticking close to the central scene, but frequently making surprising moves, as when the speaker begins to address the “Mighty Prophet” in the eighth stanza—only to reveal midway through his address that the mighty prophet is a six-year-old boy.

Wordsworth’s linguistic strategies are extraordinarily sophisticated and complex in this Ode, as the poem’s use of metaphor and image shifts from the register of lost childhood to the register of the philosophic mind. When the speaker is grieving, the main tactic of the poem is to offer joyous, pastoral nature images, frequently personified—the lambs dancing as to the tabor, the moon looking about her in the sky. But when the poet attains the philosophic mind and his fullest realization about memory and imagination, he begins to employ far more subtle descriptions of nature that, rather than jauntily imposing humanity upon natural objects, simply draw human characteristics out of their natural presences, referring back to human qualities from earlier in the poem.

So, in the final stanza, the brooks “fret” down their channels, just as the child’s mother “fretted” him with kisses earlier in the poem; they trip lightly just as the speaker “tripped lightly” as a child; the Day is new-born, innocent, and bright, just as a child would be; the clouds “gather round the setting sun” and “take a sober coloring,” just as mourners at a funeral (recalling the child’s playing with some fragment from “a mourning or a funeral” earlier in the poem) might gather soberly around a grave. The effect is to illustrate how, in the process of imaginative creativity possible to the mature mind, the shapes of humanity can be found in nature and vice-versa. (Recall the “music of humanity” in “Tintern Abbey.”) A flower can summon thoughts too deep for tears because a flower can embody the shape of human life, and it is the mind of maturity combined with the memory of childhood that enables the poet to make that vital and moving connection.

The speaker begins by declaring that there was a time when nature seemed mystical to him, like a dream, “Apparelled in celestial light.” But now all of that is gone. No matter what he does, “The things which I have seen I now can see no more.”

In the second stanza the speaker says that even though he can still see the rainbow, the rose, the moon, and the sun, and even though they are still beautiful, something is different...something has been lost: “But yet I know, where’er I go, / that there hath past away a glory from the earth.” The speaker is saddened by the birds singing and the lambs jumping in the third stanza. Soon, however, he resolves not to be depressed, because it will only put a damper on the beauty of the season.

## Notes



*Notes* The speaker declares that all of the earth is happy, and exhorts the shepherd boy to shout.

In the fourth stanza the speaker continues to be a part of the joy of the season, saying that it would be wrong to be “sullen / While Earth herself in adorning, / And the Children are culling / On every side, / In a thousand valleys far and wide.” However, when he sees a tree, a field, and later a pansy at his feet, they again give him a strong feeling that something is amiss. He asks, “Whither is fled the visionary gleam? / Where is it now, the glory and the dream?”

The fifth stanza contains arguably the most famous line of the poem: “Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting.” He goes on to say that as infants we have some memory of heaven, but as we grow we lose that connection: “Heaven lies about us in our infancy!” As children this connection with heaven causes us to experience nature’s glory more clearly. Once we are grown, the connection is lost. In the sixth stanza, the speaker says that as soon as we get to earth, everything conspires to help us forget the place we came from: heaven. “Forget the glories he hath known, and that imperial palace whence he came.”

In the seventh stanza the speaker sees (or imagines) a six-year-old boy, and foresees the rest of his life. He says that the child will learn from his experiences, but that he will spend most of his effort on imitation: “And with new joy and pride / The little Actor cons another part.” It seems to the speaker that his whole life will essentially be “endless imitation.” In the eighth stanza the speaker speaks directly to the child, calling him a philosopher. The speaker cannot understand why the child, who is so close to heaven in his youth, would rush to grow into an adult. He asks him, “Why with such earnest pains dost thou provoke / The years to bring the inevitable yoke, / Thus blindly with thy blessedness at strife?” In the ninth stanza (which is the longest at 38 lines) the speaker experiences a flood of joy when he realizes that through memory he will always be able to connect to his childhood, and through his childhood to nature.

Hence is a season of calm weather  
 Though inland far we be,  
 Our souls have sight of that immortal sea  
 Which brought us hither,  
 Can in a moment travel thither,  
 And see the Children sport upon the shore,  
 And hear the might water rolling evermore.

In the tenth stanza the speaker harkens back to the beginning of the poem, asking the same creatures that earlier made him sad with their sounds to sing out: “Then sing, ye Birds, sing, sing a joyous song!” Even though he admits that he has lost some of the glory of nature as he has grown out of childhood, he is comforted by the knowledge that he can rely on his memory. In the final stanza the speaker says that nature is still the stem of everything in his life, bringing him insight, fueling his memories and his belief that his soul is immortal: “To me the meanest flower that blows can give / Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.”

### Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

1. Composed at Grasmere, in the ....., between 1802 and 1804, “Intimations of Immortality” was first published in poems in two volumes (1807).

- (a) High street (b) Blencathra  
(c) Lake district (d) Scafell pike
2. .... taught pre-existence, meaning that the soul dwelled in an ideal alternate state prior to its present occupation of the body, and the soul will return to that ideal previous state after the body's death.  
(a) Plato (b) Immanuel  
(c) Aristotle (d) Bertrand Russell
3. .... cantata Intimations of Immortality was premiered in 1950, when it was conducted by Herbert Sumsion in Gloucester Cathedral at the Three Choirs Festival.  
(a) Edward Elgar's (b) Ralph Vaughan Williams  
(c) Gerald Finzi's (d) Gustav Holst
4. The poem was read by actor Timothy West at the .....  
(a) Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall (b) Prince Harry of Wales  
(c) Prince William of Wales  
(d) Wedding of Charles, Prince of Wales and Camilla Parker Bowles
5. Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of early childhood is a long ode in eleven sections by the English Romantic poet .....  
(a) William Wordsworth (b) George Gordon Byron  
(c) Samuel Taylor Coleridge (d) Romantic poetry

### 27.1.5 Analysis

In the first stanza, the speaker says wistfully that there was a time when all of nature seemed dreamlike to him, "appareled in celestial light," and that time is past; "the things I have seen I can see no more."

In the second stanza, he says that he still sees the rainbow, and that the rose is still lovely; the moon looks around the sky with delight, and starlight and sunshine are each beautiful. Nonetheless the speaker feels that a glory has passed away from the earth.

In the third stanza, the speaker says that, while listening to the birds sing in springtime and watching the young lambs leap and play, he was stricken with a thought of grief; but the sound of nearby waterfalls, the echoes of the mountains, and the gusting of the winds restored him to strength. He declares that his grief will no longer wrong the joy of the season, and that all the earth is happy. He exhorts a shepherd boy to shout and play around him. In the fourth stanza, he addresses nature's creatures, and says that his heart participates in their joyful festival. He says that it would be wrong to feel sad on such a beautiful May morning, while children play and laugh among the flowers. Nevertheless, a tree and a field that he looks upon make him think of "something that is gone," and a pansy at his feet does the same. He asks what has happened to "the visionary gleam": "Where is it now, the glory and the dream?"

In the fifth stanza, he proclaims that human life is merely "a sleep and a forgetting"—that human beings dwell in a purer, more glorious realm before they enter the earth. "Heaven," he says, "lies about us in our infancy!" As children, we still retain some memory of that place, which causes our experience of the earth to be suffused with its magic—but as the baby passes through boyhood and young adulthood and into manhood, he sees that magic die. In the sixth stanza, the speaker says that the pleasures unique to earth conspire to help the man forget the "glories" whence he came.

**Notes**

In the seventh stanza, the speaker beholds a six-year-old boy and imagines his life, and the love his mother and father feel for him. He sees the boy playing with some imitated fragment of adult life, "some little plan or chart," imitating "a wedding or a festival" or "a mourning or a funeral." The speaker imagines that all human life is a similar imitation. In the eighth stanza, the speaker addresses the child as though he were a mighty prophet of a lost truth, and rhetorically asks him why, when he has access to the glories of his origins, and to the pure experience of nature, he still hurries toward an adult life of custom and "earthly freight."

In the ninth stanza, the speaker experiences a surge of joy at the thought that his memories of childhood will always grant him a kind of access to that lost world of instinct, innocence, and exploration. In the tenth stanza, bolstered by this joy, he urges the birds to sing, and urges all creatures to participate in "the gladness of the May." He says that though he has lost some part of the glory of nature and of experience, he will take solace in "primal sympathy," in memory, and in the fact that the years bring a mature consciousness—"a philosophic mind." In the final stanza, the speaker says that this mind—which stems from a consciousness of mortality, as opposed to the child's feeling of immortality—enables him to love nature and natural beauty all the more, for each of nature's objects can stir him to thought, and even the simplest flower blowing in the wind can raise in him "thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears."

**27.2 Summary**

- The poem is elegiac in that it is about the regret of loss.
- "The world is too much with us," Wordsworth believes that the loss stems from being too caught up in material possessions.
- The poem, whose full title is "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood,"
- While one might disagree with the poem's metaphysical hypotheses, there is no arguing with the genius of language at work in this Ode.
- The speaker begins by declaring that there was a time when nature seemed mystical to him, like a dream, "Apparelled in celestial light."

**27.3 Keywords**

*Doth* : Archaic third person singular present of.

*Coronal* : Relating to the crown or corona of something.

*Gleam* : Shine brightly, especially with reflected light.

*Forebode* : Act as an advance warning of something bad.

*Meadow* : An area of grassland, especially one used for hay.

**27.4 Review Questions**

1. Who wrote Ode on Intimations of Immortality from recollections ode?
2. Why Ode Intimations of Immortality frist the romantic tradition?
3. Why is the meaning of childhood, pre-existence and memory in William Wordsworth?

**Answers: Self Assessment**

1. (c)
2. (a)
3. (c)
4. (d)
5. (a)

## 27.5 Further Readings

Notes



*Books*

- |                                  |                         |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------|
| John Keats: a literary biography | — Albert Helmer Hancock |
| William Wordsworth               | — William Wordsworth    |
| Complete poetical works          | — William Wordsworth    |
| Robert Browning                  | — G.K.Chesterton        |



*Online links*

- <http://mural.uv.es/horpla/wordsworth.html>  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ode:\\_Intimations\\_of\\_Immortality](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ode:_Intimations_of_Immortality)

Notes

## Unit 28: John Keats: Ode on a Grecian Urn, Ode to a Nightingale and Ode to Autumn

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## Objectives

## Notes

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Explain briefly the text, theme and summary of the poem Ode on Grecian urn
- Explain briefly the text, theme and summary of the poem Ode to a Nightingale
- Explain briefly the text, theme and summary of the poem Ode to Autumn
- Discuss the detailed analysis of all poems.

## Introduction

John Keats was an English Romantic poet. Along with Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley, he was one of the key figures in the second generation of the Romantic movement, despite the fact that his work had been in publication for only four years before his death. Although his poems were not generally well received by critics during his life, his reputation grew after his death to the extent that by the end of the 19th century he had become one of the most beloved of all English poets. He has had a significant influence on a diverse range of later poets and writers: Jorge Luis Borges stated that his first encounter with Keats was the most significant literary experience of his life.

The poetry of Keats is characterized by sensual imagery, most notably in the series of odes. Today his poems and letters are some of the most popular and analyzed in English literature. 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' was the third of the five 'great odes' of 1819, which are generally believed to have been written in the following order - Psyche, Nightingale, Grecian Urn, Melancholy, and Autumn. Of the five, Grecian Urn and Melancholy are merely dated '1819'. Critics have used vague references in Keats's letters as well as thematic progression to assign order. This ode contains the most discussed two lines in all of Keats's poetry - "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," - that is all/ Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.'

The exact meaning of those lines is disputed by everyone; no less a critic than TS Eliot considered them a blight upon an otherwise beautiful poem. Scholars have been unable to agree to whom the last thirteen lines of the poem are addressed. Arguments can be made for any of the four most obvious possibilities, -poet to reader, urn to reader, poet to urn, poet to figures on the urn. The issue is further confused by the change in quotation marks between the original manuscript copy of the ode and the 1820 published edition.

## 28.1 Ode on a Grecian Urn

### 28.1.1 Text

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,  
Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,  
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express  
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:  
What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape  
Of deities or mortals, or of both,  
In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?  
What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?  
What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?  
What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

Notes

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard  
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;  
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,  
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:  
Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave  
Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;  
Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,  
Though winning near the goal yet, do not grieve;  
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,  
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed  
Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;  
And, happy melodist, unwearied,  
For ever piping songs for ever new;  
More happy love! more happy, happy love!  
For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd,  
For ever panting, and for ever young;  
All breathing human passion far above,  
That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,  
A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?  
To what green altar, O mysterious priest,  
Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,  
And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?  
What little town by river or sea shore,  
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,  
Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?  
And, little town, thy streets for evermore  
Will silent be; and not a soul to tell  
Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede  
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,  
With forest branches and the trodden weed;  
Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought  
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!  
When old age shall this generation waste,

Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe  
 Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,  
 "Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all  
 Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."

### 28.1.2 Summary

In the first stanza, the speaker stands before an ancient Grecian urn and addresses it. He is preoccupied with its depiction of pictures frozen in time. It is the "still unravish'd bride of quietness," the "foster-child of silence and slow time." He also describes the urn as a "historian" that can tell a story. He wonders about the figures on the side of the urn and asks what legend they depict and from where they come. He looks at a picture that seems to depict a group of men pursuing a group of women and wonders what their story could be: "What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape? / What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?"



Task

What makes the speaker question the Urn in the first stanza? What state of mind does Keat's poem seem designed to bring about?

In the second stanza, the speaker looks at another picture on the urn, this time of a young man playing a pipe, lying with his lover beneath a glade of trees. The speaker says that the piper's "unheard" melodies are sweeter than mortal melodies because they are unaffected by time. He tells the youth that, though he can never kiss his lover because he is frozen in time, he should not grieve, because her beauty will never fade. In the third stanza, he looks at the trees surrounding the lovers and feels happy that they will never shed their leaves. He is happy for the piper because his songs will be "for ever new," and happy that the love of the boy and the girl will last forever, unlike mortal love, which lapses into "breathing human passion" and eventually vanishes, leaving behind only a "burning forehead, and a parching tongue."

In the fourth stanza, the speaker examines another picture on the urn, this one of a group of villagers leading a heifer to be sacrificed. He wonders where they are going ("To what green altar, O mysterious priest...") and from where they have come. He imagines their little town, empty of all its citizens, and tells it that its streets will "for evermore" be silent, for those who have left it, frozen on the urn, will never return. In the final stanza, the speaker again addresses the urn itself, saying that it, like Eternity, "doth tease us out of thought." He thinks that when his generation is long dead, the urn will remain, telling future generations its enigmatic lesson: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty." The speaker says that is the only thing the urn knows and the only thing it needs to know.

### 28.1.3 Form

"Ode on a Grecian Urn" follows the same ode-stanza structure as the "Ode on Melancholy," though it varies more the rhyme scheme of the last three lines of each stanza. Each of the five stanzas in "Grecian Urn" is ten lines long, metered in a relatively precise iambic pentameter, and divided into a two-part rhyme scheme, the last three lines of which are variable. The first seven lines of each stanza follow an ABABCDE rhyme scheme, but the second occurrences of the CDE sounds do not follow the same order. In stanza one, lines seven through ten are rhymed DCE; in stanza two, CED; in stanzas three and four, CDE; and in stanza five, DCE, just as in stanza one. As in other odes (especially "Autumn" and "Melancholy"), the two-part rhyme scheme (the first part made of AB rhymes, the second of CDE rhymes) creates the sense of a two-part thematic structure as well. The first four lines of each stanza roughly define the subject of the stanza, and the last six roughly explicate or develop it. (As in other odes, this is only a general rule, true of some stanzas more than others; stanzas such as the fifth do not connect rhyme scheme and thematic structure closely at all.)

## Notes

## Self Assessment

## Multiple Choice Questions:

1. In 1999, ..... claimed that the poem "Tells a story that cannot be developed."
 

(a) Harry Patch	(b) Andrew Motion
(c) Carol Ann Duffy	(d) England
2. This posed a problem for the ....., who were prone to closely reading a poem's text.
 

(a) Literary criticism	(b) New historicism
(c) New criticism	(d) Literary theory
3. It is one of his "Great odes of 1819", which include ....., ode on Melancholy, ode to a Nightingale and ode to Psyche.
 

(a) Ode on a Grecian Urn	(b) Romantic poetry
(c) Negative capability	(d) Ode on Indolence
4. The technique of the poem is ....., the poetic representation of a painting or sculpture in words.
 

(a) Aristotle	(b) Ekphrasis
(c) Poetry	(d) Homer
5. There is a hint of a ..... in that indulgence causes someone to be filled with desire and that music without a sound is desired by the soul.
 

(a) Aristotle	(b) Paradox
(c) Bertrand Russell	(d) Ambiguity

## 28.1.4 Themes

If the "Ode to a Nightingale" portrays Keats's speaker's engagement with the fluid expressiveness of music, the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" portrays his attempt to engage with the static immobility of sculpture. The Grecian urn, passed down through countless centuries to the time of the speaker's viewing, exists outside of time in the human sense—it does not age, it does not die, and indeed it is alien to all such concepts. In the speaker's meditation, this creates an intriguing paradox for the human figures carved into the side of the urn: They are free from time, but they are simultaneously frozen in time. They do not have to confront aging and death (their love is "for ever young"), but neither can they have experience (the youth can never kiss the maiden; the figures in the procession can never return to their homes).

The speaker attempts three times to engage with scenes carved into the urn; each time he asks different questions of it. In the first stanza, he examines the picture of the "mad pursuit" and wonders what actual story lies behind the picture: "What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?" Of course, the urn can never tell him the whos, whats, whens, and wheres of the stories it depicts, and the speaker is forced to abandon this line of questioning.

In the second and third stanzas, he examines the picture of the piper playing to his lover beneath the trees. Here, the speaker tries to imagine what the experience of the figures on the urn must be like; he tries to identify with them. He is tempted by their escape from temporality and attracted to the eternal newness of the piper's unheard song and the eternally unchanging beauty of his lover. He thinks that their love is "far above" all transient human passion, which, in its sexual expression, inevitably leads to an abatement of intensity—when passion is satisfied, all that remains is a wearied physicality: a sorrowful heart, a "burning forehead," and a "parching tongue."



*Notes* The speaker's recollection of these conditions seems to remind the speaker that he is inescapably subject to them, and he abandons his attempt to identify with the figures on the urn.

## Notes

In the fourth stanza, the speaker attempts to think about the figures on the urn as though they were experiencing human time, imagining that their procession has an origin (the “little town”) and a destination (the “green altar”). But all he can think is that the town will forever be deserted: If these people have left their origin, they will never return to it. In this sense he confronts head-on the limits of static art; if it is impossible to learn from the urn the whos and wheres of the “real story” in the first stanza, it is impossible ever to know the origin and the destination of the figures on the urn in the fourth.

It is true that the speaker shows a certain kind of progress in his successive attempts to engage with the urn. His idle curiosity in the first attempt gives way to a more deeply felt identification in the second, and in the third, the speaker leaves his own concerns behind and thinks of the processional purely on its own terms, thinking of the “little town” with a real and generous feeling. But each attempt ultimately ends in failure. The third attempt fails simply because there is nothing more to say—once the speaker confronts the silence and eternal emptiness of the little town, he has reached the limit of static art; on this subject, at least, there is nothing more the urn can tell him.

In the final stanza, the speaker presents the conclusions drawn from his three attempts to engage with the urn. He is overwhelmed by its existence outside of temporal change, with its ability to “tease” him “out of thought / As doth eternity.” If human life is a succession of “hungry generations,” as the speaker suggests in “Nightingale,” the urn is a separate and self-contained world. It can be a “friend to man,” as the speaker says, but it cannot be mortal; the kind of aesthetic connection the speaker experiences with the urn is ultimately insufficient to human life.

The final two lines, in which the speaker imagines the urn speaking its message to mankind—“Beauty is truth, truth beauty,” have proved among the most difficult to interpret in the Keats canon. After the urn utters the enigmatic phrase “Beauty is truth, truth beauty,” no one can say for sure who “speaks” the conclusion, “that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.” It could be the speaker addressing the urn, and it could be the urn addressing mankind. If it is the speaker addressing the urn, then it would seem to indicate his awareness of its limitations: The urn may not need to know anything beyond the equation of beauty and truth, but the complications of human life make it impossible for such a simple and self-contained phrase to express sufficiently anything about necessary human knowledge. If it is the urn addressing mankind, then the phrase has rather the weight of an important lesson, as though beyond all the complications of human life, all human beings need to know on earth is that beauty and truth are one and the same. It is largely a matter of personal interpretation which reading to accept.

### 28.1.5 Detailed Analysis

A man is whispering sweet nothings to a Grecian urn, an ancient Greek pot that is covered in illustrations. He thinks the pot is married to a guy named “Quietness,” but they haven’t had sex yet, so the marriage isn’t official. He also thinks that the urn is the adopted child of “Silence” and “Slow Time.”

Then the speaker gives us the urn’s profession: it’s a “historian,” and it does a much better job of telling stories than the speaker possibly could. The speaker looks closer at the urn and tries to figure out what’s going on in the pictures that are painted on it. Illustrated on the urn is some kind of story that might involve gods, men, or both. It looks like a bunch of guys are chasing beautiful women through the forest. People are playing pipes and beating on drums. Everyone looks happy. The scene is chaotic and the speaker doesn’t know quite what’s happening.

## Notes

Not only is the urn a better storyteller than the poet, but the musicians in the illustration have sweeter melodies than the poet. The poet then tries to listen to the music played by the people in the image. That's right: even though he can't hear the music with his ears, he's trying to listen to it with his "spirit." He looks at the illustration of a young guy who is playing a song under a tree. Because pictures don't change, the man will be playing his song as long as the urn survives, and the tree will always be full and green.

Then the speaker addresses one of the guys who is chasing a maiden, and he offers some advice: "You're never going to make out with that girl, because you're in a picture, and pictures don't change, but don't worry – at least you'll always be in love with her, because you're in a picture, and pictures don't change."

The speaker thinks about how happy the trees must be to keep all their leaves forever. It's always springtime in the world of the urn, and every song sounds fresh and new. Then he starts talking about love and repeats the word "happy" a bunch of times. He is jealous of the lovers on the urn, because they will always be lusting after each other. He thinks the best part of being in love is trying to get your lover to hook up with you, and not the part that follows. We're starting to think that the speaker needs a cold shower.



*Did u know?* The word "panting" threatens to send the poem careening into X-rated territory.

Things were getting a bit steamy, but now the speaker has moved to a different section of the urn. He's looking at an illustration of an animal sacrifice. This is pretty much the cold shower he needed. A priest is leading a cow to be sacrificed. People have come from a nearby town to watch. The speaker imagines that it's a holy day, so the town has been emptied out for the sacrifice. The town will always be empty, because it's a picture, and pictures don't change.

The speaker starts freaking out a bit. He's basically yelling at the urn now. Whereas before he was really excited about the idea of living in the eternal world of the illustrations, now he's not so sure. Something about it seems "cold" to him. He thinks about how, when everyone he knows is dead, the urn will still be around, telling its story to future generations. The urn is a teacher and friend to mankind. It repeats the same lesson to every generation: that truth and beauty are the same thing, and this knowledge is all we need to make it through life.

## Stanza I Summary

### Line 1

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,

Keats talks to the urn as if it were a beautiful woman, like many people do nowadays with their cars. He calls her the "unravish'd bride of quietness," which, if taken literally, would mean that the urn is married to a guy named Quietness. But urns can't get married, so he probably just means a really old pot and quietness go hand in hand. Imagine the speaker standing in some big, empty room of a museum, and it's easy to see where the quietness thing comes from.

What about "still unravish'd"? It might not seem like it on the surface, but this is a sexy poem. The word "ravish" means to take or carry away something by force, and, more directly, it means to have violent, passionate sex with someone. The writers of bodice-ripper romance novels love the word "ravish."

But this urn hasn't been ravished – yet. Even though "she" is married to quietness, they haven't consummated the marriage by having sex. It looks youthful and pure, even though it's really old.

If you think the whole sex-and-marriage metaphor for a pot doesn't make much sense, you're not alone. But you have to admit that it sounds cool. If you want to boil the first line down to something very simple, he's saying that the urn has lived its life in "quietness," in a museum or buried in some Greek ruins, but it's still in great condition and hasn't suffered any major damage.

**Line 2**

**Notes**

Thou foster-child of Silence and slow Time,

The urn is called the “foster-child” of Silence and slow Time. A “foster-child” is a kid who is adopted and raised by people other than his or her own parents.

In this case, the urn has been adopted by “Silence” and “slow Time,” which, if anything, sounds like an even more boring couple than Mrs. Urn and Mr. Quietness.

The point is that the pot is thousands of years old, and it has spent most of its time buried in rubble or tucked away in the corner of some museum or some private collector’s house. But these were not its “original” circumstances.

The true “parent” of the urn would have been the Greek artist who created it. Furthermore, the pot might have had a ceremonial use rather than just being a pretty thing to look at.

But after the decline of Greek civilization, the pot lived on to age in silence, outside of the vibrant culture in which he was created.

**Lines 3-4**

Sylvan historian, who canst thus express

A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:

So far, the speaker has addressed the urn by a bunch of different names and titles. It’s like saying, “You, John Doe, husband of Jane Doe, son of Susie and Richard Doe, lawyer at the firm of . . .” Now this line gives us the urn’s job or profession, which is “Sylvan historian.”

Bet you’ve never seen that one on a business card, huh? “Sylvan” is a just a word derived from Latin that refers to woods or forests. This makes the urn a historian of people who live in forests. It’s a storyteller (the word “history” is derived from a Latin word for “story” or “tale”), and a darn good one.

In fact, the urn is a better storyteller than the poet.

The urn tells stories using pictures, while the poet uses “rhymes.” The tale told by the urn is “flowery” and “sweet,” as if you could bury your nose in it like a bee inside a daffodil.

This is appropriate, because this particular urn depicts scenes that are set in nature. Moreover, “flowery” works as a pun. A tale is “flowery” if it’s complicated and has a lot of ins and outs.

But the story told on an urn is also “flowery” in a more literal sense: the illustrations on urns were often framed by a pattern of leaves or flowers.

**Line 5-7**

What leaf-fringed legend haunts about thy shape

Of deities or mortals, or of both,

In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?

This is the point when our speaker leans in to take a closer look at the urn. He’s trying to figure what’s going on in the carved pictures that encircle it.

We got the flowers in line 4, and now we get the leaves. The story or “legend” on the pot is “leaf-fringed,” which builds on the idea of the “Sylvan” or forest historian.

But this “legend” suddenly sounds a lot like a ghost story: it “haunts.” This is another pun, because “haunt” can just mean to exist in a certain place, but it has that obvious connection to the dead. Indeed, we would expect that all the characters of a story that was first told thousands of years ago would be dead by now.

And who are these characters, the speaker is wondering. Are they gods (“deities”) or just normal human beings (“mortals”)?

**Notes**

In Ancient Greece, all the gods were represented as looking like people, so you wouldn't always be able to tell the difference between them and people in a picture. The gods also liked to hang out with humans.

Needless to say, it's hard to tell if these people are mere mortals or gods.

The speaker is also wondering where the story takes place.

With his knowledge of Ancient Greece, he throws out a couple of names as guesses: Tempe and "Arcady," or Arcadia. (A "dale" is just a valley.)

**Line 8-10**

What men or gods are these? what maidens loth?

What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?

What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

Keats is playing a clever trick here. Under the guise of having the speaker try to figure out what's on the pictures, Keats is really telling us about the story.

The speaker repeats the question about "deities or mortals" in more causal language: are they "men or gods"?

Here it helps to have a little background into a very common Ancient Greek theme: a bunch of lustful guys chasing a bunch of nice girls around and trying to get some action. Very often the males would be half-man, half-goat-type creatures called "satyrs," but Keats doesn't mention anything about satyrs so we can't jump to that conclusion.

If you want to have a more sinister interpretation, you can imagine that the women are being chased against their will.

We're going to give these couples the benefit of the doubt, though, and imagine that the women are just being playful.

They are "loth," or "loath," to have sex, which means they are reluctant, but it could just be a teasing reluctance.

In the picture, the guys are chasing the women in "mad pursuit," which the women "struggle to escape."

This cat-and-mouse scenario seems to be a game. It wouldn't make much sense to depict a serious chase scene and then include people playing instruments like "pipes and timbrels" (a timbrel is like a tambourine).

On the whole, everyone looks happy. But not just happy as in simply content.

We're talking rowdy, crazy, best-party-of-my-life happiness. We're talking "wild ecstasy." Everyone is running around and dancing.

**Stanza II Summary**

**Lines 11-12**

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard

Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;

In this stanza, the speaker seems to have moved on to another of the pictures on the side of the urn.

As in the first scene, there is music playing. The music is being played on "pipes," which is like a primitive version of a flute. Unlike the wild party music of the first stanza, these pipes are "soft."

The speaker arrives at a totally counter-intuitive conclusion. He says that the melodies you don't hear are "sweeter" than those you do.

This claim is a paradox: it doesn't seem to make sense. No one listens to their music player with the volume at zero so they can "imagine" the music they aren't hearing.

This is the first example of a trick that Keats is going to play over and over again for the rest of the poem.

He treats the scenes on the urn as if they were real places and events, and not just a depiction of a place. Real people are actually "living" on the urn, but they are frozen in time.

The pipe-player actually is playing a song, but you can't hear the song because urns don't make sounds. The speaker is imagining what the song would sound like, and he thinks this imaginary song inside his head is better than anything he has heard with his ears.

In other words, he prefers to the world of fantasy to the physical world.

He tells the "soft pipes" to keep playing, even though he's the one who is making the pipes play, by imagining them.

In this sense, it's almost like he's talking to himself. He is both musician and audience.

#### **Lines 13-14**

Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,

Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:

The speaker is still giving orders that only he can obey. He tells the pipes not to play to his "sensual" or physical ear, but to the metaphorical ear of his "spirit," or imagination. This spiritual ear is "more endear'd," or cherished, than his flesh-and-blood ears.

As if that weren't strange enough, he asks the pipes to play "ditties of no tone," that is, songs that don't have any notes or sounds, at least in the real world. Imaginary songs.

#### **Lines 15-16**

Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave

Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;

The identity of our mysterious musician revealed! It was Colonel Mustard in the Conservatory with the Lead Pipe. It was a good-looking young guy ("fair youth") sitting under the trees, and his pipe was probably made of wood.

Here comes Keats's trick again. He treats the urn like a real place, and because this place never changes, it means that the guy under the tree will always be playing the same song, in the same pose forever!

It's like Bill Murray's life in *Groundhog Day*, but with even less variety.

But for the speaker, this is actually a good thing. Because the seasons never change, the weather will always be nice and the trees will never be "bare," without leaves.

It's Eden. Eternal spring.

#### **Line 17**

Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss,

Now he turns back to the first scene, the guys chasing the women, and he starts talking to one of the guys.

He calls him "bold," presumably because he has taken the initiative to chase his lady around the forest. In modern-day terms, he's like a guy who is never afraid to ask for a girl's number.

To paraphrase, the speaker says, "I know you're hoping to make it with that nice girl you're chasing, but I've got bad news for you: It's not going to happen. Ever. I don't think you realize this, but you

Notes

live on an urn, you're just a picture, and you can never move or change. But there's a definite upside to the situation: you'll always feel just as strongly about her, and she'll always be really beautiful.

This is an absurd thing to say, and it tells us more about the speaker than it does about the lover. The speaker wants to imagine a world in which nothing changes and good things never come to an end.

The speaker isn't the most tactful guy in the world, and he repeats the word "never" twice as if to rub in the bad news. He also describes the chase scene as if it were an athletic race, for which having sex is considered "winning." It's like the Romantic poetry equivalent of locker-room banter.

**Stanza III Summary**

*Lines 21-22*

Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed  
Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;

The branches of the trees never lose their leaves because the world of the urn never changes.

The urn is to the Ancient Greek world what a Norman Rockwell painting is to 1950s America: it captures a moment in time in which everything seems to be wholesome and happy.

In this case, it's always springtime, and the trees are always green.

After repeating the word "never" twice in line 17, the speaker seems to have decided that repeating words is his new thing, and he does it a bunch of times in this stanza. He uses the word, "happy," twice in a row in line 21. He also continues to talk to objects that can't respond to him, like the "boughs" or branches of the trees depicted on the urn.

Finally, he continues to treat the urn as a real place, and one where things never change.

To bid "adieu" is to say "goodbye" in French with the expectation that you won't see someone again for a long time. If someone goes down the street to the corner store, you say "au revoir," but if someone moves to another state, you say "adieu."

Fortunately for the tree branches, they never have to say goodbye to the Spring, which will never be replaced by summer in this world.

Some readers have thought that the repeated use of the word "happy" smacks of desperation on the part of the speaker, as if he were trying to convince himself that eternal springtime would be a great thing, rather than a huge snooze-fest.

After all, how long can you sit around looking at tree leaves?

*Lines 23-24*

And, happy melodist, unwearied,  
For ever piping songs for ever new;

These lines make us think that the speaker is still talking about the second scene of the urn: the young musician playing the pipes under a tree.

Now he calls him a "melodist." Unlike, say, the piano, you can't play both melody and harmony on the pipes. You have to pick one, and the most obvious choice is to play a melody.

The "melodist," you probably won't be shocked to learn, is also "happy," like everyone else in this world. He is also "unwearied," which means he never gets tired.

In your version of the poem, you might notice that the word has an accent at the end, so that it reads, "un-wear-i-ed." What's that about? It means that Keats wants you to pronounce the word with four syllables, instead of three.

He does this to preserve a perfect ten-syllable iambic pentameter, which you can read more about in the “Form and Meter” section.

But you can think of the accent as being like a notation on a piece of sheet music, which might be important in light of the fact that the speaker is talking about music at this point. Is he comparing himself with the “happy melodist”? We think so.

In line 24 the speaker says that the songs played by the musician are always fresh and new. Again, that’s because the world of the urn never changes.

It would be as if our world froze while you were listening to the radio, so whatever was on the Top-40 station would always be considered hip and catchy.

Of course, in the real world, we know that most pop songs don’t last in the Top-40 for more than a few weeks. We get sick of the old songs and crave new ones, which is why there will always be a need for young teen pop stars to replace the older teen pop stars of the year before.

### Line 25

More happy love! more happy, happy love!

This is the place where a lot of readers think the speaker starts to go off in his own world.

Three “happy” in one line? We imagine our speaker is the kind of person who puts 25 packets of sugar into their iced tea. In case you hadn’t noticed, he likes sweet things. But do these “happy” thoughts have any substance?

If you want to be less cynical, you could also read these lines as the speaker encouraging the musician to keep playing by calling for more songs.

He thinks the music and “love” go hand in hand, so more music means more love. He’s like the crowd at a concert clapping its hands and shouting, “Another! Two more songs! Ten more songs!”

### Line 26-27

For ever warm and still to be enjoy’d,

For ever panting, and for ever young;

The birds and the bees. When it comes to sex, lots of people think that the most exciting part is definitely before the act itself. It is the time of attraction and pursuit.

By contrast, “after” is the time when people often wonder what they were so worked up about. On a longer time scale, the same holds true for love affairs. They are usually most exciting in the beginning, before things settle down into a routine.

The speaker seems to have returned to the first image on the urn, that of the “men or gods” chasing a bunch of women, and he imagines that everyone in the scene is at the peak of their erotic excitement.

The men are just about to catch the women, but they haven’t yet, so they always have the big moment ahead of them.

Line 26 refers to the bodies of the women, which are “warm and still to be enjoy’d.”

Line 27 refers to both men and women, who are “panting” from their chase.

Keeping in his mode of repetition, the speaker keeps using the words “for ever” to make the point that the people on the urn are frozen in time. The world of art is eternal.

We’re now going to argue in favor of a different interpretation. Our speaker is showing definite symptoms of sexual excitement himself, like the pulsating rhythm of his speech and the repetition of his words (being sexually excited isn’t the most creative human state). He might need a cold shower.

Notes

*Lines 28-30*

All breathing human passion far above,  
That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,  
A burning forehead and a parching tongue.

Line 28 has somewhat awkward grammar. Generations of readers have not known what to make of these lines. Line 27 told us about the "panting" of the lovers, but now these lines might suggest that the lovers are better than or "far above" the "breathing human passion" of the normal world.

That's one interpretation. But here's a different one.

In this second interpretation, "far above" refers to the perspective of the speaker, our excited guy who is "breathing" on the display case at the museum as he salivates over the urn.

The word "all" suggests that the speaker knows he belongs to a much wider and more populous world than the people on the urn. In other words, the urn is like a tiny planet that is frozen in time while all around it people are moving and breathing and carrying on with their lives.

So if the speaker represents the "human passion" that looks down on this little world from "far above," then line 29 must refer to his "heart," not just any old heart.

When he looks at the happy lovers, the speaker's heart becomes "high-sorrowful and cloy'd." In other words, he feels a dramatic, woe-is-me kind of sadness.

To be "cloy'd" is to have too much of a good thing. The speaker is overpowered by his excitement, and instead of a warm and pleasant "panting," he feels feverish, with a "burning forehead," and desperately thirsty, with "a parching of tongue."

He's like a guy stuck in the desert. But instead of water, he craves love.

**Stanza IV Summary**

*Line 31*

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?

Just when we thought the speaker might faint from the steamy, sticky atmosphere of the lovers, he manages to turn his attention to other things.

Now the speaker is looking at the third scene on the urn, which depicts an animal sacrifice.

Just as in stanza I, the speaking is leaning in and trying to figure out what is going on in the scene. In stanza I he asked "What," and now he asks, "Who?" There seem to be people coming to watch the sacrifice.

*Line 32-34*

To what green altar, O mysterious priest,  
Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,  
And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?

Now our speaker talks to the priest on the urn, asking him, "Hey, where are you headed?"

He wants to know to "what green altar" he is taking a cow ("heifer").

In classical times, an altar was a place where sacrifices were carried out, and this one is covered with leaves and vegetation that make it green. The poor cow must know what's coming, because it moans or "lows" at the sky.

Its sides ("flanks") are dressed in a string or "garland" of flowers. This cow is a holy object, destined for the Gods.

**Lines 35-37**

**Notes**

What little town by river or sea shore,  
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,  
Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?

We can now piece together the whole third scene. There's a priest, a cow, a green altar, and a crowd of people following behind in anticipation of the sacrifice.

The speaker infers that this crowd must have come from somewhere, from some "little town," but the town isn't depicted, so he has to imagine what it must look like.

He imagines things in the world of the urn just like we, the readers, imagine what is going on in the poem. Very curious.

This scene doesn't have anything besides people and cows in it, but he comes up with a few guesses as to what the town looks like. It is either a.) By a river, b.) By a sea-shore, or c.) On a mountain.

If it's on a mountain, he imagines a small fortress called a "citadel" must protect it. But there isn't a great need to be defended, so the citadel is "peaceful."

This truly is a perfect world. Everyone is outside, enjoying the weather and looking forward to the ritual. The town is "emptied" because it is a "pious" or holy morning.

**Lines 38-40**

And, little town, thy streets for evermore  
Will silent be; and not a soul to tell  
Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.

The speaker talks to the town to inform it that its streets will always be "silent" and "desolate" of people.

Although the speaker knows that everyone is headed to a sacrifice, he doesn't know what the sacrifice is for, and he can never find out because there is "not a soul, to tell" the reason for the holy day.

**Stanza V Summary**

**Lines 41-43**

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede  
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,  
With forest branches and the trodden weed;

Compared to the steamy stanza III, stanza IV was a mellow, low-key affair. But in the last stanza the speaker suddenly gets excited again.

It's like someone stuck a shot of adrenaline in his arm. He starts yelling about the beautiful appearance of the urn, as if noticing it for the first time.

He has raptures over its "Attic shape," which just means it has a distinctively Greek appearance, and its "fair attitude," which means a graceful posture. (A "brede" is a braid, like a braid of hair.)

The lovers are "braided" together in the chiseled marble, which is a wild image. It makes the carving sound complicated and ornate.

Indeed, the speaker calls the depiction "overwrought," or too complicated.

There's just too much detail and craftsmanship. This might remind us of the use of the word "cloy'd" in stanza III, another occasion where the speaker thought that the urn's artistry was just too rich.

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We already mentioned that the urn has decorative images of plants all over it, and now the speaker is annoyed with the “forest branches” and the “trodden weed” that seem to be choking the poem with vegetation. They get in the way and make the urn look crowded.

He’s starting to have some serious mixed feelings about this urn. He praises it and disuses it within two lines. He’s basically saying, “You have a nice body, but you’re trying way too hard to look fancy.”

**Lines 44-45**

Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought  
As doth eternity: Cold pastoral!

If you thought his feelings were mixed before, these lines will really throw you for a loop.

He starts out by pointing his finger at the urn: “You! That’s right. You, the quiet one.” So far, it’s been a fairly one-sided conversation (that tends to happen with inanimate objects), and now he’s trying to get the urn to be more involved.

He says that the urn is so mysterious and baffling that it’s impossible to think about.

Our speaker uses the word “tease,” which has at least two meanings. The first is the one we’re familiar with: mockery. The second is to separate or disentangle, like you might “tease” apart the nest of wires behind your computer.

We think this second meaning is actually the primary one here. The poet compares the experience of looking at the urn to thinking about eternity, an idea so lofty and hard to understand that trying to think about it is like not thinking at all.

The speaker has been setting up this comparison between the world of the urn and eternity for the entire poem. He views the urn as a world where things never change and can never be destroyed, which is pretty much the definition of eternity. Except, of course, if the urn breaks.

Finally, he calls the scenes depicted on the urn a “Cold Pastoral.” Pastoral imagery concerns nature and simple country life, so it’s an appropriate word in the context of images of peaceful towns, young lovers, and bright, green trees.

But “cold”? Are these lines supposed to be a put-down, or are they actually a form of praise. They sound more like a put-down – like the speaker changed his mind after all his talk about happiness and warm bodies. He might be accusing the urn of being distant and uncaring.

But maybe he likes how the world of the urn seems so foreign from human life that it’s hard to even think about.

You might compare the feeling to looking at remote stars and planets, which seem cold and indifferent but also provide a sense of beauty and comfort.

Overall, it seems he understands the urn even less at the end of the poem than at the beginning.

**Lines 46-48**

When old age shall this generation waste,  
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe  
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say’st,

“Old age” like the villain with a flamethrower in an action movie to “waste” an entire generation of people – the speaker’s generation.

The speaker imagines that after everyone in his generation is dead, the urn will still be around.

The problems or “woe” of the present generation will have been replaced by new problems. But the urn, like a good therapist and “a friend of man,” won’t be lacking in advice to give new generations. In fact, it has always given the same advice to everyone, throughout history, which is.

**Lines 49-50**

**Notes**

'Beauty is truth, truth beauty'—that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

Beauty and truth is the same thing. That makes no sense at all. If beauty and truth is the same thing, then why do we have two different words for them?

One of the sneakiest things about these lines is how they sound so darned confident, as if "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" were on a par with "Gravity makes things fall down."

We want to respond: "First of all, we didn't already know that beauty and truth were that same thing. Second, if you think we already knew that, why are you telling us? Third, why do you think this is all we 'need to know.' How does this information help us, at all?"

To our knowledge, the urn has yet to respond to our inquiry. But we can try to say a bit about what these lines could mean.

To say that beauty and truth are the same thing has usually been taken to mean that there is no truth outside of art. We're talking about big truths, like meaning-of-life truths.

We also think he's using "beauty" to refer to more than just pretty pictures and writings. He's referring to anything that gives us that sense of grandeur and a meaning larger than ourselves, including the art of the universe: nature.

Truth is not something that can be "thought." It's too remote and complicated, like the idea of eternity. It can only be felt.

The speaker thinks that we don't need truths that can be expressed in words. The experience of beauty is enough. Enough for what? Well, perhaps to lead a good, fulfilling, meaningful life. There are lots of things we'd like to know about the world, like why suffering exists. But we don't need to know such things. Beauty is the only absolutely necessary idea.

This last point is actually super-radical, and it's what makes Keats one of the most Romantic of the Romantics. If you take it to the extreme, you don't need any of the truths of religious or philosophical texts, history books, celebrity magazines, or wherever else people get their ideas. You don't need truths that are passed down through tradition.

Needless to say, British conservatives hated Keats, whom they considered a wild-eyed liberal, which he kind of was.

You may just want to throw up your hands and decide these lines are absurd. You'd be in good company. T.S. Eliot, a poet, was never shy about voicing his opinions.

But for many people, they express truth in exactly the way they suggest: not with some kind of intellectual argument, but through their rhythm and melody – their beauty.

## **28.2 Ode to a Nightingale**

### **28.2.1 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,

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That thou, light-winged 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-delved 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-stained 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 spectre-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 embalmed darkness, guess each sweet

Notes

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 easeful Death,  
Call'd him soft names in many a mused 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, in faery lands 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 fam'd 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?

## Notes

## 28.2.2 Summary

The speaker opens with a declaration of his own heartache. He feels numb, as though he had taken a drug only a moment ago. He is addressing a nightingale he hears singing somewhere in the forest and says that his “drowsy numbness” is not from envy of the nightingale’s happiness, but rather from sharing it too completely; he is “too happy” that the nightingale sings the music of summer from amid some unseen plot of green trees and shadows.

In the second stanza, the speaker longs for the oblivion of alcohol, expressing his wish for wine, “a draught of vintage,” that would taste like the country and like peasant dances, and let him “leave the world unseen” and disappear into the dim forest with the nightingale. In the third stanza, he explains his desire to fade away, saying he would like to forget the troubles the nightingale has never known: “the weariness, the fever, and the fret” of human life, with its consciousness that everything is mortal and nothing lasts. Youth “grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies,” and “beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes.”

In the fourth stanza, the speaker tells the nightingale to fly away, and he will follow, not through alcohol (“Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards”), but through poetry, which will give him “viewless wings.” He says he is already with the nightingale and describes the forest glade, where even the moonlight is hidden by the trees, except the light that breaks through when the breezes blow the branches. In the fifth stanza, the speaker says that he cannot see the flowers in the glade, but can guess them “in embalmed darkness”: white hawthorne, eglantine, violets, and the musk-rose, “the murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.” In the sixth stanza, the speaker listens in the dark to the nightingale, saying that he has often been “half in love” with the idea of dying and called Death soft names in many rhymes. Surrounded by the nightingale’s song, the speaker thinks that the idea of death seems richer than ever, and he longs to “cease upon the midnight with no pain” while the nightingale pours its soul ecstatically forth. If he were to die, the nightingale would continue to sing, he says, but he would “have ears in vain” and be no longer able to hear.

In the seventh stanza, the speaker tells the nightingale that it is immortal, that it was not “born for death.” He says that the voice he hears singing has always been heard, by ancient emperors and clowns, by homesick Ruth; he even says the song has often charmed open magic windows looking out over “the foam / Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.” In the eighth stanza, the word forlorn tolls like a bell to restore the speaker from his preoccupation with the nightingale and back into himself. As the nightingale flies farther away from him, he laments that his imagination has failed him and says that he can no longer recall whether the nightingale’s music was “a vision, or a waking dream.” Now that the music is gone, the speaker cannot recall whether he himself is awake or asleep.



Task

How in Stanza 7, does the birds song lead the speaker beyond his immediate surroundings?

## 28.2.3 Form

Like most of the other odes, “Ode to a Nightingale” is written in ten-line stanzas. However, unlike most of the other poems, it is metrically variable—though not so much as “Ode to Psyche.” The first seven and last two lines of each stanza are written in iambic pentameter; the eighth line of each stanza is written in trimeter, with only three accented syllables instead of five. “Nightingale” also differs from the other odes in that its rhyme scheme is the same in every stanza (every other ode varies the order of rhyme in the final three or four lines except “To Psyche,” which has the loosest structure of all the odes).



*Notes* Each stanza in "Nightingale" is rhymed ABABCDECDE, Keats's most basic scheme throughout the odes.

Notes

### 28.2.4 Analysis

The poem begins as the speaker starts to feel disoriented from listening to the song of the nightingale, as if he had just drunken something really, really strong. He feels bittersweet happiness at the thought of the nightingale's carefree life.



*Did u know?* The speaker wishes he had a special wine distilled directly from the earth. He wants to drink such a wine and fade into the forest with the nightingale. He wants to escape the worries and concerns of life, age, and time.

He uses poetry to join the nightingale's nighttime world, deep in the dark forest where hardly any moonlight can reach. He can't see any of the flowers or plants around him, but he can smell them. He thinks it wouldn't be so bad to die at night in the forest, with no one around except the nightingale singing.

But the nightingale can't die. The nightingale must be immortal, because so many different kinds of generations of people have heard its song throughout history, everyone from clowns and emperors to Biblical characters to people in fantasy stories.

The speaker's vision is interrupted when the nightingale flies away and leaves him alone. He feels abandoned and disappointed that his imagination is not strong enough to create its own reality. He is left confused and bewildered, not knowing the difference between reality and dreams.

### Stanza 1 Summary

#### Lines 1-2

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains  
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,

The speaker says that his heart hurts as if he has just drunken poison. "Hemlock" is the poison that the Greek philosopher Socrates took when he was put to death for corrupting the youth. The speaker feels woozy and numb, like when the dentist puts you on Novocain. Imagine him swaying back and forth, kind of drunk and out of it.

The "ache" in his heart almost sounds pleasurable, the way he describes it. Like when you hear a sad song you really love that just pierces your heart, and you're like, "This makes me so sad!" but if anyone tried to turn it off you'd throttle them.

#### Lines 3-4

Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains  
One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:

"Poison" is a bit exaggerated. He's not dying, after all. He tries another approach to explain how he feels. He feels as though he has drank some powerful drug or painkiller ("opiate") that causes him to "sink" into a kind of oblivion.

**Notes**

In Greek mythology, "Lethe" was a river in Hades (the Underworld) that made people forget all their memories if they drank from it. There's really no way to dance around it: the speaker is comparing his feeling to being totally strung out on drugs.

"Opium" is a powerful drug made from the poppy flower, and it was all the rage among certain adventurous types in the 19th century. The poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, for example, was an opium addict, as was the writer Thomas de Quincy, who wrote an essay titled, "Confessions of an Opium Eater." This was before people discovered just how toxic opium is for the body.

**Lines 5-6**

'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,  
But being too happy in thine happiness,

Now we know that the speaker must be addressing the nightingale of the title. He wants to clarify that the pain he feels is not because he is jealous of the bird's happiness. Instead, he is excessively happy for the bird's happiness. He's like that friend who bursts into tears when you share really good news and cries, "I'm just . . . so . . . happy . . . for you!" but you're not sure if they are really happy for you or just sad for themselves.

**Lines 7-10**

That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees,  
In some melodious plot  
Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,  
Singest of summer in full-throated ease.

And why is the nightingale so happy? Because it gets to sit in the trees all day and sing about summertime. It's to the trees what Jimmy Buffet is to the beach.

The nightingale is not a large bird, and it can fly, which seems like enough grounds to call it "light-winged" (which is pronounced with three syllables, by the way). And in Greek mythology, a "dryad" is a nymph (female spirit) that lives in the trees.

The bird makes whatever space or "plot" it inhabits "melodious," and this particular plot seems to have beech trees, giving it a "beechen green" color.

The nightingale doesn't hold back. It sings with a "full throat," like an opera singer in a solo. We imagine that this poem takes place in the peak of summer.

**Stanza 2 Summary**

**Lines 11-12**

O, for a draught of vintage! that hath been  
Cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth,

The speaker longs for a drink of wine or some other spirit that has been kept cool deep in the earth. "Vintage" wine is made from grapes from the same harvest, and people often refer to a particular year at a winery as a "vintage."

We have no explanation at this point for his sudden desire to get his drink on. He wants wine to just start bubbling up out of the ground, as if you could stick a tap right into the soil and let the good times flow.

Good wine needs to be kept cool, which is why people often store it in their cellars. According to Keats, the earth is like a giant wine cellar.

**Lines 13-14**

**Notes**

Tasting of Flora and the country green,  
Dance, and Provencal song, and sunburnt mirth!

If you drink wine out of the earth, it's no surprise that it might taste like flowers ("Flora") and plants ("country green"). People sometimes jokingly say they want to "squeeze every last drop" out of the day, but the speaker seems to mean it literally.

Not only does the earth's wine taste like flowers, but it also tastes like dancing, song, and happiness ("sunburnt mirth"). Specifically, he is thinking of "Provencal," a region in the south of France known for its wine, sun, and a kind of poetic song known as "Troubadour poetry." Many Troubadours wrote poems addressed to an unattainable lover.

**Lines 15-16**

O for a beaker full of the warm South,  
Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,

The speaker wants to stick the south of France or just the South in general, into a bottle ("beaker") and guzzle the whole thing down! He wants to distill the earth down to its powerful, intoxicating essence.

It's like when you go to the beach and wish you could just bottle the breezy ocean air to take back with you to school or the office. "Hippocrene" is a reference that there is no reason you should know – Keats is showing off his knowledge of Greek mythology again.

Hippocrene is the "fountain of the Muses," a group of eight women (again, in Greek mythology) who inspire struggling poets. The fountain bubbles up out of the earth where Pegasus, the famous flying horse, is supposed to have dug his hoof into the ground.

He wants to drink something that will make him a great poet...and that'll get him drunk. The liquid from the Hippocrene is "blushful" because it is reddish, the color of both wine and a blush.

**Lines 17-18**

With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,  
And purple-stained mouth;

In delicious detail, the speaker describes the appearance of the wine. It has little bubbles at that burst, or "wink," at the brim of the beaker, like little eyes.

It also stains your mouth purple when you drink it, like any strong red wine will do.

**Lines 19-20**

That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,  
And with thee fade away into the forest dim:

What does all this talk about wine, inspiration, and drunkenness have to do with the nightingale? What happened to that old bird?

The speaker sums up his intentions in these final two lines of the stanza. He wants to get drunk on this magical wine so that he can leave the "world" without anyone noticing and just "fade" into the dark forest with the nightingale.

But isn't the forest part of the "world"? Apparently not. By "world" he might mean the world of human society, work, responsibility, and all that. The nightingale lives apart from this world.

Putting aside all this business about Provencal and Hippocrene, the speaker wants to drink for the same reason many people drink: to forget his problems for a while and to have a more carefree state of mind.

Notes

**Stanza 3 Summary**

*Lines 21-22*

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget  
What thou among the leaves hast never known,

A harp starts playing, and the dream sequence begins. The speaker dreams of “fading” out of the world, of just disappearing in a very quiet way. He wants to forget about those things that the nightingale has never had to worry about. Again, we don’t know much about which things he means specifically, but we assume they must have to do with the stresses and cares of living in human society. The bird is free of such cares.

*Lines 23-24*

The weariness, the fever, and the fret  
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;

Why is he talking about these depressing things? It seems just he just can’t leave the world behind. The world is full of tired and “weary” people, sickness (“fever”), and massive stress (“fret”). He reduces all of society down to one depressingly exaggerated image: people sitting around and listen to each other “groan” and complain.

That’s a pretty bleak view of the world, but it just goes to show how much of an effect the nightingale has had on him. Compared to the nightingale’s carefree song, our voices sound like groans.

*Lines 25-26*

Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,  
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;

He decides to take the whole depressing images thing to a new level, describing the world as a place where the uncontrollable movements of illness shake the “last gray hairs” on a dying man’s head. Palsy is a disease the causes sudden involuntary movements, and so this gray-hair person is no long capable of controlling his own body.

He’s also almost bald. In this section, Keats confronts one of his favorite enemies: time. After you read this poem, check out the “Ode on a Grecian Urn” in which he tries magically to stop time.

Time is the speaker’s enemy because it causes young and beautiful people to turn old, “pale,” thin as a ghost, and, eventually, dead as a doornail. Simply, time = death, death = bad, so time = bad.

*Lines 27-28*

Where but to think is to be full of sorrow  
And leaden-eyed despairs,

The world is a place where any kind of thinking leads to depressing thoughts and worries. There are no thoughts that can ultimately bring joy or peace: thinking itself is the problem.

These sad and “despairing” thoughts make your eyelid like lead weights. You have trouble just staying awake and conscious during the day. The world totally wears people down and tires them out.

*Lines 29-30*

Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,  
Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow.

The speaker continues to explain why the world of human time is such a bad place. Neither Beauty nor Love can survive there for long. Beauty loses her glowing (“lustrous”) eyes, probably when they become “leaden” from depressed thoughts.

And new Love cannot fawn (“pine”) over Beauty’s eyes once they have lost their luster. Love is fickle like that, and, as anyone who has ever been through junior high school knows, it often doesn’t last “beyond to-morrow.”

#### Stanza 4 Summary

##### Lines 31-32

Away! away! for I will fly to thee,  
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,

All this thinking about how depressing the world is makes the speaker think, “Get me outta here!” He needs to hatch an escape plan.

He wants fly away to join the nightingale in its refuge from the world. But he knows that the booze isn’t going to take him. He can’t rely on Bacchus, the Greek god of wine, or any of Bacchus’s buddies (“pards”), which is what he wanted earlier in the poem.

##### Lines 33-34

But on the viewless wings of Poesy,  
Though the dull brain perplexes and retards:

Instead of wine, he’s going to fly on the wings of his own poetry. Poetry’s wings are invisible, or “viewless.”

He’s hopeful that poetry will take him to the nightingale’s world even though his brain is not so helpful in making the trip. His brain confuses him and slows him down.

##### Lines 35-36

Already with thee! tender is the night,  
And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,

And, the, all of a sudden, he’s with the nightingale. How did that happen? Count us slightly suspicious of how he can be “already with” the bird, even though he just complained about how his brain was such a big roadblock.

One possibility is that he joins the nightingale in his dreams, because the imagery in this section is associated with darkness and night.

He is in the kingdom of the night, which is soft and “tender,” and the moon is visible in the sky. The imagery is more fanciful and imaginative here.

The phrase “tender is the night” was made famous by the American writer F. Scott Fitzgerald, who used it as the title of one of his novels.

##### Lines 37-40

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.

**Notes**

The moon is surrounded by her attendants (“fays”), the stars. Despite all these sources of light, there is no light in the nightingale’s world beyond what filters down through the trees.

What he is really describing in this complicated-sounding line is the fact that the nightingale lives in the forest, where trees block the light. “Verdurous glooms,” just means the darkness that is caused by plants getting in the way of the moon. Still, the nightingale’s home sounds like a magical place, something out of a fairy tale.

**Stanza 5 Summary**

*Lines 41-42*

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,  
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,

The speaker remains in the nightingale’s nighttime world. Without light, the speaker can’t see the flowers on the forest floor or the plants that produce that pleasant smell (“soft incense”) in the trees.

*Lines 43-46*

But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet  
Wherewith the seasonable month endows  
The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;  
White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;

The speaker is still groping around in the dark, but he’s having fun. Because he can’t see, he has to guess what “sweet” flowers and plants he smells, which depends on what month it is. It’s a delicious guessing game.

The darkness is “embalmed,” where “balm” is a sweet-smelling substance like a perfume. He’s guessing all kinds of different plants: “Grass!” “Fruit tree!” “Wait, wait, I know this one: white hawthorn! No, it’s eglantine!” Or maybe he smells all of them at once, like a bouquet.

*Lines 47-50*

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.

The speaker names more plants that he smells in the darkness. He also begins listing things that he can hear. This section all relates to the experience of being alone in a dark – but not a frightening – forest.

He sees violets, a summer flower, and the musk rose, a flower that blooms in May. The dew of the musk rose is intoxicating, like the wine he spoke of earlier.

He hears the sound of flies on a summer evening. In short, he seems to experience both spring and summer at the same time, which tells us that we have left the world of strict reality. As Dorothy might say, we’re not in Kansas anymore.

**Stanza 6 Summary**

*Lines 51-52*

Darkling I listen; and, for many a time  
I have been half in love with easeful Death,

The stanzas in this poem actually connect seamlessly. At the end of stanza 5, the speaker moved from smells to sounds. Now he says that he is listening in the darkness.

The experience of being alone in the dark seems related to the experience of death, and he thinks maybe death wouldn't be so bad. "This is easy," he thinks. "I could get used to this."

Death would be another way to free himself of all his worldly cares. Maybe he's confusing death for sitting on a beach in Barbados....

**Lines 53-54**

Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,  
To take into the air my quiet breath;

This is turning into a love story between the speaker and death. The speaker whispers sweet nothings to death. And by whisper we mean, "writes rhyming poetry about."

Keats was obsessed with the idea of death, and he often wrote about it. Line 54 is mysterious: we think it means either that he wants death to take the air from his lungs, or that the air takes his breath along with his verses.

**Lines 55-56**

Now more than ever seems it rich to die,  
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,

He's really quite taken with this death idea. While in the world of the nightingale, he thinks it would be "rich to die." Many people are afraid that death will be empty, but richness is associated with an abundance of good things, which is almost the opposite of emptiness.

He'd like to go out quietly, in the middle of the night. He'd just stop existing: "cease." This part of the poem is kind of creepy, because Keats did die very young.

**Lines 57-58**

While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad  
In such an ecstasy!

He wants to die at midnight, while listening to the nightingale singing. We were wondering what happened to the nightingale. He seems to forget about the nightingale at the beginning of the stanzas and then return to it at the end, as if he suddenly remembered: "Oh, right: this is supposed to be a poem about a bird!"

The nightingale is kind of like a poet, sending its voice into the air just as Keats sends his rhyme into the air. The bird's music expresses its "soul." Birds have souls? This one does. The bird is completely lost in the moment of pure joy and "ecstasy."

**Lines 59-60**

Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—  
To thy high requiem become a sod.

He imagines what would happen after the moment of his death. Basically, the bird would keep singing as if nothing had happened. The speaker would still have "ears," of course: or at least. His corpse would. But the ears would be useless ("vain") because there is no brain to process the sounds. The bird would be then singing a "high requiem," a kind of church service with music sung for a dead person. Lots of classical musicians have composed amazing requiems, like Mozart, but we'd bet the nightingale probably doesn't know it is singing one.

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And neither would the speaker, of course. By that point, he'd just be an inanimate object, like a piece of grassy soil or "sod."

**Stanza 7 Summary**

*Lines 61-62*

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!  
No hungry generations tread thee down;

He thinks that the nightingale must be immortal: it can't die. Being immortal, the nightingale is not followed by future generations, which are metaphorically "hungry" in that they take the place of their parents. This is a very pessimistic view of the cycle of life. Basically, the younger folks are hunting down their own parents to run them off the planet.

*Lines 63-64*

The voice I hear this passing night was heard  
In ancient days by emperor and clown:

He doesn't necessarily mean that each nightingale is immortal. He means that the nightingale's voice is immortal, because all nightingales produce the same beautiful, haunting sound. His talk of generations leads him to think of human history.

Emperors and clowns in the old days listened to the same voice of the nightingale that he hears now. The reference to emperors makes us think of Ancient Rome. Keats was an Italian buff.

*Lines 65-67*

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 speaker moves slightly further back through history, from Imperial Rome to the Old Testament of the Bible (also known as the Hebrew Bible). The Book of Ruth is one of the lesser-known books in the Hebrew Bible. The story goes that Ruth married a guy and moved to a new country. Then her husband died, and Ruth's mother-in-law told her to return home and get married again. But Ruth was like, "I'm totally loyal to you and can't leave you." She supports her mother-in-law by working in the fields of this (to her) completely strange and random place. Eventually she finds a new husband.

Keats imagines that Ruth heard the nightingale's song while she was working in the fields in this foreign or "alien" place, and it caused her to start weeping. We wish we had more info on why exactly he chose this story: it's a curious reference!

*Lines 68-70*

The same that oft-times hath  
Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam  
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

He notes another time that the nightingale's song might have been heard. But now he has left regular human history all together in favor of fantasy. A "casement" is either a normal case or a window that opens on a hinge. The speaker thinks the nightingale's song has "charmed" a casement on a ship, and the casement opens. Somehow "magic" is involved, but we think Keats is just using words that conjure up the images of fantasy. The nightingale flies out the window and over the open ocean. There is an air of danger: this is no regular ocean. It is the ocean surrounding a fantasy world

or “faery land.” Keats might be thinking of the stories of knights, fairies, and monsters from Edmund Spenser’s famous Renaissance poem, *The Faerie Queene*. After it flies out the window, the nightingale is alone and abandoned—“forlorn”—in this strange land.

### Stanza 8 Summary

#### *Lines 71-72*

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell  
To toil me back from thee to my sole self!

Why did he have to use the word “forlorn?” It reminds the speaker of how he has also been abandoned – by the nightingale itself. All of a sudden, he gets sucked back into the normal world after several pleasant stanzas of exploring the nightingale’s realm. For him, the word “forlorn” is like, when you are having a really great dream and then all of a sudden you hear your alarm clock and remember that you have to wake up and go to class. It’s a big disappointment. The speaker is pulled back into his own mind, his “sole self.”

#### *Lines 73-74*

Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well  
As she is fam’d to do, deceiving elf.

He admits that his attempts to use his imagination (“fancy”) to “cheat” his way into the nightingale’s world have not been as effective as he would have liked. He bids good-bye to the bird and then lashes out at his imagination for being a “deceiving elf,” like the character Puck from Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Although “fancy” is famed for being able to create new worlds, the speaker has not been successful at permanently escaping the everyday world.

#### *Lines 75-78*

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:

Now it becomes clear that the nightingale is flying away. The speaker bids goodbye twice more to the nightingale using the French word, “adieu,” which means, “good-bye for a long time.” The bird’s sad or “plaintive” song grows harder to hear, as the bird flies from the nearby meadows, across a stream, up a hill, and into the next valley. Now he can’t hear it at all.

#### *Lines 79-80*

Was it a vision, or a waking dream?  
Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?

Now that the bird is left, the speaker’s not sure if he ever entered its world at all. He thinks that maybe the experience was just a “waking dream” and not really true. But has the speaker returned to the “real” world? Maybe the nightingale’s world was reality, and the “real” world is just a dream. Everything is topsy-turvy, and he doesn’t know what is true from what is fancy. He wonders if he is awake or sleeping.

### 28.2.5 Themes

With “*Ode to a Nightingale*,” Keats’s speaker begins his fullest and deepest exploration of the themes of creative expression and the mortality of human life. In this ode, the transience of life and the

## Notes

tragedy of old age (“where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs, / Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies”) is set against the eternal renewal of the nightingale’s fluid music (“Thou wast not born for death, immortal bird!”). The speaker reprises the “drowsy numbness” he experienced in “Ode on Indolence,” but where in “Indolence” that numbness was a sign of disconnection from experience, in “Nightingale” it is a sign of too full a connection: “being too happy in thine happiness,” as the speaker tells the nightingale. Hearing the song of the nightingale, the speaker longs to flee the human world and join the bird. His first thought is to reach the bird’s state through alcohol—in the second stanza, he longs for a “draught of vintage” to transport him out of himself. But after his meditation in the third stanza on the transience of life, he rejects the idea of being “charioted by Bacchus and his pards” (Bacchus was the Roman god of wine and was supposed to have been carried by a chariot pulled by leopards) and chooses instead to embrace, for the first time since he refused to follow the figures in “Indolence,” “the viewless wings of Poesy.”

## Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

6. The nightingale experiences a sort of death and even the God ..... experiences death, but his death reveals his own divine state.
 

(a) Artemis	(b) Apollo
(c) Greek mythology	(d) Hera
7. Of Keats’s major odes of 1819, ..... was probably written first and “To Autumn” written last.
 

(a) Ode to Psyche	(b) John Keats
(c) Cupid and Psyche	(d) Ode on a Grecian Urn
8. There is also an emphasis on words beginning with ....., especially those that begin with “b”, “p” or “v”.
 

(a) Palatal consonant	(b) Consonant
(c) Alveolar consonant	(d) Velar consonant
9. Furthermore, Keats began to reduce the amount of ..... based words and syntax that he relied on in his poetry, which in turn shortened the length of the words that dominate the poem.
 

(a) Vulgar Latin	(b) Roman Empire
(c) Old Latin	(d) Latin
10. According to Keats’s friend, ....., a nightingale had built its nest near his home in the spring of 1819.
 

(a) John Keats	(b) Charles Armitage Brown
(c) London	(d) Charles Brown

The rapture of poetic inspiration matches the endless creative rapture of the nightingale’s music and lets the speaker, in stanzas five through seven, imagine himself with the bird in the darkened forest. The ecstatic music even encourages the speaker to embrace the idea of dying, of painlessly succumbing to death while enraptured by the nightingale’s music and never experiencing any further pain or disappointment. But when his meditation causes him to utter the word “forlorn,” he comes back to himself, recognizing his fancy for what it is—an imagined escape from the inescapable (“Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well / As she is fam’d to do, deceiving elf”). As the nightingale flies away, the intensity of the speaker’s experience has left him shaken, unable to remember whether he is awake or asleep.

In “Indolence,” the speaker rejected all artistic effort. In “Psyche,” he was willing to embrace the creative imagination, but only for its own internal pleasures. But in the nightingale’s song, he finds a form of outward expression that translates the work of the imagination into the outside world,

and this is the discovery that compels him to embrace Poesy's "viewless wings" at last. The "art" of the nightingale is endlessly changeable and renewable; it is music without record, existing only in a perpetual present. As befits his celebration of music, the speaker's language, sensually rich though it is, serves to suppress the sense of sight in favor of the other senses. He can imagine the light of the moon, "But here there is no light"; he knows he is surrounded by flowers, but he "cannot see what flowers" are at his feet. This suppression will find its match in "Ode on a Grecian Urn," which is in many ways a companion poem to "Ode to a Nightingale." In the later poem, the speaker will finally confront a created art-object not subject to any of the limitations of time; in "Nightingale," he has achieved creative expression and has placed his faith in it, but that expression—the nightingale's song—is spontaneous and without physical manifestation.

## 28.3 Ode to Autumn

### 28.3.1 Text

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,  
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;  
Conspiring with him how to load and bless  
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run;  
To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,  
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;  
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells  
With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,  
And still more, later flowers for the bees,  
Until they think warm days will never cease,  
For Summer has o'er-brimm'd their clammy cells.

Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?  
Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find  
Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,  
Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind;  
Or on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep,  
Drows'd with the fume of poppies, while thy hook  
Spares the next swath and all its twined flowers:  
And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep  
Steady thy laden head across a brook;  
Or by a cyder-press, with patient look,  
Thou watchest the last oozings hours by hours.

Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?  
Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,—  
While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day,  
And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;

Notes

Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn  
Among the river shallows, borne aloft  
Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;  
And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;  
Hedge-crickets sing; and now with treble soft  
The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;  
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies

### 28.3.2 Summary

Keats's speaker opens his first stanza by addressing Autumn, describing its abundance and its intimacy with the sun, with whom Autumn ripens fruits and causes the late flowers to bloom. In the second stanza, the speaker describes the figure of Autumn as a female goddess, often seen sitting on the granary floor, her hair "soft-lifted" by the wind, and often seen sleeping in the fields or watching a cider-press squeezing the juice from apples. In the third stanza, the speaker tells Autumn not to wonder where the songs of spring have gone, but instead to listen to her own music. At twilight, the "small gnats" hum among the "the river shallows," or willow trees, lifted and dropped by the wind, and "full-grown lambs" bleat from the hills, crickets sing, robins whistle from the garden, and swallows, gathering for their coming migration, sing from the skies.

### 28.3.3 Form

Like the "Ode on Melancholy," "To Autumn" is written in a three-stanza structure with a variable rhyme scheme. Each stanza is eleven lines long (as opposed to ten in "Melancholy", and each is metered in a relatively precise iambic pentameter. In terms of both thematic organization and rhyme scheme, each stanza is divided roughly into two parts. In each stanza, the first part is made up of the first four lines of the stanza, and the second part is made up of the last seven lines. The first part of each stanza follows an ABAB rhyme scheme, the first line rhyming with the third, and the second line rhyming with the fourth. The second part of each stanza is longer and varies in rhyme scheme: The first stanza is arranged CDEDCCE, and the second and third stanzas are arranged CDECDDE. (Thematically, the first part of each stanza serves to define the subject of the stanza, and the second part offers room for musing, development, and speculation on that subject; however, this thematic division is only very general.)

### 28.3.4 Analysis

In 'To Autumn', a superficial reading would suggest that John Keats writes about a typical day of this season, describing all kind of colourful and detailed images. But before commenting on the meaning of the poem, I will briefly talk about its structure, its type and its rhyme.

The poem is an ode that contains three stanzas, and each of these has eleven lines. With respect to its rhyme, 'To Autumn' does not follow a perfect pattern. While the first stanza has an ABABCDEDCCCE pattern, the second and the third ones have an ABABCDECDDE pattern. However, it is important to say that a poetic license appears in the third stanza. The word 'wind' (line 15) is pronounced [waɪnd] to rhyme with 'find'.

With regard to the meaning of the poem, as I said above, the author makes an intense description of autumn at least at first sight. The first stanza begins showing this season as misty and fruitful, which, with the help of a 'maturing sun', ripens the fruit of the vines. Next, we can see clearly a hyperbole. Keats writes that a tree has so many apples that it bends (line 5), while the gourds swell and the hazel shells plumps. Finally, Keats suggests that the bees have a large amount of flowers. And these flowers did not bud in summer but now, in autumn. As a consequence, the bees are

incessantly working and their honeycombs are overflowing since summer.

Notes

In the second stanza, there is an evident personification. The poet starts asking a rhetoric question (line 12) to autumn which now is not only a woman but a gleaner. However, this woman is apparently resting in a granary or in the landscape:

‘Or on a half-reaped furrow sound asleep,  
Drowsed with the fume of poppies...’

As she is not working with her hook, some flowers, that were going to be cut, remain untouchable (lines 17 and 18). Also we can see an image of her hair gently moving. The stanza ends with autumn patiently watching the ‘last ooziings’ of cider.

The third stanza continues again with rhetoric questions. In the first one Keats asks the woman where the sounds of the spring are. And the second one is just a repetition of the same question. However, the poet tells autumn that she has her own sounds, although some of them are sad:

‘Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn’

On the contrary, the ‘full-grown lambs’ bleat loudly, the crickets sing, a red-breast whistles, and swallows warble in the sky. Keats also describes a day that is dying, ending, and, as a consequence, is getting rose (lines 25 and 26). The last lines of this stanza consist of a combination of the autumn sounds, of the animal sounds (lines from 30 to 33) as I said before few lines above.

## Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

11. He devoted his free time to studying work such as Robert Burton’s ..... to further his own ideas.
 

(a) Aristotle	(b) The Anatomy of Melancholy
(c) Medicine	(d) Major depressive disorder
12. His..... lacks hiatus and there is only a single instance medical inversion of an accent within the poem.
 

(a) Syntax	(b) Grammar
(c) Morphology	(d) Generative grammar
13. To Autumn is a poem written by English Romantic poet ..... .
 

(a) George Gordon Byron	(b) Romantic poetry
(c) Percy Bysshe Shelley	(d) John Keats
14. The ..... follows a pattern of starting with a Shakespearian ABAB pattern which is followed by CDEDCCE rhyme scheme.
 

(a) English poetry	(b) French poetry
(c) Poetry	(d) Rhyme
15. The poem also defends art’s role in helping society in a manner similar to Keats’s ..... and ode to Psyche.
 

(a) Ode on a Grecian Urn	(b) Ode to Nightingale
(c) Ode on Indolence	(d) John Keats

John Keats was simply describing the main characteristics of autumn, and the human and animal activities related to it, a deeper reading could suggest that Keats talks about the process of life. Autumn symbolises maturity in human and animal lives. Some instances of this are the ‘full-grown lambs’, the sorrow of the gnats, the wind that lives and dies, and the day that is dying and getting dark. As all we know, the next season is winter, a part of the year that represents aging and death,

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in other words, the end of life. However, in my opinion, death does not have a negative connotation because Keats enjoys and accepts 'autumn' or maturity as part of life, though winter is coming.



Task

All of the seasons have found poets to sing their praises, or at least their significance. But what is special to Keat's speaker about Autumn?

### 28.3.5 Themes

In both its form and descriptive surface, "To Autumn" is one of the simplest of Keats's odes. There is nothing confusing or complex in Keats's paean to the season of autumn, with its fruitfulness, its flowers, and the song of its swallows gathering for migration. The extraordinary achievement of this poem lies in its ability to suggest, explore, and develop a rich abundance of themes without ever ruffling its calm, gentle, and lovely description of autumn. Where "Ode on Melancholy" presents itself as a strenuous heroic quest, "To Autumn" is concerned with the much quieter activity of daily observation and appreciation. In this quietude, the gathered themes of the preceding odes find their fullest and most beautiful expression.

"To Autumn" takes up where the other odes leave off. Like the others, it shows Keats's speaker paying homage to a particular goddess—in this case, the deified season of Autumn. The selection of this season implicitly takes up the other odes' themes of temporality, mortality, and change: Autumn in Keats's ode is a time of warmth and plenty, but it is perched on the brink of winter's desolation, as the bees enjoy "later flowers," the harvest is gathered from the fields, the lambs of spring are now "full grown," and, in the final line of the poem, the swallows gather for their winter migration. The understated sense of inevitable loss in that final line makes it one of the most moving moments in all of poetry; it can be read as a simple, uncomplaining summation of the entire human condition.

Despite the coming chill of winter, the late warmth of autumn provides Keats's speaker with ample beauty to celebrate: the cottage and its surroundings in the first stanza, the agrarian haunts of the goddess in the second, and the locales of natural creatures in the third. Keats's speaker is able to experience these beauties in a sincere and meaningful way because of the lessons he has learned in the previous odes: He is no longer indolent, no longer committed to the isolated imagination (as in "Psyche"), no longer attempting to escape the pain of the world through ecstatic rapture (as in "Nightingale"), no longer frustrated by the attempt to eternalize mortal beauty or subject eternal beauty to time (as in "Urn"), and no longer able to frame the connection of pleasure and the sorrow of loss only as an imaginary heroic quest (as in "Melancholy").

In "To Autumn," the speaker's experience of beauty refers back to earlier odes (the swallows recall the nightingale; the fruit recalls joy's grape; the goddess drowsing among the poppies recalls Psyche and Cupid lying in the grass), but it also recalls a wealth of earlier poems. Most importantly, the image of Autumn winnowing and harvesting (in a sequence of odes often explicitly about creativity) recalls an earlier Keats poem in which the activity of harvesting is an explicit metaphor for artistic creation. In his sonnet "When I have fears that I may cease to be," Keats makes this connection directly:

When I have fears that I may cease to be  
 Before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain,  
 Before high-piled books, in charactry,  
 Hold like rich garners the full ripen'd grain...

In this poem, the act of creation is pictured as a kind of self-harvesting; the pen harvests the fields of the brain, and books are filled with the resulting “grain.” In “To Autumn,” the metaphor is developed further; the sense of coming loss that permeates the poem confronts the sorrow underlying the season’s creativity. When Autumn’s harvest is over, the fields will be bare, the swaths with their “twined flowers” cut down, the cider-press dry, the skies empty. But the connection of this harvesting to the seasonal cycle softens the edge of the tragedy. In time, spring will come again, the fields will grow again, and the birdsong will return. As the speaker knew in “Melancholy,” abundance and loss, joy and sorrow, song and silence are as intimately connected as the twined flowers in the fields. What makes “To Autumn” beautiful is that it brings an engagement with that connection out of the realm of mythology and fantasy and into the everyday world. The development the speaker so strongly resisted in “Indolence” is at last complete: He has learned that an acceptance of mortality is not destructive to an appreciation of beauty and has gleaned wisdom by accepting the passage of time.

## 28.4 Summary

- “Ode on a Grecian Urn” follows the same ode-stanza structure as the “Ode on Melancholy,” though it varies more the rhyme scheme of the last three lines of each stanza.
- A man is whispering sweet nothings to a Grecian urn, an ancient Greek pot that is covered in illustrations.
- A priest is leading a cow to be sacrificed. People have come from a nearby town to watch.
- Like the “Ode on Melancholy,” “To Autumn” is written in a three-stanza structure with a variable rhyme scheme.

## 28.5 Keywords

*Ecstasy* : Overwhelming or rapture.

*Urn* : Vase with a foot a rounded body, used esp. for the ashes of the dead.

*Autumn* : Season between summer and winter.

*Piper* : Person who plays a pipe.

*Baffle* : Frustrate, hinder.

## 28.6 Review Questions

1. What are emotions and desires does Keats speaker describe in connection with the nightingale?
2. Keats respectfully opposes Wordsworth’s poetry of the egotistical subline. How does the present poem offer an alternative focus for poetry?
3. What paradox develops beginning with the second stanza and developing through the rest of the poem “Ode on a Grecian Urn”?
4. How does the stanzaic patterning of the poem “To Autumn” along with other formal features, reinforce the seasonal mood that Keats explores?

## Answers: Self Assessment

- |         |         |         |         |         |
|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| 1. (b)  | 2. (c)  | 3. (d)  | 4. (b)  | 5. (b)  |
| 6. (b)  | 7. (a)  | 8. (b)  | 9. (d)  | 10. (b) |
| 11. (b) | 12. (a) | 13. (d) | 14. (d) | 15. (c) |

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**28.7 Further Readings**



*Books*

- |                                  |                         |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------|
| John Keats: a literary biography | — Albert Helmer Hancock |
| William Wordsworth               | — William Wordsworth    |
| Complete poetical works          | — William Wordsworth    |
| Robert Browning                  | — G.K.Chesterton.       |



*Online links*

- <http://englishhistory.net/keats/poetry.html>  
<http://www.online-literature.com/keats/>

## Unit 29: Robert Browning: My Last Duchess and the Last Ride Together

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### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Explain briefly the text, summary and commentary of the poem “My Last Duchess”
- Explain briefly the text, summary and philosophy of the poem “The Last Ride Together”
- Discuss the detailed analysis of both poems.

### Introduction

First published in the collection *Dramatic Lyrics* in 1842, “My Last Duchess” is an excellent example of Browning’s use of dramatic monologue. Browning’s psychological portrait of a powerful Renaissance aristocrat is presented to the reader as if he or she were simply “eavesdropping” on a slice of casual conversation. As the poem unfolds, the reader learns the speaker of the poem, Duke Ferrara, is talking to a representative of his fiancée’s family. Standing in front of a portrait of the

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Duke's last wife, now dead, the Duke talks about the woman's failings and imperfections. The irony of the poem surfaces as the reader discovers that the young woman's "faults" were qualities like compassion, modesty, humility, delight in simple pleasures, and courtesy to those who served her.

Using abundant detail, Browning leads the reader to conclude that the Duke found fault with his former wife because she did not reserve her attentions for him, his rank, and his power. More importantly, the Duke's long list of complaints presents a thinly veiled threat about the behavior he will and will not tolerate in his new wife. The lines "I gave commands; / smiles stopped together" suggest that the Duke somehow, directly or indirectly, brought about the death of the last Duchess. In this dramatic monologue, Browning has not only depicted the inner workings of his speaker, but has in fact allowed the speaker to reveal his own failings and imperfections to the reader.

Robert Browning is difficult to a certain extent, demanding a degree of intellectual exertion on the part of the reader. His poetry is also characterized by a certain deliberate roughness reminiscent of the metaphysical poets. His poems are greatly concerned with human character and reflect an attraction towards the bizarre, the unusual and the eccentric. His poems are also dramatic and are concerned with Renaissance themes. The most important qualities pervading Browning's works are his robust optimism and spiritual courage. The narrator told his lover the fact of the matter that it is so and now at length he knows his fate, nothing to all his love avails and his life is meant to accept failure. This was written in his stars and all must need be that his whole heart rises up to bless her name in pride and thankfulness. He asked her to take back the hope she gave for he claimed only a memory of the same and besides this if she would not blame her leave for one more last ride with him. His mistress bent that brow of hers and those dark eyes where pride demurs; lingers; when pity would be softening through, fixed him with a breathing-while or two with life or death in the balance.

## **29.1 My Last Duchess**

### **29.1.1 Text**

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,  
Looking as if she were alive. I call  
That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf's hands  
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.  
Will 't please you sit and look at her? I said  
"Frà Pandolf" by design, for never read  
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,  
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,  
But to myself they turned (since none puts by  
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)  
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,  
How such a glance came there; so, not the first  
Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 'twas not  
Her husband's presence only, called that spot  
Of joy into the Duchess' cheek: perhaps  
Frà Pandolf chanced to say, "Her mantle laps  
Over my Lady's wrist too much," or "Paint

Must never hope to reproduce the faint  
Half-flush that dies along her throat"; such stuff  
Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough  
For calling up that spot of joy. She had  
A heart... how shall I say?... too soon made glad,  
Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er  
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.  
Sir, 'twas all one! My favour at her breast,  
The dropping of the daylight in the West,  
The bough of cherries some officious fool  
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule  
She rode with round the terrace—all and each  
Would draw from her alike the approving speech,  
Or blush, at least. She thanked men,—good; but thanked  
Somehow... I know not how... as if she ranked  
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name  
With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame  
This sort of trifling? Even had you skill  
In speech—(which I have not)—to make your will  
Quite clear to such an one, and say, "Just this  
Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,  
Or there exceed the mark"—and if she let  
Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set  
Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse,  
—E'en then would be some stooping; and I chuse  
Never to stoop. Oh, sir, she smiled, no doubt,  
Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without  
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;  
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands  
As if alive. Will 't please you rise? We'll meet  
The company below, then. I repeat,  
The Count your Master's known munificence  
Is ample warrant that no just pretence  
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;  
Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed  
At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go  
Together down, Sir! Notice Neptune, though,  
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,  
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me.

## Notes

## 29.1.2 Summary

This poem is loosely based on historical events involving Alfonso, the Duke of Ferrara, who lived in the 16th century. The Duke is the speaker of the poem, and tells us he is entertaining an emissary who has come to negotiate the Duke's marriage (he has recently been widowed) to the daughter of another powerful family. As he shows the visitor through his palace, he stops before a portrait of the late Duchess, apparently a young and lovely girl. The Duke begins reminiscing about the portrait sessions, then about the Duchess herself. His musings give way to a diatribe on her disgraceful behavior: he claims she flirted with everyone and did not appreciate his "gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name." As his monologue continues, the reader realizes with ever-more chilling certainty that the Duke in fact caused the Duchess's early demise: when her behavior escalated, "[he] gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together." Having made this disclosure, the Duke returns to the business at hand: arranging for another marriage, with another young girl. As the Duke and the emissary walk leave the painting behind, the Duke points out other notable artworks in his collection.

## 29.1.3 Form

"My Last Duchess" comprises rhyming pentameter lines. The lines do not employ end-stops; rather, they use enjambment—that is, sentences and other grammatical units do not necessarily conclude at the end of lines. Consequently, the rhymes do not create a sense of closure when they come, but rather remain a subtle driving force behind the Duke's compulsive revelations. The Duke is quite a performer: he mimics others' voices, creates hypothetical situations, and uses the force of his personality to make horrifying information seem merely colorful.



*Did u know?*

Indeed, the poem provides a classic example of a dramatic monologue: the speaker is clearly distinct from the poet; an audience is suggested but never appears in the poem; and the revelation of the Duke's character is the poem's primary aim.



*Task*

How does the poem compare to other works from the Victorian period?

## 29.1.4 Commentary

But Browning has more in mind than simply creating a colorful character and placing him in a picturesque historical scene. Rather, the specific historical setting of the poem harbors much significance: the Italian Renaissance held a particular fascination for Browning and his contemporaries, for it represented the flowering of the aesthetic and the human alongside, or in some cases in the place of, the religious and the moral. Thus the temporal setting allows Browning to again explore sex, violence, and aesthetics as all entangled, complicating and confusing each other: the lushness of the language belies the fact that the Duchess was punished for her natural sexuality. The Duke's ravings suggest that most of the supposed transgressions took place only in his mind. Like some of Browning's fellow Victorians, the Duke sees sin lurking in every corner. The reason the speaker here gives for killing the Duchess ostensibly differs from that given by the speaker of "Porphyria's Lover" for murder Porphyria; however, both women are nevertheless victims of a male desire to inscribe and fix female sexuality. The desperate need to do this mirrors the efforts of Victorian society to mold the behavior—sexual and otherwise—of individuals. For people confronted with an increasingly complex and anonymous modern world, this impulse comes naturally: to control would seem to be to conserve and stabilize. The Renaissance was a time when morally dissolute men like the Duke exercised absolute power, and as such it is a fascinating study for the Victorians: works like this imply that, surely, a time that produced magnificent art like the Duchess's portrait couldn't have been entirely evil in its allocation of societal control—even though it put men like the Duke in power.

A poem like “My Last Duchess” calculatedly engages its readers on a psychological level. Because we hear only the Duke’s musings, we must piece the story together ourselves. Browning forces his reader to become involved in the poem in order to understand it, and this adds to the fun of reading his work. It also forces the reader to question his or her own response to the subject portrayed and the method of its portrayal. We are forced to consider, Which aspect of the poem dominates: the horror of the Duchess’s fate, or the beauty of the language and the powerful dramatic development? Thus by posing this question the poem firstly tests the Victorian reader’s response to the modern world—*git* asks, Has everyday life made you numb yet?—*gand* secondly asks a question that must be asked of all art—*git* queries, Does art have a moral component, or is it merely an aesthetic exercise? In these latter considerations Browning prefigures writers like Charles Baudelaire and Oscar Wilde.

### 29.1.5 Detailed Analysis

Murder... mystery... intrigue... All describe Robert Browning’s poem, “My Last Duchess.” From the speaker’s indirect allusions to the death of his wife the reader might easily think that the speaker committed a vengeful crime out of jealousy. His flowery speech confuses and disguises any possible motives, however, and the mystery is left unsolved. Based on the poem’s style, structure, and historical references, it becomes evident that even if the speaker did not directly kill his wife, he certainly had something to hide.

The style and structure of this poem play a significant role in the effect of the poem. As is typical of Browning’s poems, “My Last Duchess” is written as a dramatic monologue: one speaker relates the entire poem as if to another person present with him. This format suits this poem particularly well because the speaker, taken to be the Duke of Ferrara, comes across as being very controlling, especially in conversation. For example, he seems jealous that he was not able to monopolize his former duchess’ smiles for himself. He also seems to direct the actions of the person he is addressing with comments such as “Will’t please you rise?” (Line 47) and “Nay, we’ll go / Together down, sir” (lines 53-54).



*Task* What is the role of women in the poem?

Browning uses many techniques, including a simple rhyme scheme, enjambment, and caesura to convey various characteristics and qualities about the speaker and the situation. Browning uses an AA BB rhyme scheme, which is very common to ballads and songs. It also enhances the irony of the speaker’s later comment that he does not have “skill / In speech” (lines 35-36). The enjambed lines indicate the control that the speaker is exerting on the conversation and give the feeling that the speaker is rushing through parts of the poem.



*Notes* When the Duke is speaking of the death of his wife, for example, the lines running over suggest that he is nervous about the subject. The caesuras also suggest to the reader that he is hiding something or that he is pausing to think.

When discussing the poem’s content, there are many things we know for certain and many others that are questionable. We know that the Duchess died suspiciously and that the Duke is in the process of looking for a new wife. He is speaking to a messenger about a painting of his now deceased wife. The Duke, of course, is casting himself in a favorable light and is presenting his best side. He wants to make it look as if his wife was cheating on him and was unfaithful to him. He is very controlling, and could not control her and her smiles. This smile was what the Duke likes the

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most about the painting of the Duchess—he feels that the painter accurately captured the smile and the vivacity of the Duchess. Now that the Duke owns this painting and has placed it behind a curtain, he can at last control who is graced with her smile.

When the Duchess was alive, the Duke could not control her smile and love for life and he considered her unfaithful. It is thought that he poisoned her because of these suspicions. Other aspects of the Duke that remain unclear include his true character. As mentioned, he is presenting his best side, but through his speech the reader sees how he is very jealous and controlling, which leads one to believe that he may have many dishonorable qualities. Another ambiguous quality about the Duke is his historical character. The poem clearly references the historical Alfonso II, Duke of Ferrara (a city in northeast Italy), whose first wife died suspiciously within two years of their marriage. We know that Browning's Duke has a 900-year-old name of which he is very proud, and, based on his collection of paintings and sculptures, that he was a patron of the arts. Both facts correspond with information known about the historical Duke. However, the poem omits some important information. Browning does not refer to the Duchess in the painting as being a member of the royal de Medici family. Historical sources indicate that Alfonso's first wife was Lucretia de Medici, the daughter of two very important and powerful Italian monarchs. The poem is based on the fact that she died within two years of the Duke's ascension to the throne. Although sources indicate that she died suspiciously, it was never proven that the Duke had anything to do with her death.

## **29.2 The Last Ride Together**

### **29.2.1 Text**

#### **I**

I said—Then, dearest, since 'tis so,  
Since now at length my fate I know,  
Since nothing all my love avails,  
Since all, my life seemed meant for, fails,  
Since this was written and needs must be—  
My whole heart rises up to bless  
Your name in pride and thankfulness!  
Take back the hope you gave,—I claim  
—Only a memory of the same,  
—And this beside, if you will not blame,  
Your leave for one more last ride with me.

#### **II**

My mistress bent that brow of hers;  
Those deep dark eyes where pride demurs  
When pity would be softening through,  
Fixed me, a breathing-while or two,  
With life or death in the balance: right!  
The blood replenished me again;  
My last thought was at least not vain:

I and my mistress, side by side  
Shall be together, breathe and ride,  
So, one day more am I deified.  
Who knows but the world may end tonight?

### III

Hush! if you saw some western cloud  
All billowy-bosomed, over-bowed  
By many benedictions—sun's  
And moon's and evening-star's at once—  
And so, you, looking and loving best,  
Conscious grew, your passion drew  
Cloud, sunset, moonrise, star-shine too,  
Down on you, near and yet more near,  
Till flesh must fade for heaven was here!—  
Thus leant she and lingered—joy and fear!  
Thus lay she a moment on my breast.

### IV

Then we began to ride. My soul  
Smoothed itself out, a long-cramped scroll  
Freshening and fluttering in the wind.  
Past hopes already lay behind.  
What need to strive with a life awry?  
Had I said that, had I done this,  
So might I gain, so might I miss.  
Might she have loved me? just as well  
She might have hated, who can tell!  
Where had I been now if the worst befell?  
And here we are riding, she and I.

### V

Fail I alone, in words and deeds?  
Why, all men strive and who succeeds?  
We rode; it seemed my spirit flew,  
Saw other regions, cities new,  
As the world rushed by on either side.  
I thought,—All labour, yet no less

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Bear up beneath their unsuccess.  
Look at the end of work, contrast  
The petty done, the undone vast,  
This present of theirs with the hopeful past!  
I hoped she would love me; here we ride.

**VI**

What hand and brain went ever paired?  
What heart alike conceived and dared?  
What act proved all its thought had been?  
What will but felt the fleshly screen?  
We ride and I see her bosom heave.  
There's many a crown for who can reach,  
Ten lines, a statesman's life in each!  
The flag stuck on a heap of bones,  
A soldier's doing! what atones?  
They scratch his name on the Abbey-stones.  
My riding is better, by their leave.

**VII**

What does it all mean, poet? Well,  
Your brains beat into rhythm, you tell  
What we felt only; you expressed  
You hold things beautiful the best,  
And pace them in rhyme so, side by side.  
'Tis something, nay 'tis much: but then,  
Have you yourself what's best for men?  
Are you—poor, sick, old ere your time—  
Nearer one whit your own sublime  
Than we who never have turned a rhyme?  
Sing, riding's a joy! For me, I ride.

**VIII**

And you, great sculptor—so, you gave  
A score of years to Art, her slave,  
And that's your Venus, whence we turn  
To yonder girl that fords the burn!  
You acquiesce, and shall I repine?

What, man of music, you grown grey  
With notes and nothing else to say,  
Is this your sole praise from a friend,  
“Greatly his opera’s strains intend,  
“Put in music we know how fashions end!”  
I gave my youth; but we ride, in fine.

## IX

Who knows what’s fit for us? Had fate  
Proposed bliss here should sublimate  
My being—had I signed the bond—  
Still one must lead some life beyond,  
Have a bliss to die with, dim-descried.  
This foot once planted on the goal,  
This glory-garland round my soul,  
Could I descry such? Try and test!  
I sink back shuddering from the quest.  
Earth being so good, would heaven seem best?  
Now, heaven and she are beyond this ride.

## X

And yet—she has not spoke so long!  
What if heaven be that, fair and strong  
At life’s best, with our eyes upturned  
Whither life’s flower is first discerned,  
We, fixed so, ever should so abide?  
What if we still ride on, we two  
With life for ever old yet new,  
Changed not in kind but in degree,  
The instant made eternity,—  
And heaven just prove that I and she  
Ride, ride together, for ever ride?

### 29.2.2 Summary

Robert Browning is difficult to a certain extent, demanding a degree of intellectual exertion on the part of the reader. His poetry is also characterized by a certain deliberate roughness reminiscent of the metaphysical poets. His poems are greatly concerned with human character and reflect an attraction towards the bizarre, the unusual and the eccentric. His poems are also dramatic and are concerned with Renaissance themes. The most important qualities pervading Browning’s works are his robust optimism and spiritual courage. The narrator told his lover the fact of the matter that

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it is so and now at length he knows his fate, nothing to all his love avails and his life is meant to accept failure. This was written in his stars and all must need to be that his whole heart rises up to bless her name in pride and thankfulness. He asked her to take back the hope she gave for he claimed only a memory of the same and besides this if she would not blame her leave for one more last ride with him. His mistress bent that brow of hers and those dark eyes where pride demurs; lingers; when pity would be softening through, fixed him with a breathing-while or two with life or death in the balance.

The blood replenished; revitalized; him again and his last thoughts was at least not in vain. He and his mistress would sit side by side and together they would breathe and ride. So one more day would he be deified; become a god, *i.e.* achieved the supreme goal; who knows but the world may end tonight. If she would see some western cloud all billowy-bosomed; with gentle curves; over bowed by many benedictions; blessings; of the sun's, the moon's and evening stars at once, she would look and loved best as her conscious grew, her passion drew closer to the cloud, sunset, moonrise and star-shine too. Right down near to her, till her flesh must fade for heaven was there. She leant and lingered for joy and fear and she lay for a moment on his breast. Ultimately they began the ride and his soul smoothed herself out-a long-cramped scroll; parchment kept rolled up for a long period- freshening and fluttering in the wind. Past hopes were already laid behind and there was no need to strive with a life's awry; gone wrong; had he said that or had he done this, so might he gain or so might he miss. She might have love or hated him. No one could tell as to where he had been now if the worst befell but here they are both of them riding together.

As they rode, it seemed that his spirit flew and saw other regions and new cities. As the world rushed on either side, he thought all labour bore up beneath their failure. Look at the end of work, contrast between the petty done and the vast undone. This present of theirs with a hopeful past, he hoped that she would love him as they ride. Their hands and brains went paired as much as their hearts alike conceived and dared. He saw her bosom heave and the many crowns that were hard to reach. There were ten lines in each of the statesman's life, the flag that was stuck on a heap of bones or what atones a soldier's doing? They scratch his name on the Abbey-stones; a memorial tablet at Westminster Abbey. This honour is usually given to distinguished people like the heroic soldier mentioned earlier in the poem; but the lover's riding was better than their leave.

His brains beat into rhythm, he spoke what he felt and held things that were beautifully the best. He paced them in rhyme side by side if he should be poor, sick or old before his time. Nearer one whit his own sublime; even a little bit nearer to his sublime ideal; than they who had never turned a rhyme as they sang and riding together for joy. She was like a great sculptor; not exactly identifiable since many medieval sculptors carved out statues of Venus-the ideal of feminine beauty; this a sole praise from a friend which greatly intends his opera's strains. They turn to yonder girl that fords the burn of her; acquiesce; agree; and he would repine; express dejection. In music they know how fashions end, he gave his youth but they rode in fine together. Fate proposed that bliss should sublimate his being there and one must lead some life beyond. To have bliss to die with, dim-dесried; dimly observed as from afar; whose foot once planted on the goal. The glory-garland round his soul could he descry yet sunk back shuddering from the quest. Earth would be good but Heaven would be best for she was beyond this ride. She hardly spoke yet if Heaven would be fair and strong with their eyes upturned, whither life's flower is discerned as they headed to eternity, Heaven just proved that both of them rode together undisturbed.

### 29.2.3 Detailed Analysis

Robert Browning's "Last Ride Together" is a monologue of a rejected lover that expresses his undying love for his beloved. The title apparently gives out the notion that this is their last ride together. Nevertheless, what the speaker signifies is that he has lived all his life in this ride, with the all-sufficing splendor of love. The poem echoes the 'carpe diem' motif of seizing the present. He affirms that he is well-acquainted with his past. Even so, hitherto all that his life stood for, comes to naught when it

comes to his unrequited love. His love is unselfish and does not avail of anything unreasonable, it is truly blessed with pride and happiness in having the Last ride with her which would endow him with the joy of a lifetime. For this, he would even handover his most prized possession- the hope of love that inspired him to live on. If gifted with the Ride, he guarantees that he will be content with just the memory of the hope that inspired him to go on.



*Task* Examine the last ride together as a dramatic monologue.

The Lady bent her brows to this entreaty; pity smoothening the pride had filled her dark eyes. The moment of her decision was a crucial point for the poet, as though he hung between life and death; and the colour left his face for a splitting second. However, the positive signal replenishes the blood at once. He is euphoric regarding the prospects of riding with her while the present lasted. And he states that he is deified or exalted for one more day, because one never knows when the world might end.

The poet subsequently refers to their physical proximity, implying that the word 'ride' has sexual connotations. The poet informs her that if she witnesses the Western cloud with its bosom laden with blessings; if she encounters the sun's and moon's and evening stars all at once, it is just because heaven has descended upon them. The poet pleads with her to leave her consciousness aside, and let passion draw her "Cloud, sunset, moonrise, star-shine too, "That they rise above the distinctions of the flesh to a spiritual union. She comes closer to the speaker with mixed emotions of joy and fear.

The poet dwells on the significance of the present in the next stanza as he concentrates on the ride. He contemplates on why people attach so much significance to the past and future, than focusing on the present. His soul that was hitherto a long "scramped scroll " smoothenes itself out. The metaphor connotes living life to the fullest in elation and ecstasy for the moment. The scroll freshens and flutters in the wind in intense euphoria. Why does one get carried way by past actions:

Had I said that, had I done this,  
So might I gain, so might I miss.

Why do people leave room, for doubts, suspicions, failure, misgivings that haunt the present instead of protecting it, and distracting the same. One should breathe each moment as though there is no room for regret. For him at the moment there was no truth save:

And here we are riding, she and I.

The speaker anticipated no 'real' love from his ladylove. He had failed in word and deeds. He consoles himself that all men do strive for success, but who achieves it? His spirit was still on a high with regard to the present, as they encountered unknown avenues during the course of their ride. The speaker asserts that the "the world rushed by on either side.". That is, the world seemed to rush past because the poet was caught in the moment in slow motion. The world that was caught up in worldly pursuits continued with it, in spite of the failures they encountered. Yet, what compensates them for the petty present is the hopeful future that promises vast opportunities. Likewise, the poet temporarily goes against his own dictum, suddenly wishing that if she would ever love him back. He thus contradicts himself proving that hope is instinctive and universal. It cannot be traded for anything in the world, in spite of ourselves.

What hand and brain went ever paired?  
What heart alike conceived and dared?  
What act proved all its thought had been?  
What will but felt the fleshly screen?

## Notes

The poet asserts that the hand (practice) and brain (thought) never went perfectly paired. The heart never dared to give vent to the true emotions that it fostered. No act even could prove the intention behind the same. What hand and brain went ever paired?



*Notes* Browning deems himself to be in no way lesser to the statesman, soldier, soft, sculptor and musician. In fact, his riding is superior to all the above-said acts.

In this second stanza, he compares the Ride to the act of composing poetry. The difference is that the Poet expressed what the normal person felt. The poets idealize certain things and places them into rhyme, the image and rhyme co-existing side-by-side. However, the speaker quips whether the Poet's own life was as beautiful as he portrayed in poetry. Whether in reality the Poet was stricken with poverty or ailments or old age. It was perhaps his tragedies that contributed to an iota of his sublime.

Are you—poor, sick, old ere your time—  
Nearer one whit your own sublime

Though the speaker prefers the Ride, as the ride entails only joy compared to the poets singing. Ironically the speaker is a Poet himself in reality.

The sculptor turns years to lock the beauty of Venus in his artistic creation, but it is of no practical use. The sculptor has devoted years of service to Art. The speaker personifies Art, and sculptor as the slave of Art. All this servility comes to nothing, because a person is more attracted towards domestic reality, his gaze immediately shifts from the statue of Venus to a dame that waddles(fords) through a spring of water(burn).The Sculptor acquiesces, he accepts fate reluctantly but without protest. On the other hand, shouldn't the speaker openly express his discontent? The significance of being a musician also pales in comparison. The musician whiles way his best years in music, while music too has its own fashions and one kind of music may not appeal to another generation. His only reward appears to be praise from a friend. The speaker too has sacrificed his youth, but he rides fine because it endows upon him the bliss of a lifetime.

### Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

1. What is the Duke arranging in "My Last Duchess"?
 

(a) The Duchess's funeral	(b) The painting of the Duchess's portrait
(c) A new marriage for himself	(d) The sale of his art collection
2. What is the rhyme scheme of "My Last Duchess"?
 

(a) Enjambled blank verse	(b) Enjambled rhyming couplets
(c) End-stopped rhyming couplets	(d) End-stopped blank verse
3. Who was the author of "My Last Duchess"?
 

(a) Elizabeth Barrett Browning	(b) Lord Tennyson
(c) Arthur Hugh Clough	(d) Robert Browning
4. Who is presumed speaker of "My Last Duchess"?
 

(a) Robert Browning	(b) Alfonso II, Duke of Ferrara
(c) The Duchess of Ferrara	(d) Fra Pandolf

5. What is the object of the Duke's discussion at the beginning of the poem?
  - (a) The Duchess, who is standing by the wall
  - (b) A painting of the Duke
  - (c) Neptune
  - (d) A painting of the Duchess
6. How old does the Duke say his name is?
  - (a) 900
  - (b) 600
  - (c) 300
  - (d) 100
7. What is the current object of the Duke's desire (as he sees it)?
  - (a) A painting
  - (b) A Neptune sculpture
  - (c) The duchess
  - (d) The count's daughter
8. Who was the sculptor of Neptune in the poem?
  - (a) Carlo crivelli
  - (b) Giotto di Bandone
  - (c) Claus of Innsbruck
  - (d) Lorenzo Ghiberti
9. What does the Duke say that he will never do?
  - (a) Love
  - (b) Hate
  - (c) Fear
  - (d) Stoop
10. What does the Duke say was one of the faults of the Duchess?
  - (a) She hated him
  - (b) She smiled too much
  - (c) She was never impressed
  - (d) She was a snob

Only God knows what lies in store for us. Had the poet resigned himself to fate, and fate proposed bliss, he would not have found himself in a lofty position for the poet writes best when he is sad. Nevertheless one has to live a life beyond this 'destined' life, have his own share of ecstasy. One should descry these hitherto unexplored avenues of bliss. His feet seem to planted on the goal, and glory steady around one's neck in such an instance. Earth being so good, would heaven seem best?: asks the poet in a rhetorical question. He implies that if earth were good as people said it was, then how it was that heaven was the superlative. But now the experience itself has transcended the object and result of the experience as he declares:

"Now, heaven and she are beyond this ride."

The beloved has not spoken to him, throughout the ride. What if heaven is that life at its fairest and strongest? With the eyes focused towards the first fruition that always imparts unending joy. Being fixed in eternity, one need not be flexible. What if they ride on, old with experience, but ever-new in essence? Altered not in the kind, but in degree: not in quantity but in quality. In such an instance, a single instant is transformed into eternity. And lastly, what if, they could forever 'ride' without worrying about action, intention or inclination.

#### 29.2.4 Philosophy of Robert Browning

Browning was primarily a thinker, and would not have understood Keat's prayer for "a world of sensation rather than of thought." He "chose poetry" because he felt his thought was valuable, requisite to be given to the world, and given more arrestingly in verse, for which he know he had a very unusual gift. A large portion of his poetry consists of his reflections, sometimes bare and bald, sometimes buried beneath masses of verbal debris, more often clothed in his own individual kind of rich and varied verse.

Notes

Browning's religion is inextricably bound up with his philosophy of life. His philosophy is no set professional synthesis, but the immediate product of a series of recurrent insights into life. His poems are his philosophy. He is one of those great poets who have given a concrete synthesis of life, a creative and constructive line of thinking and above all a deep and profound philosophy of life grounded in optimism and faith.

In estimating Browning's philosophy of life one is to bear in mind that he treated certain elements as axiomatic. He harbored no doubts about certain of his philosophical conceptions and took them for granted. He was not prepared to enter into any arguments about the veracity of certain of his philosophical thoughts and ideas.

Browning takes for granted the existence and supremacy of God as the creator and the sole governor of the universe, and was not, in the least, in a position to doubt His existence. He considered God as an all pervading Deity, an essence always partially, never wholly revealed in the creative energy of nature and the aspirations of man. All nature is viewed as a thought of God. "God is the perfect poet", he says "who in His person acts his own creations." So the whole universe is a crystallized thought of God to him:

"God dwells in all  
From life's minute beginnings up at last  
To man,  
and  
God is seen God  
In the star, in the stone, in the flesh, in the soul and the cloud."

Browning did not conceive of God as a cruel and tyrannical being unmindful of the lot of the creative universe, or a sinister intelligence bent on punishing mankind. He conceived of God as a benignant and sympathetic power helping men in their endeavors if they reposed faith in Him and His mercy:

"God made all the creatures and gave them  
Our love and our fear  
We and they are His children  
Our family here."

Browning's philosophy of life, evident in many of his poems, is based upon his faith in immortality. He never believed that death brings the end of the divine spark irradiating human life. God is the potter and the soul is the clay. Both of them endure forever. This faith of the poet is expressed in "**Rabbi Ben Ezra**":

"Fool! All that is at all,  
Lasts ever, past recall;"  
Earth changes, but thy soul and God stand sure  
Time's wheel runs back or stops: Potter and clay endure."

The earthly life is a period of trial, testing and preparation for the future life is central to Browning's optimistic philosophy of life. The earthly life is necessarily imperfect:

"On the earth the broken arcs: in the heaven a perfect round."

Though, imperfect Browning earnestly believed that the world with all its glories and triumphs, its joys and fears, is a fitting place for man's actions and activities. Browning was not an ascetic who shunned the world, nor across grained man to regard the universe as a vale of sorrow and tears,

"Where but to think is to be full of sorrow", "Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,/Or new love pine at them beyond tomorrow." He had a genuine interest in the world and human life, which he considered to be real and good, for he found many things that were good in it.

Optimism is a philosophy, a considered judgment on life. Often though not necessarily, associated with happiness, which is mainly a matter of temperament. Fra Lippo Lippi's philosophy, his optimistic judgment on life, is summed up in his belief that:

"This world's no blot for us,  
Nor blank—it means intensely, and means good,  
To find its meaning is my meat and drink."

Although Lippo is a dramatic character, Browning's own voice and attitude to life speak through him, eloquent in every touch of delighted description of nature, of human beauty, or of the man-made scene. Again in the same poem we have another statement, recognizing the goodness of the world—

"The world and life's too long to pass for a dream."

"Andrea del Sarto" is a poem which has to be viewed in a wider context than the special one of the artist's life and activity, for it expresses an important aspect of Browning's philosophy. In posing the questions "what is success?" "What is failure?" and exploring the reality rather than the appearance of each, the poet is envisaging the life of not only the creative artist but of men in general. In this poem Browning emphasizes the necessity of keeping high ideals in one's life. He should set his goal as high as possible even though it may be impossible to attain in this life:

"Ah, but a man's reach should exceed disgrace,  
Or what's a Heaven for?"

says the unhappy Andrea del Sarto, who realizes he has failed because he has set his goal too low. Success, in the world's sense, may in the light of eternity be failure; failure, in the world's sense, may be lasting success. Man is judged by God by his aspirations, his noble ideals, and his efforts to achieve success in life. In God's view success is not the yardstick to judge a man's earthly life. A man who has failed in a noble struggle is likely to be placed on a higher pedestal in the kingdom of God as compared to the man who aspires to gain little and succeeds in achieving that little in his life. This faith that man's success would be judged not by achievements only but by his efforts and endeavors too, is voiced fervently in "**Rabbi Ben Ezra**":

"But all, the worlds' coarse thumb  
And finger failed to plumb,  
So passed in making up the main account,  
All instincts immature,  
All purposes unsure,  
That weighed not as his work, yet swelled the man's account."

[**Rabbi Ben Ezra**: Robert Browning]

Browning believes that on earth we have the "broken arc" but in heaven there is "the perfect round". But despite earth's—and man's—imperfections, man's highest duty is to strive toward perfection of himself. In "**Rabbi Ben Ezra**" comes the counsel:

Notes

“As it was better, youth  
Should strive, through acts uncouth,  
Towards making.”

[**Rabbi Ben Ezra**: Robert Browning]

Life is probation. Life follows life. Man’s soul is immortal death need not terrify us. As Browning faithfully voices in “**Rabbi Ben Ezra**”:

“So, better, age, exempt  
From strife, should know, than tempt  
Further. Thou waitedst age: wait death, nor be afraid!”

[**Rabbi Ben Ezra**: Robert Browning]

Imperfects and failures are man’s glory, because they prophesy the future bliss. What man fails to achieve in this world would be attained by him in the next— that was Browning’s hope and faith as he in “**A Grammarian’s Funeral**” states:

“...What’s time? Leave now for dogs and apes!  
“Man has forever.”

Such is the optimistic philosophy of Browning, based on his invincible faith, not founded on any arguments for optimism, nor on opinions, but on life which is the work of God. The pronouncements on life are preponderantly sober, but the sky is lighted by courage and hope and faith.

Browning rejected the idea of asceticism and believed that this life should be lived to the full, like “**Fra Lippo Lippi**” he believed in “the value and significance of flesh”, and he causes Rabbi Ben Ezra to advise:

“Let us not always say,  
“Spite of this flesh today  
I strove, made head, gained ground upon the whole!”  
As the bird wings and sings,  
Let us cry” All good things  
Are ours, nor soul helps flesh more, now, than flesh helps soul!”

### 29.3 Summary

- This poem is loosely based on historical events involving Alfonso, the Duke of Ferrara, who lived in the 16th century.
- The Duke begins reminiscing about the portrait sessions, then about the Duchess herself.
- The style and structure of this poem play a significant role in the effect of the poem.
- A poem like “My Last Duchess” calculatedly engages its readers on a psychological level.
- The most important qualities pervading Browning’s works are his robust optimism and spiritual courage.
- Robert Browning’s “Last Ride Together” is a monologue of a rejected lover that expresses his undying love for his beloved.

## 29.4 Keywords

- Transcendentalism** : Transcendentalism is a group of ideas in literature and philosophy that developed in the 1830s and 1840s as a protest against the general state of culture and society.
- Interconnectedness** : Interconnectedness refers to state of being mutually joined or related.
- Morality** : Morality is the sense which differentiates among the intentions, decisions and actions, between those that are good and bad.
- Imagery** : Imagery, in a literary text, is the use of details and descriptors, such as adjectives and nouns, used to create a mental or sensational image in the mind of a reader.
- Verse** : A verse is formally a single line in a metrical composition, e.g. poetry. However, the word has come to represent any division or grouping of words in such a composition, which traditionally had been referred to as a stanza.

## 29.5 Review Questions

1. How does Robert Browning reveal character in “My Last Duchess”?
2. What are some symbols in “My Last Duchess”?
3. Show how Browning’s philosophy of life and philosophy of love are fused together in the last ride together.
4. Browning’s the last ride together registers his characteristic optimism. Do you agree?

## Answers: Self Assessment

- |         |        |        |
|---------|--------|--------|
| 1. (c)  | 2. (b) | 3. (d) |
| 4. (b)  | 5. (b) | 6. (a) |
| 7. (d)  | 8. (c) | 9. (d) |
| 10. (b) |        |        |

## 29.6 Further Readings



### Books

- |                                  |                         |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------|
| John Keats: a literary biography | — Albert Helmer Hancock |
| William Wordsworth               | — William Wordsworth    |
| Complete poetical works          | — William Wordsworth    |
| Robert Browning                  | — G.K.Chesterton        |



### Online links

- <http://www.shmoop.com/my-last-duchess/summary.html>
- <http://voices.yahoo.com/poetry-analysis-robert-brownings-last-ride-together-6890172.html>

## Unit 30: Tennyson, Arnold and Yeats

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### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Describe the analysis of the Lord Tennyson's, The lady of shallot and Ulysses
- Critically appreciate the Mathew Arnold's "Dover beach"
- Discuss the Introduction of the W.B.Yeats and his poem, "A prayer for my daughter"
- Examine the theme of W.B.Yeats's, "Second Coming"
- Consider W.B.Yeats as an Irish poet.

### Introduction

Alfred Tennyson, 1st Baron Tennyson, FRS (6 August 1809 – 6 October 1892) was Poet Laureate of the United Kingdom during much of Queen Victoria's reign and remains one of the most popular poets in the English language.

Tennyson excelled at penning short lyrics, such as “In the Valley of Caerteret”, “Break, Break, Break”, “and The Charge of the Light Brigade “,” Tears, Idle Tears “and” Crossing the Bar”. Much of his verse was based on classical mythological themes, such as Ulysses, although In Memoriam A.H.H. was written to commemorate his best friend Arthur Hallam, a fellow poet and fellow student at Trinity College, Cambridge, who was engaged to Tennyson’s sister, but died from a brain haemorrhage before they could marry. Tennyson also wrote some notable blank verse including Idylls of the King, “Ulysses,” and “Tithonus.” During his career, Tennyson attempted drama, but his plays enjoyed little success.

William Butler Yeats was born in County Dublin on June 13, 1865. Due to the demands of his father’s career as an artist, he moved with his family to London at a young age, but he spent summers in County Sligo, in Western Ireland. When Yeats was fifteen his family moved back to Dublin, where he attended the Metropolitan School of Art.

## 30.1 Lord Tennyson: The Lady of Shalott, Ulysses

### 30.1.1 The Lady of Shalott: Text

#### Part I

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

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

By the margin, willow veiled  
 Slide the heavy barges trailed  
 By slow horses; and unhailed  
 The shallop flitteth silken-sailed  
 Skimming down to Camelot:  
 But who hath seen her wave her hand?

Notes

Or at the casement seen her stand?  
Or is she known in all the land,  
The Lady of Shalott?

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

Part II

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

And moving through a mirror clear  
That hands before her all the year,  
Shadows of the world appear.  
There she sees the highway near  
Winding down to Camelot:  
There the river eddy whirls,  
And there the curly village-churls,  
And the red cloaks of market girls,  
Pass onward from Shalott.  
Sometimes a troop of damsels glad,  
An abbot on an ambling pad,  
Sometimes a curly shepherd-lad,  
Or long-haired page in crimson clad,  
Goes by to towered Camelot;  
And sometimes through the mirror blue

The knights come riding two and two:  
She hath no loyal knight and true,  
The Lady of Shalott.

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

**Part III**

A bow-shot from her bower-eaves,  
He rode between the barley-sheaves,  
The sun came dazzling through the leaves,  
And flamed upon the brazen greaves  
Of bold Sir Lancelot.

A red-cross knight for ever kneeled  
To a lady in his shield,  
That sparkled on the yellow field,  
Beside remote Shalott.

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

All in the blue unclouded weather  
Thick-jewelled shone the saddle-leather,  
The helmet and the helmet-feather  
Burned like one burning flame together,  
As he rode down to Camelot.  
As often through the purple night,

Notes

Below the starry clusters bright,  
Some bearded meteor, trailing light,  
Moves over still Shalott.

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

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

**Part IV**

In the stormy east-wind straining,  
The pale yellow woods were waning,  
The broad stream in his banks complaining,  
Heavily the low sky raining  
Over towered Camelot;  
Down she came and found a boat  
Beneath a willow left afloat,  
And round about the prow she wrote  
The Lady of Shalott.

And down the river's dim expanse  
Like some bold seer in a trance,  
Seeing all his own mischance—  
With a glassy countenance  
Did she look to Camelot.  
And at the closing of the day  
She loosed the chain, and down she lay;

Notes

The broad stream bore her far away,  
The Lady of Shalott.

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

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

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

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

## Notes

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

This poem was first published in 1832, when Tennyson was 23 years old, in a volume called *Poems*. Up to that point, Tennyson had received great critical acclaim and had won national awards, but the critics savagely attacked the 1832 book, mostly because of poems such as "The Lady of Shallot" that dealt with fantasy situations instead of realistic ones. The next year, 1833, Tennyson's best friend died, which affected the poet as greatly as would anything in his life. For a long time, during a period that later came to be known as "the ten years' silence," nothing of Tennyson's was published. In 1842, a new volume, also called *Poems*, was published, to great critical acclaim. The new book had a slightly revised version of "The Lady of Shallot," and this version is the one that is studied today.

## Story

The Lady of Shallot is a magical being who lives alone on an island upstream from King Arthur's Camelot. Her business is to look at the world outside her castle window in a mirror, and to weave what she sees into a tapestry. She is forbidden by the magic to look at the outside world directly. The farmers who live near her island hear her singing and know who she is, but never see her.



*Task* Write short note on poem the Lady Shallot.

The Lady sees ordinary people, loving couples and knights in pairs reflected in her mirror. One day, she sees the reflection of Sir Lancelot riding alone. Although she knows that it is forbidden, she looks out the window at him. The mirror shatters, the tapestry flies off on the wind, and the Lady feels the power of her curse.

An autumn storm suddenly arises. The lady leaves her castle, finds a boat, writes her name on it, gets into the boat, sets it adrift, and sings her death song as she drifts down the river to Camelot. The locals find the boat and the body, realize who she is, and are saddened. Lancelot prays that God will have mercy on her soul.

This is one of Tennyson's most popular poems. The Pre-Raphaelites liked to illustrate it. Waterhouse made three separate paintings of "The Lady of Shalott". Agatha Christie wrote a Miss Marple mystery entitled "The Mirror Crack'd From Side to Side", which was made into a movie starring Angela Lansbury. *Tirra Lirra by the River*, by Australian novelist Jessica Anderson, is the story of a modern woman's decision to break out of confinement.



*Did u know?* The poem was particularly popular amongst artists of the Pre-Raphaelite movement, who shared Tennyson's interest in Arthuriana; several of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood made paintings based on episodes from the poem.

The 1857 Moxon edition of Tennyson's works was illustrated by William Holman Hunt and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Hunt depicted the moment when the Lady turns to see Lancelot. Rossetti depicted Lancelot's contemplation of her 'lovely face'. Neither illustration pleased Tennyson, who took Hunt to task for depicting the Lady caught in the threads of her tapestry, something which is not described in the poem. Hunt explained that he wanted to sum up the whole poem in a single image, and that the entrapment by the threads suggested her "weird fate". The scene fascinated Hunt, who returned to the composition at points throughout his life, finally painting a large scale version shortly before his death. He required assistants, as he was too frail to complete it himself. This deeply conceived evocation of the Lady, ensnared within the perfect rounds of her woven reality, is an apt illustration of the mythology of the weaving arts. This work is now in the collection of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, Connecticut.

John William Waterhouse painted three episodes from the poem. In 1888, he painted the Lady setting out for Camelot in her boat; this work is now in the Tate Gallery. In 1894, Waterhouse painted the Lady at the climactic moment when she turns to look at Lancelot in the window; this work is now in the City Art Gallery in Leeds. In 1915, Waterhouse painted "I Am Half-Sick of Shadows," Said the Lady of Shalott, as she sits wistfully before her loom; this work is now in the Art Gallery of Ontario.

Because of the similarity in the stories, paintings of Elaine of Astolat tend to be very similar to paintings of the Lady of Shalott. The presence of a servant rowing the boat is one aspect that distinguishes them.

## Analysis

### Part I

The poem begins with a description of a river and a road that pass through long fields of barley and rye before reaching the town of Camelot. The people of the town travel along the road and look toward an island called Shalott, which lies further down the river. The island of Shalott contains several plants and flowers, including lilies, aspens, and willows. On the island, a woman known as the Lady of Shalott is imprisoned within a building made of "four gray walls and four gray towers."

Both "heavy barges" and light open boats sail along the edge of the river to Camelot. But has anyone seen or heard of the lady who lives on the island in the river? Only the reapers who harvest the barley hear the echo of her singing. At night, the tired reaper listens to her singing and whispers that he hears her: "Tis the fairy Lady of Shalott."

### Part II

The Lady of Shalott weaves a magic, colorful web. She has heard a voice whisper that a curse will befall her if she looks down to Camelot, and she does not know what this curse would be. Thus, she concentrates solely on her weaving, never lifting her eyes.

However, as she weaves, a mirror hangs before her. In the mirror, she sees "shadows of the world," including the highway road, which also passes through the fields, the eddies in the river, and the peasants of the town. Occasionally, she also sees a group of damsels, an abbot (church official), a young shepherd, or a page dressed in crimson. She sometimes sights a pair of knights riding by, though she has no loyal knight of her own to court her. Nonetheless, she enjoys her solitary weaving, though she expresses frustration with the world of shadows when she glimpses a funeral procession or a pair of newlyweds in the mirror.

### Part III

A knight in brass armor ("brazen greaves") come riding through the fields of barley beside Shalott; the sun shines on his armor and makes it sparkle. As he rides, the gems on his horses bridle glitter like a constellation of stars, and the bells on the bridle ring. The knight hangs a bugle from his sash, and his armor makes ringing noises as he gallops alongside the remote island of Shalott.

**Notes**

In the “blue, unclouded weather,” the jewels on the knight’s saddle shine, making him look like a meteor in the purple sky. His forehead glows in the sunlight, and his black curly hair flows out from under his helmet. As he passes by the river, his image flashes into the Lady of Shalott’s mirror and he sings out “tirra lirra.” Upon seeing and hearing this knight, the Lady stops weaving her web and abandons her loom. The web flies out from the loom, and the mirror cracks, and the Lady announces the arrival of her doom: “The curse is come upon me.”

**Part IV**

As the sky breaks out in rain and storm, the Lady of Shalott descends from her tower and finds a boat. She writes the words “The Lady of Shalott” around the boat’s bow and looks downstream to Camelot like a prophet foreseeing his own misfortunes. In the evening, she lies down in the boat, and the stream carries her to Camelot.

The Lady of Shalott wears a snowy white robe and sings her last song as she sails down to Camelot. She sings until her blood freezes, her eyes darken, and she dies. When her boat sails silently into Camelot, all the knights, lords, and ladies of Camelot emerge from their halls to behold the sight. They read her name on the bow and “cross...themselves for fear.” Only the great knight Lancelot is bold enough to push aside the crowd, look closely at the dead maiden, and remark “She has a lovely face; God in his mercy lend her grace.”

**Form**

The poem is divided into four numbered parts with discrete, isometric (equally-long) stanzas. The first two parts contain four stanzas each, while the last two parts contain five. Each of the four parts ends at the moment when description yields to directly quoted speech: this speech first takes the form of the reaper’s whispering identification, then of the Lady’s half-sick lament, then of the Lady’s pronouncement of her doom, and finally, of Lancelot’s blessing. Each stanza contains nine lines with the rhyme scheme AAAABCCCB. The “B” always stands for “Camelot” in the fifth line and for “Shalott” in the ninth. The “A” and “C” lines are always in tetrameter, while the “B” lines are in trimeter. In addition, the syntax is line-bound: most phrases do not extend past the length of a single line.

**Commentary**

Originally written in 1832, this poem was later revised, and published in its final form in 1842. Tennyson claimed that he had based it on an Old Italian romance, though the poem also bears much similarity to the story of the Maid of Astolat in Malory’s *Morte d’Arthur*. As in Malory’s account, Tennyson’s lyric includes references to the Arthurian legend; moreover, “Shalott” seems quite close to Malory’s “Astolat.”

Much of the poem’s charm stems from its sense of mystery and elusiveness; of course, these aspects also complicate the task of analysis. That said, most scholars understand “The Lady of Shalott” to be about the conflict between art and life. The Lady, who weaves her magic web and sings her song in a remote tower, can be seen to represent the contemplative artist isolated from the bustle and activity of daily life. The moment she sets her art aside to gaze down on the real world, a curse befalls her and she meets her tragic death. The poem thus captures the conflict between an artist’s desire for social involvement and his/her doubts about whether such a commitment is viable for someone dedicated to art. The poem may also express a more personal dilemma for Tennyson as a specific artist: while he felt an obligation to seek subject matter outside the world of his own mind and his own immediate experiences—to comment on politics, history, or a more general humanity—he also feared that this expansion into broader territories might destroy his poetry’s magic.

Part I and Part IV of this poem deal with the Lady of Shalott as she appears to the outside world, whereas Part II and Part III describe the world from the Lady’s perspective. In Part I, Tennyson portrays the Lady as secluded from the rest of the world by both water and the height of her tower. We are not told how she spends her time or what she thinks about; thus we, too, like everyone in the poem, are denied access to the interiority of her world. Interestingly, the only people who know

that she exists are those whose occupations are most diametrically opposite her own: the reapers who toil in physical labor rather than by sitting and crafting works of beauty.

Part II describes the Lady's experience of imprisonment from her own perspective. We learn that her alienation results from a mysterious curse: she is not allowed to look out on Camelot, so all her knowledge of the world must come from the reflections and shadows in her mirror. (It was common for weavers to use mirrors to see the progress of their tapestries from the side that would eventually be displayed to the viewer.) Tennyson notes that often she sees a funeral or a wedding, a disjunction that suggests the interchangeability, and hence the conflation, of love and death for the Lady: indeed, when she later falls in love with Lancelot, she will simultaneously bring upon her own death.

Whereas Part II makes reference to all the different types of people that the Lady sees through her mirror, including the knights who "come riding two and two" (line 61), Part III focuses on one particular knight who captures the Lady's attention: Sir Lancelot. This dazzling knight is the hero of the King Arthur stories, famous for his illicit affair with the beautiful Queen Guinevere. He is described in an array of colors: he is a "red-cross knight"; his shield "sparkled on the yellow field"; he wears a "silver bugle"; he passes through "blue unclouded weather" and the "purple night," and he has "coal-black curls." He is also adorned in a "gemmy bridle" and other bejeweled garments, which sparkle in the light. Yet in spite of the rich visual details that Tennyson provides, it is the sound and not the sight of Lancelot that causes the Lady of Shalott to transgress her set boundaries: only when she hears him sing "Tirra lirra" does she leave her web and seal her doom. The intensification of the Lady's experiences in this part of the poem is marked by the shift from the static, descriptive present tense of Parts I and II to the dynamic, active past of Parts III and IV.

In Part IV, all the lush color of the previous section gives way to "pale yellow" and "darkened" eyes, and the brilliance of the sunlight is replaced by a "low sky raining." The moment the Lady sets her art aside to look upon Lancelot, she is seized with death. The end of her artistic isolation thus leads to the end of creativity: "Out flew her web and floated wide" (line 114). She also loses her mirror, which had been her only access to the outside world: "The mirror cracked from side to side" (line 115). Her turn to the outside world thus leaves her bereft both of her art object and of the instrument of her craft—and of her very life. Yet perhaps the greatest curse of all is that although she surrenders herself to the sight of Lancelot, she dies completely unappreciated by him. The poem ends with the tragic triviality of Lancelot's response to her tremendous passion: all he has to say about her is that "she has a lovely face" (line 169). Having abandoned her artistry, the Lady of Shalott becomes herself an art object; no longer can she offer her creativity, but merely a "dead-pale" beauty (line 157).

### 30.1.2 Ulysses: Text

It little profits that an idle king,  
 By this still hearth, among these barren crags,  
 Match'd with an aged wife, I mete and dole  
 Unequal laws unto a savage race,  
 That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me.  
 I cannot rest from travel: I will drink  
 Life to the lees: All times I have enjoy'd  
 Greatly, have suffer'd greatly, both with those  
 That loved me, and alone, on shore, and when  
 Thro' scudding drifts the rainy Hyades  
 Vext the dim sea: I am become a name;  
 For always roaming with a hungry heart  
 Much have I seen and known; cities of men

Notes

And manners, climates, councils, governments,  
Myself not least, but honour'd of them all;  
And drunk delight of battle with my peers,  
Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy.  
I am a part of all that I have met;  
Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'  
Gleams that untravell'd world whose margin fades  
For ever and forever when I move.  
How dull it is to pause, to make an end,  
To rust unburnish'd, not to shine in use!  
As tho' to breathe were life! Life piled on life  
Were all too little, and of one to me  
Little remains: but every hour is saved  
From that eternal silence, something more,  
A bringer of new things; and vile it were  
For some three suns to store and hoard myself,  
And this gray spirit yearning in desire  
To follow knowledge like a sinking star,  
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.

This is my son, mine own Telemachus,  
To whom I leave the sceptre and the isle,—  
Well-loved of me, discerning to fulfil  
This labour, by slow prudence to make mild  
A rugged people, and thro' soft degrees  
Subdue them to the useful and the good.  
Most blameless is he, centred in the sphere  
Of common duties, decent not to fail  
In offices of tenderness, and pay  
Meet adoration to my household gods,  
When I am gone. He works his work, I mine.

There lies the port; the vessel puffs her sail:  
There gloom the dark, broad seas. My mariners,  
Souls that have toil'd, and wrought, and thought with me—  
That ever with a frolic welcome took  
The thunder and the sunshine, and opposed  
Free hearts, free foreheads—you and I are old;  
Old age hath yet his honour and his toil;  
Death closes all: but something ere the end,  
Some work of noble note, may yet be done,  
Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods.  
The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks:  
The long day wanes: the slow moon climbs: the deep  
Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends,  
'T is not too late to seek a newer world.  
Push off, and sitting well in order smite  
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds  
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths  
Of all the western stars, until I die.

It may be that the gulfs will wash us down:  
 It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,  
 And see the great Achilles, whom we knew.  
 Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'  
 We are not now that strength which in old days  
 Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;  
 One equal temper of heroic hearts,  
 Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will  
 To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

### Summary

Ulysses (Odysseus) declares that there is little point in his staying home "by this still hearth" with his old wife, doling out rewards and punishments for the unnamed masses who live in his kingdom.

Still speaking to himself he proclaims that he "cannot rest from travel" but feels compelled to live to the fullest and swallow every last drop of life. He has enjoyed all his experiences as a sailor who travels the seas, and he considers himself a symbol for everyone who wanders and roams the earth. His travels have exposed him to many different types of people and ways of living. They have also exposed him to the "delight of battle" while fighting the Trojan War with his men. Ulysses declares that his travels and encounters have shaped who he is: "I am a part of all that I have met," he asserts. And it is only when he is traveling that the "margin" of the globe that he has not yet traversed shrinks and fade, and cease to goad him.

Ulysses declares that it is boring to stay in one place, and that to remain stationary is to rust rather than to shine; to stay in one place is to pretend that all there is to life is the simple act of breathing, whereas he knows that in fact life contains much novelty, and he longs to encounter this. His spirit yearns constantly for new experiences that will broaden his horizons; he wishes "to follow knowledge like a sinking star" and forever grow in wisdom and in learning.



*Task* Write about the prosody of poem Ulysses.

Ulysses now speaks to an unidentified audience concerning his son Telemachus, who will act as his successor while the great hero resumes his travels: he says, "This is my son, mine own Telemachus, to whom I leave the scepter and the isle." He speaks highly but also patronizingly of his son's capabilities as a ruler, praising his prudence, dedication, and devotion to the gods.



*Notes* Telemachus will do his work of governing the island while Ulysses will do his work of traveling the seas: "He works his work, I mine."

In the final stanza, Ulysses addresses the mariners with whom he has worked, traveled, and weathered life's storms over many years. He declares that although he and they are old, they still have the potential to do something noble and honorable before "the long day wanes." He encourages them to make use of their old age because "'tis not too late to seek a newer world." He declares that his goal is to sail onward "beyond the sunset" until his death. Perhaps, he suggests, they may even reach the "Happy Isles," or the paradise of perpetual summer described in Greek mythology where great heroes like the warrior Achilles were believed to have been taken after their deaths. Although Ulysses and his mariners are not as strong as they were in youth, they are "strong in will" and are sustained by their resolve to push onward relentlessly: "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."

## Notes

**Self Assessment**

## Multiple Choice Questions:

1. Libba Bray's book *A Great and Terrible Beauty* has a section of the poem as an introduction, as does Meg Cabot's ..... .
  - (a) Merlin
  - (b) King Arthur
  - (c) Avalon High
  - (d) Guinevere
2. In the novel *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* by ....., the title character recites the poem to her class (this is also done in the stage and film adaptations).
  - (a) Zimbabwe
  - (b) A.S. Byatt
  - (c) Muriel Spark
  - (d) Graham Greene
3. .... painted three episodes from the poem.
  - (a) Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood
  - (b) Royal Academy
  - (c) John Everett Millais
  - (d) John William Waterhouse
4. Who haunts Stephen throughout *Ulysses*?
  - (a) His father
  - (b) His mother
  - (c) Shakespeare
  - (d) Ulysses
5. What does Stephen perceive Buck to be?
  - (a) Lover
  - (b) Muse
  - (c) Savior
  - (d) Usurper

**Form**

This poem is written as a dramatic monologue: the entire poem is spoken by a single character, whose identity is revealed by his words. The lines are in blank verse, or unrhymed iambic pentameter, which serves to impart a fluid and natural quality to Ulysses' speech. Many of the lines are enjambed, which means that a thought does not end with the line-break; the sentences often end in the middle, rather than the end, of the lines. The use of enjambment is appropriate in a poem about pushing forward "beyond the utmost bound of human thought." Finally, the poem is divided into four paragraph-like sections, each of which comprises a distinct thematic unit of the poem.

**Commentary**

In this poem, written in 1833 and revised for publication in 1842, Tennyson reworks the figure of Ulysses by drawing on the ancient hero of Homer's *Odyssey* ("Ulysses" is the Roman form of the Greek "Odysseus") and the medieval hero of Dante's *Inferno*. Homer's Ulysses, as described in *Scroll XI* of the *Odyssey*, learns from a prophecy that he will take a final sea voyage after killing the suitors of his wife Penelope. The details of this sea voyage are described by Dante in *Canto XXVI* of the *Inferno*: Ulysses finds himself restless in Ithaca and driven by "the longing I had to gain experience of the world." Dante's Ulysses is a tragic figure who dies while sailing too far in an insatiable thirst for knowledge. Tennyson combines these two accounts by having Ulysses make his speech shortly after returning to Ithaca and resuming his administrative responsibilities, and shortly before embarking on his final voyage.

However, this poem also concerns the poet's own personal journey, for it was composed in the first few weeks after Tennyson learned of the death of his dear college friend Arthur Henry Hallam in 1833. Like *In Memoriam*, then, this poem is also an elegy for a deeply cherished friend. Ulysses, who symbolizes the grieving poet, proclaims his resolution to push onward in spite of the awareness that "death closes all" (line 51). As Tennyson himself stated, the poem expresses his own "need of going forward and braving the struggle of life" after the loss of his beloved Hallam.

## Notes

The poem's final line, "to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield," came to serve as a motto for the poet's Victorian contemporaries: the poem's hero longs to flee the tedium of daily life "among these barren crags" (line 2) and to enter a mythical dimension "beyond the sunset, and the baths of all the western stars" (lines 60–61); as such, he was a model of individual self-assertion and the Romantic rebellion against bourgeois conformity. Thus for Tennyson's immediate audience, the figure of Ulysses held not only mythological meaning, but stood as an important contemporary cultural icon as well.

"Ulysses," like many of Tennyson's other poems, deals with the desire to reach beyond the limits of one's field of vision and the mundane details of everyday life. Ulysses is the antithesis of the mariners in "The Lotos-Eaters," who proclaim "we will no longer roam" and desire only to relax amidst the Lotos fields. In contrast, Ulysses "cannot rest from travel" and longs to roam the globe (line 6). Like the Lady of Shallot, who longs for the worldly experiences she has been denied, Ulysses hungers to explore the untraveled world.

As in all dramatic monologues, here the character of the speaker emerges almost unintentionally from his own words. Ulysses' incompetence as a ruler is evidenced by his preference for potential quests rather than his present responsibilities. He devotes a full 26 lines to his own egotistical proclamation of his zeal for the wandering life, and another 26 lines to the exhortation of his mariners to roam the seas with him. However, he offers only 11 lines of lukewarm praise to his son concerning the governance of the kingdom in his absence, and a mere two words about his "aged wife" Penelope.



*Notes* The speaker's own words betray his abdication of responsibility and his specificity of purpose.

### Analysis

"Ulysses" is a poem in blank verse by the Victorian poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809–1892), written in 1833 and published in 1842 in Tennyson's well-received second volume of poetry. An oft-quoted poem, it is popularly used to illustrate the dramatic monologue form. Ulysses describes, to an unspecified audience, his discontent and restlessness upon returning to his kingdom, Ithaca, after his far-ranging travels. Facing old age, Ulysses yearns to explore again, despite his reunion with his wife Penelope and son Telemachus.

The character of Ulysses (in Greek, Odysseus) has been explored widely in literature. The adventures of Odysseus were first recorded in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (c. 800–700 BC), and Tennyson draws on Homer's narrative in the poem. Most critics, however, find that Tennyson's Ulysses recalls Dante's *Ulisse* in his *Inferno* (c. 1320). In Dante's re-telling, *Ulisse* is condemned to hell among the false counsellors, both for his pursuit of knowledge beyond human bounds and for his adventures in disregard of his family.

For much of this poem's history, readers viewed Ulysses as resolute and heroic, admiring him for his determination "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield". The view that Tennyson intended a heroic character is supported by his statements about the poem and by the events in his life—the death of his closest friend—that prompted him to write it. In the twentieth century, some new interpretations of "Ulysses" highlighted potential ironies in the poem. They argued, for example, that Ulysses wishes to selfishly abandon his kingdom and family, and they questioned more positive assessments of Ulysses' character by demonstrating how he resembles flawed protagonists in earlier literature.

As the poem begins, Ulysses has returned to his kingdom, Ithaca, having had a long, eventful journey home after fighting in the Trojan War. Confronted again by domestic life, Ulysses expresses his lack of contentment, including his indifference toward the "savage race" (line 4) that he governs. Ulysses contrasts his restlessness and boredom with his heroic past. He contemplates his age and eventual

**Notes**

death—"Life piled on life / were all too little, and of one to me / little remains" (24–26)—and longs for further experience and knowledge. His son Telemachus will inherit the throne that Ulysses finds burdensome. While Ulysses thinks Telemachus will be an adequate king, he seems to have little empathy for his son—"He works his work, I mine" (43)—and the necessary methods of governing—"by slow prudence" (36) and "through soft degrees" (37). In the final section, Ulysses turns his attention to his mariners and calls on them to join him on another quest, making no guarantees as to their fate but attempting to conjure their heroic past:

... Come, my friends,  
Tis not too late to seek a newer world.  
Push off, and sitting well in order smite  
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds  
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths  
Of all the western stars, until I die.  
It may be that the gulfs will wash us down;  
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,  
And see the great Achilles, whom we knew. (56–64)

**Prosody**

The speaker's language is unadorned and forceful, and it expresses Ulysses' conflicting moods as he searches for continuity between his past and future. There is often a marked contrast between the sentiment of Ulysses' words and the sounds that express them. For example, the poem's insistent iambic pentameter is often interrupted by spondees (metrical feet consisting of two long syllables), which slow down the movement of the poem; the labouring language casts into doubt the reliability of Ulysses' sentiments. Noteworthy are lines 19–21:

Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'  
Gleams that untravell'd world, whose margin fades  
For ever and for ever when I move. (19–21)

Observing their burdensome prosodic effect, the poet Matthew Arnold remarked, "these three lines by themselves take up nearly as much time as a whole book of the Iliad." Many of the poem's clauses carry over into the following line; this enjambment emphasizes Ulysses' restlessness and dissatisfaction.

**Form**

The poem's seventy lines of blank verse are presented as a dramatic monologue. Scholars disagree on how Ulysses' speech functions in this format; it is not necessarily clear to whom Ulysses is speaking, if anyone, and from what location. Some see the verse turning from a soliloquy to a public address, as Ulysses seems to speak to himself in the first movement, then to turn to an audience as he introduces his son, and then to relocate to the seashore where he addresses his mariners. In this interpretation, the comparatively direct and honest language of the first movement is set against the more politically minded tone of the last two movements. For example, the second paragraph (33–43) about Telemachus, in which Ulysses muses again about domestic life, is a "revised version [of lines 1–5] for public consumption": a "savage race" is revised to a "rugged people".

The ironic interpretations of "Ulysses" may be the result of the modern tendency to consider the narrator of a dramatic monologue as necessarily "unreliable". According to critic Dwight Culler, the poem has been a victim of revisionist readings in which the reader expects to reconstruct the truth from a misleading narrator's accidental revelations. (Compare the more obvious use of this

approach in Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess".) Culler himself views "Ulysses" as a dialectic in which the speaker weighs the virtues of a contemplative and an active approach to life; Ulysses moves through four emotional stages that are self-revelatory, not ironic: beginning with his rejection of the barren life to which he has returned in Ithaca, he then fondly recalls his heroic past, recognizes the validity of Telemachus' method of governing, and with these thoughts plans another journey.

## 30.2 Mathew Arnold: Dover Beach

This is a poem about a sea and a beach that is truly beautiful, but holds much deeper meaning than what meets the eye. The poem is written in free verse with no particular meter or rhyme scheme, although some of the words do rhyme. Arnold is the speaker speaking to someone he loves. As the poem progresses, the reader sees why Arnold poses the question stated above, and why life seems to be the way it is. During the first part of the poem Arnold states, "The Sea is calm tonight" and in line 7, "Only, from the long line of spray". In this way, Arnold is setting the mood or scene so the reader can understand the point he is trying to portray. In lines 1-6 he is talking about a very peaceful night on the ever so calm sea, with the moonlight shining so intensely on the land. Then he states how the moonlight "gleams and is gone" because the "cliffs of England" are standing at their highest peaks, which are blocking the light of the moon. Next, the waves come roaring into the picture, as they "draw back and fling the pebbles" onto the shore and back out to sea again. Arnold also mentions that the shore brings "the eternal note of sadness in", may be representing the cycles of life and repetition. Arnold then starts describing the history of Sophocles's idea of the "Aegean's turbid ebb and flow".

### 30.2.1 Text of Dover Beach

The sea is calm to-night,  
 The tide is full, the moon lies fair  
 Upon the straits; — on the French coast the light  
 Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,  
 Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.  
 Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!  
 Only, from the long line of spray  
 Where the sea meets the moon-blanch'd land,  
 Listen! you hear the grating roar  
 Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,     10  
 At their return, up the high strand,  
 Begin, and cease, and then again begin,  
 With tremulous cadence slow, and bring  
 The eternal note of sadness in.  
 Sophocles long ago  
 Heard it on the Aegean, and it brought  
 Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow  
 Of human misery; we  
 Find also in the sound a thought,

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Hearing it by this distant northern sea. 20

The sea of faith

Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore

Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd.

But now I only hear

Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,

Retreating, to the breath

Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear

And naked shingles of the world.

Ah, love, let us be true

To one another! for the world which seems 30

To lie before us like a land of dreams,

So various, so beautiful, so new,

Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,

Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;

And we are here as on a darkling plain

Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,

Where ignorant armies clash by night. (Matthew Arnold, 1867)

The opening stanza of Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" is a soothing description of what is believed to be Matthew Arnold looking out the window of his honeymoon cottage over a moonlit pebble beach of the Dover area of Southeastern England. All, save for the last line, is poetic romanticism at its finest; describing the "moon-blanch'd land" (8) as it's rhythmically washed by the sea, and the sound of the rasping pebbles echoing across the shoreline. The opening stanza of "Dover Beach" is meant to lull the reader into a peaceful composure, imagining the scene with the entire divine splendor that Arnold was writing with. The final line, however, Matthew Arnold ominously calls this scenery the medium that brings "the eternal note of sadness in" (14); the emotional music, that carries with it spiritual manna, bares the stinging bitter-sweet realization that none of it is actually real.

Sophocles (495 – 406), the Greek tragedy playwright, is described by Matthew Arnold as hearing the same sound in the Mediterranean when inspired to write his tragedies such as *Antigone*, *King Oedipus*, and *Electra*. Arnold describes it as having "brought into his mind the turbid ebb and flow of human misery" (16). This comparison to Sophocles' Theban plays, in their pitiless misfortunes, foreshadows the mood of the following stanzas. The touching enchantment of first devout stanza of "Dover Beach" is now enveloped by the ugly and secular truth of the world. Matthew Arnold describes the "sea of faith" (20), the divine protection of religious devotion, as an encompassing "bright girdle furl'd" (22) that is now retreating before human reason, "the breath of the night-wind" (25).



*Task* Write about the final stanza of the poem, *Dover Beach*.

In the final stanza of "Dover Beach", Matthew Arnold writes "Ah, love, let us be true / To one another! for the world which seems / To lie before us like a land of dreams, / So various, so beautiful, so new, / Hath really neither joy, nor love, or light, / Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;"

(28-33). In these emotionally charged lines Arnold pleads that they cling to each other against a land that is beautiful as only an exterior to an unfeeling, Godless world. The beautiful world, the world of the Romantic, is a lie; there is only the callous Modern world, devoid of answered hopes or prayers. Matthew Arnold writes in a very similar fashion to William Wordsworth, “we are here as on a darkling plain” (34), to convey how we stand in the darkness of our contemporary lifestyle and must now suffer with our realization of secular doctrine and the destruction of God.

Matthew Arnold’s modern sensibility shines through like a poetic eulogy, a poignant lamentation for the future of mankind in a world without spirituality. The beauty of the Dover Beach, that Matthew Arnold describes serves as only a momentary elation that soon descends into an ominous melancholia of understanding that none of the emotion that he finds in the landscape is real.



*Did u know?* To Matthew Arnold, Dover Beach is sour manna, poisoning his creativity as it feeds it.

### Summary

The Poet, Mathew Arnold is standing by the seashore and watching the gentle waves splashing the sandy shores of the Straits. There is a weak breeze that blows gently and the sea looks calm for the night. The tide is full of potential yet under self control and the moon looks bright as it shines its beams on the quiet sea. From the French Coast across the English Channel to the high sea cliffs of England, the light shines pleasantly and softly, and gets weakened towards the tranquil bay of England.

The poet tells his companion to come to the window of his cabin and enjoy the sweet aroma of the night air. Watching the seashore from this height, one can only witness the waters of the sea that acts as a catalyst when they touch the moonlit blended Colour of the sands. Sometimes they hear the roar of the sea when the pebbles cross over to the high sandy beaches and move back suddenly with the withdrawing waves. This phenomenon continues every evening throughout the night with a slow trembling note and the presence of melancholy is felt.

The poet makes his reference to ‘Sophocles’ a famous Greek dramatist long ago, of the 5th Century B.C. to a passage in his play ‘Antigone’(line-583). Here the same eternal note of sadness can be heard on the ‘Aegean’: an elongated embayment of the Mediterranean Sea, between Southern Balkans and Anatolia. This brought to the dramatist’s mind the muddy movement of the tide away from the land and its flow, the tide of misfortune that rules human misery. That same similar sound can be heard in the thoughts from the distant sea in the north.

The mighty sea was once a beholder of faith with its vastness that touches all the shores of the earth around the globe, lay folded like a bright girdle cord worn around the waist and rolled up fastened and firm. Yet now, the sounds of the waves in the sea are only notes of melancholy; long drawn; advancing and retreating at the breath of the night wind that blows down the vast yet dull and gloomy edges of the bare shingles of the world, the beaches that are covered with coarse sand and large stones.

The poet finally appeals to his beloved companion to be honest with each other, for the world that they live in, which looks so beautiful and new, and lay before them like a land of dreams, does not have joy, love or spiritual light. There is no certainty for help in times of trouble and peace. All the mortals live in this world in a dark state of mind and the struggle for survival is no less different from ignorant armies that fight throughout the night.

### 30.2.2 Theme and Subject

The first stanza opens with the description of a nightly scene at the seaside. The lyrical self calls his addressee to the window, to share the visual beauty of the scene. Then he calls her attention to the

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aural experience, which is somehow less beautiful. The lyrical self projects his own feelings of melancholy on to the sound of “the grating roar /Of pebbles, which the waves draw back, and fling/ At their return, up the high strand” (ll.9-11). This sound causes an emotion of “sadness” (l.14) in him.

The second stanza introduces the Greek author Sophocles’ idea of “the turbid ebb and flow of human misery” (ll.17-18). A contrast is formed to the scenery of the previous stanza. Sophocles apparently heard the similar sound at the “Aegean” sea (l. 16) and thus developed his ideas. Arnold then reconnects this idea to the present. Although there is a distance in time and space (“Aegean” — “northern sea” (L. 20)), the general feeling prevails.

In the third stanza, the sea is turned into the “Sea of Faith” (l.21), which is a metaphor for a time (probably the Middle Ages) when religion could still be experienced without the doubt that the modern (Victorian) age brought about through Darwinism, the Industrial revolution, Imperialism, a crisis in religion, etc.) Arnold illustrates this by using an image of clothes (‘Kleidervergleich’). When religion was still intact, the world was dressed (“like the folds of a bright girdle furled” (l. 23)). Now that this faith is gone, the world lies there stripped naked and bleak. (“the vast edges drear/ And naked shingles of the world” (ll. 27-28))

The fourth and final stanza begins with a dramatic pledge by the lyrical self. He asks his love to be “true” (l.29), meaning faithful, to him. (“Ah, love, let us be true /To one another!” (ll. 29-30)). For the beautiful scenery that presents itself to them (“for the world, which seems/ To lie before us like a land of dreams,/ So various, so beautiful, so new” (ll.30-32)) is really not what it seems to be. On the contrary, as he accentuates with a series of denials, this world does not contain any basic human values. These have disappeared, along with the light and religion and left humanity in darkness. “We” (l.35) could just refer to the lyrical self and his love, but it could also be interpreted as the lyrical self addressing humanity. The pleasant scenery turns into a “darkling plain” (l. 35), where only hostile, frightening sounds of fighting armies can be heard:

And we are here as on a darkling plain

Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,

Where ignorant armies clash by night.” (ll.35-37).

According to Ian Hamilton, these lines refer to a passage in Thukydides, The Battle of Epipolae, where — in a night encounter — the two sides could not distinguish friend from foe” (144-45).

### Analysis

“Dover Beach” is a difficult poem to analyze, and some of its passages and metaphors have become so well-known that they are hard to see with “fresh eyes”. Arnold begins with a naturalistic and detailed nightscape of the beach at Dover in which auditory imagery plays a significant role (“Listen! you hear the grating roar”). The beach, however, is bare, with only a hint of humanity in a light that “gleams and is gone”. Reflecting the traditional notion that the poem was written during Arnold’s honeymoon, one critic notes that “the speaker might be talking to his bride”.

The sea is calm to-night.

The tide is full, the moon lies fair

Upon the straits;—on the French coast the light

Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,

Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.

Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!

Only, from the long line of spray

Where the sea meets the moon-blanch'd land,  
 Listen! you hear the grating roar  
 Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,  
 At their return, up the high strand,  
 Begin, and cease, and then again begin,  
 With tremulous cadence slow, and bring  
 The eternal note of sadness in

Arnold looks at two aspects of this naturalistic scene, its soundscape (in the first and second stanza) and the retreating action of the tide (in the third stanza). He hears the sound of the sea as "the eternal note of sadness". Sophocles, a 5th century BC Greek playwright who wrote tragedies on fate and the will of the gods, also heard this same sound as he stood upon the shore of the Aegean Sea. Critics differ widely on how to interpret this image of the Greek Classical age. One critic sees a difference between Sophocles in the classical age of Greece interpreting the "note of sadness" humanistically, while Arnold in the industrial nineteenth century hears in this sound the retreat of religion and faith. A more recent critic connects the two as artists, Sophocles the tragedian, Arnold the lyric poet, each attempting through words to transform this note of sadness into "a higher order of experience".

Sophocles long ago  
 Heard it on the Aegean, and it brought  
 Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow  
 Of human misery; we  
 Find also in the sound a thought,  
 Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

Having examined the soundscape, Arnold turns to the action of the tide itself and sees in its retreat a metaphor for the loss of faith in the modern age, once again expressed in an auditory image ("But now I only hear/Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar"). This third stanza begins with an image not of sadness, but of "joyous fulness" similar in beauty to the image with which the poem opens.

The Sea of Faith  
 Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore  
 Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd.  
 But now I only hear  
 Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,  
 Retreating, to the breath  
 Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear  
 And naked shingles of the world

The final stanza begins with an appeal to love, then moves on to the famous ending metaphor. Critics have varied in their interpretation of the first two lines of this stanza; one calls them a "perfunctory gesture...swallowed up by the poem's powerfully dark picture", while another sees in them "a stand against a world of broken faith". Midway between these is the interpretation of one of Arnold's biographers who describes being "true/To one another" as "a precarious notion" in a world that has become "a maze of confusion".

The metaphor with which the poem ends is most likely an allusion to a passage in Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War. Thucydides describes an ancient battle which occurred on a

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similar beach during the invasion of Sicily by the Athenians. The battle took place at night; the attacking army became disoriented while fighting in the darkness and many of their soldiers inadvertently killed each other. This final image has also been variously interpreted by the critics. The “darkling plain” of the final line has been described as Arnold’s “central statement” of the human condition. A more recent critic has seen the final line as “only metaphor” and thus susceptible to the “uncertainty” of poetic language.

Ah, love, let us be true  
To one another! for the world, which seems  
To lie before us like a land of dreams,  
So various, so beautiful, so new,  
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,  
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;  
And we are here as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

“The poem’s discourse”, Honan tells us, “shifts literally and symbolically from the present, to Sophocles on the Aegean, from Medieval Europe back to the present, and the auditory and visual images are dramatic and mimetic and didactic. Exploring the dark terror that lies beneath his happiness in love, the speaker resolves to love—and exigencies of history and the nexus between lovers are the poem’s real issues. That lovers may be ‘true/To one another’ is a precarious notion: love in the modern city momentarily gives peace, but nothing else in a post-medieval society reflects or confirms the faithfulness of lovers. Devoid of love and light the world is a maze of confusion left by ‘retreating’ faith.”

Critics have questioned the unity of the poem, noting that the sea of the opening stanza does not appear in the final stanza, while the “darkling plain” of the final line is not apparent in the opening. Various solutions to this problem have been proffered. One critic saw the “darkling plain” with which the poem ends as comparable to the “naked shingles of the world”. “Shingles” here means flat beach cobbles, characteristic of some wave-swept coasts. Another found the poem “emotionally convincing” even if its logic may be questionable. The same critic notes that “the poem upends our expectations of metaphor” and sees in this the central power of the poem. The poem’s historicism creates another complicating dynamic. Beginning in the present it shifts to the classical age of Greece, then (with its concerns for the sea of faith) it turns to Medieval Europe, before finally returning to the present. The form of the poem itself has drawn considerable comment. Critics have noted the careful diction in the opening description, the overall, spell-binding rhythm and cadence of the poem and its dramatic character. One commentator sees the strophe-antistrophe of the ode at work in the poem, with an ending that contains something of the “cata-strophe” of tragedy. Finally, one critic sees the complexity of the poem’s structure resulting in “the first major ‘free-verse’ poem in the language.

**Self Assessment**

Multiple Choice Questions:

6. “Dover Beach” is written in:
- |  |                              |
|--|------------------------------|
| (a) iambic pentameter.                 | (b) unrhymed free verse.     |
| (c) free verse with occasional rhymes. | (d) fully rhymed free verse. |

7. The poem is set:
  - (a) on the English coast on a calm, moonlit night.
  - (b) on the French coast on a calm, moonlit night.
  - (c) on a darkling plain.
  - (d) on the English coast on a stormy night.
8. The roar of pebbles flung by the waves makes the speaker think of
  - (a) the steady march of human progress.
  - (b) the unconquerable spirit of the generations of humanity.
  - (c) the eternal note of sadness.
  - (d) the beauty and strength of nature.
9. The reference to Sophocles is intended to suggest
  - (a) the irrelevance of the long-ago past to present-day issues.
  - (b) the ability of great art to heal the spirit.
  - (c) the uselessness of culture in dealing with the real world.
  - (d) the universality of the tragic in human experience.
10. The image in the poem's last three lines is an example of
  - (a) metaphor.
  - (b) simile.
  - (c) allusion.

### 30.3 W.B. Yeats: Introduction of the Author and his Poem: A Prayer for My Daughter

William Butler Yeats was an Irish poet and playwright, and one of the foremost figures of 20th century literature. A pillar of both the Irish and British literary establishments, in his later years Yeats served as an Irish Senator for two terms. He was a driving force behind the Irish Literary Revival and, along with Lady Gregory, Edward Martyn, and others, founded the Abbey Theatre, where he served as its chief during its early years. In 1923 he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature for what the Nobel Committee described as "inspired poetry, which in a highly artistic form gives expression to the spirit of a whole nation." He was the first Irishman so honoured. Yeats is generally considered one of the few writers who completed their greatest works after being awarded the Nobel Prize; such works include *The Tower* (1928) and *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1929).

Yeats was born and educated in Dublin but spent his childhood in County Sligo. He studied poetry in his youth and from an early age was fascinated by both Irish legends and the occult. Those topics feature in the first phase of his work, which lasted roughly until the turn of the 20th century. His earliest volume of verse was published in 1889 and those slow-paced and lyrical poems display debts to Edmund Spenser, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and the Pre-Raphaelite poets. From 1900, Yeats' poetry grew more physical and realistic. He largely renounced the transcendental beliefs of his youth, though he remained preoccupied with physical and spiritual masks, as well as with cyclical theories of life.

Yeats is generally considered one of the twentieth century's key English language poets. He was a Symbolist poet, in that he used allusive imagery and symbolic structures throughout his career. Yeats chose words and assembled them so that, in addition to a particular meaning, they suggest other abstract thoughts that may seem more significant and resonant. His use of symbols is usually something physical that is both itself and a suggestion of other, perhaps immaterial, timeless qualities. Unlike other modernists who experimented with free verse, Yeats was a master of the traditional forms. The impact of modernism on his work can be seen in the increasing abandonment of the more conventionally poetic diction of his early work in favour of the more austere language and

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more direct approach to his themes that increasingly characterises the poetry and plays of his middle period, comprising the volumes *In the Seven Woods*, *Responsibilities* and *The Green Helmet*. His later poetry and plays are written in a more personal vein, and the works written in the last twenty years of his life include mention of his son and daughter, as well as meditations on the experience of growing old. In his poem, “*The Circus Animals’ Desertion*”, he describes the inspiration for these late works:

Now that my ladder’s gone  
I must lie down where all the ladders start  
In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.

During 1929, he stayed at Thoor Ballylee near Gort in County Galway (where Yeats had his summer home since 1919) for the last time. Much of the remainder of his life was lived outside of Ireland, although he did lease Riversdale house in the Dublin suburb of Rathfarnham in 1932. He wrote prolifically through his final years, and published poetry, plays, and prose. In 1938, he attended the Abbey for the final time to see the premier of his play *Purgatory*. His *Autobiographies of William Butler Yeats* was published that same year.

While Yeats’ early poetry drew heavily on Irish myth and folklore, his later work was engaged with more contemporary issues, and his style underwent a dramatic transformation. His work can be divided into three general periods. The early poems are lushly pre-Raphaelite in tone, self-consciously ornate, and, at times, according to unsympathetic critics, stilted. Yeats began by writing epic poems such as *The Isle of Statues* and *The Wanderings of Oisín*. His other early poems are lyrics on the themes of love or mystical and esoteric subjects.



*Did u know?* Yeats’ middle period saw him abandon the pre-Raphaelite character of his early work and attempt to turn himself into a Landor-style social ironist.

### 30.3.1 A Prayer for my Daughter: Text

Once more the storm is howling, and half hid  
Under this cradle-hood and coverlid  
My child sleeps on. There is no obstacle  
But Gregory’s wood and one bare hill  
Whereby the haystack- and roof-levelling wind,  
Bred on the Atlantic, can be stayed;  
And for an hour I have walked and prayed  
Because of the great gloom that is in my mind.

I have walked and prayed for this young child an hour  
And heard the sea-wind scream upon the tower,  
And under the arches of the bridge, and scream  
In the elms above the flooded stream;  
Imagining in excited reverie  
That the future years had come,  
Dancing to a frenzied drum,  
Out of the murderous innocence of the sea

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May she be granted beauty and yet not  
Beauty to make a stranger's eye distraught,  
Or hers before a looking-glass, for such,  
Being made beautiful overmuch,  
Consider beauty a sufficient end,  
Lose natural kindness and maybe  
The heart-revealing intimacy  
That chooses right, and never find a friend.

Helen being chosen found life flat and dull  
And later had much trouble from a fool,  
While that great Queen, that rose out of the spray,  
Being fatherless could have her way  
Yet chose a bandy-legged smith for man.  
It's certain that fine women eat  
A crazy salad with their meat  
Whereby the Horn of plenty is undone.

In courtesy I'd have her chiefly learned;  
Hearts are not had as a gift but hearts are earned  
By those that are not entirely beautiful;  
Yet many, that have played the fool  
For beauty's very self, has charm made wise.  
And many a poor man that has roved,  
Loved and thought himself beloved,  
From a glad kindness cannot take his eyes.

May she become a flourishing hidden tree  
That all her thoughts may like the linnet be,  
And have no business but dispensing round  
Their magnanimities of sound,  
Nor but in merriment begin a chase,  
Nor but in merriment a quarrel.  
O may she live like some green laurel  
Rooted in one dear perpetual place.

My mind, because the minds that I have loved,  
The sort of beauty that I have approved,  
Prosper but little, has dried up of late,  
Yet knows that to be choked with hate

Notes

May well be of all evil chances chief.  
If there's no hatred in a mind  
Assault and battery of the wind  
Can never tear the linnet from the leaf.

An intellectual hatred is the worst,  
So let her think opinions are accursed.  
Have I not seen the loveliest woman born  
Out of the mouth of plenty's horn,  
Because of her opinionated mind  
Barter that horn and every good  
By quiet natures understood  
For an old bellows full of angry wind?  
Considering that, all hatred driven hence,  
The soul recovers radical innocence  
And learns at last that it is self-delighting,  
Self-appeasing, self-affrighting,  
And that its own sweet will is Heaven's will;  
She can, though every face should scowl  
And every windy quarter howl  
Or every bellows burst, be happy still.

And may her bridegroom bring her to a house  
Where all's accustomed, ceremonious;  
For arrogance and hatred are the wares  
Peddled in the thoroughfares.  
How but in custom and in ceremony  
Are innocence and beauty born?  
Ceremony's a name for the rich horn,  
And custom for the spreading laurel tree.

William Butler Yeats (1865–1939), the celebrated Irish poet, the winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1923, needs no introduction. The Irish identity was very strong in him and as an active member of the Irish National Revival; he tried his best to add Celtic legends to evoke the glorious past of his land. In a time when the world was much fragmented, he endeavored to create a unified perspective of things that is cohesive and all encompassing.



*Notes* The poem is an intense expression of how Yeats felt after his daughter Anne was born although the ideas conveyed go far beyond the personal.

### 30.3.2 Theme of the Poem

The poem portrays how a father, who has been blessed with a daughter, prays for the future happiness and welfare of her. The poet hopes that instead of growing up to be a very beautiful woman, his daughter should be blessed with the attributes of a virtuous and great soul. She should be well-mannered and full of humility rather than being strongly opinionated, to avoid intellectual detestation because that can drown her in misery.

#### Summary

In the beginning, Yeats talks about the storm having commenced brewing in the seas. Between his newly born daughter and the sea, there stand a bare hill and Gregory's woods which might not thwart the storm from reaching the helpless infant. The father is naturally worried as he senses the gale striking the tower and the undersides of the bridges. To his mind, the storm presages the future of her daughter having arrived with a rage, mounting from the seeming innocence of the sea. As a father, the poet wishes beauty for her daughter but not such voluptuousness that would engross others to distraction or make her vain.

He does not want her daughter to be bereft of kindness nor does he want her to fail in choosing the persons with whom she will be friendly. The father shudders at the thought of her daughter's turning to be another Helen of Troy, who couldn't help being unfaithful as she was so beautiful. Some lovely women like the queen who had not had her father imposing useful restraints upon her, chose an ordinary smith with warped legs, instead of marrying a handsome yet virtuous man matching her handsome looks and social standing. It is strange how exquisitely beautiful women often choose 'a crazy salad' (an undeserving husband) to go 'with their meat' (rich food or their great beauty).

His daughter should realize that she should be deserving of winning human hearts. She should not be like those crafty women who employ their charms to use people to their advantage. It is true that men fall head over heels for stunning females but it is really the compassion of the women which they get enamored by in the end. The father in the poet is keen that her daughter should be like a tree giving succour and shade to people when she grows up and her feelings should be like the sweet song of the linnet that spreads joy for the sake of doing so. It is very likely that she will sometime desire something intensely in a wrong spirit or engage in some strife at times but let them be transient and not very serious. Let her be like an evergreen tree; let her send her roots into the depth of her good convictions standing at the same place.



Task

Write short note on the theme of the poem, "A Prayer for my Daughter".

The poet is rueful that his running after the people he liked or the kind of gorgeousness that he was infatuated with, could not satiate him as he wanted and that he is weary of all the barrenness that has enveloped him now. He seems to get momentarily confused as to what could be the right sort of beauty. He has however no hatred toward anyone as he is absolutely sure that it is the worst kind of malevolence that could poison his life. He wants her daughter also to learn this truth before she allows her to be ruled by the negative force of hatred because such a mindset will save her from inviting harsh criticism or abuses being showered upon her. The poet would not like her daughter to be self-opinionated as that could lead her to practicing intellectual loathing which the poet considers to be the worst kind of malady in a human being.

He recalls coming in close contact with a beautiful and accomplished woman who had to give away everything by being strongly biased. The truth rings clearly in the poet's mind that by removing all hatred from one's mind, the soul not only regains its innocence but also embarks on the journey of delighting in itself. Since the spirit of the soul is the will of God, he fervently prays that his daughter should be able to discover her soul and be happy in the face of any storm or disapproval.

Notes

And finally, as a father, he hopes that she will be betrothed to a man who has for ever steered away from detestation and arrogance which is so common everywhere. Let the house of her husband be comfortable and secure but not at the expense of anyone.

### **30.4 W. B. Yeats: Second Coming and as an Irish Poet**

#### **30.4.1 Second Coming–Summary**

##### **Summary**

The speaker describes a nightmarish scene: the falcon, turning in a widening “gyre” (spiral), cannot hear the falconer; “Things fall apart; the center cannot hold”; anarchy is loosed upon the world; “The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere / The ceremony of innocence is drowned.” The best people, the speaker says, lack all conviction, but the worst “are full of passionate intensity.”

Surely, the speaker asserts, the world is near a revelation; “Surely the Second Coming is at hand.” No sooner does he think of “the Second Coming,” then he is troubled by “a vast image of the Spiritus Mundi, or the collective spirit of mankind: somewhere in the desert, a giant sphinx (“A shape with lion body and the head of a man, / A gaze as blank and pitiless as the sun”) is moving, while the shadows of desert birds reel about it. The darkness drops again over the speaker’s sight, but he knows that the sphinx’s twenty centuries of “stony sleep” have been made a nightmare by the motions of “a rocking cradle.” And what “rough beast,” he wonders, “its hour come round at last, / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?”

##### **Form**

“The Second Coming” is written in a very rough iambic pentameter, but the meter is so loose, and the exceptions so frequent, that it actually seems closer to free verse with frequent heavy stresses. The rhymes are likewise haphazard; apart from the two couplets with which the poem opens, there are only coincidental rhymes in the poem, such as “man” and “sun.”

##### **Commentary**

Because of its stunning, violent imagery and terrifying ritualistic language, “The Second Coming” is one of Yeats’s most famous and most anthologized poems; it is also one of the most thematically obscure and difficult to understand. (It is safe to say that very few people who love this poem could paraphrase its meaning to satisfaction.) Structurally, the poem is quite simple—the first stanza describes the conditions present in the world (things falling apart, anarchy, etc.), and the second surmises from those conditions that a monstrous Second Coming is about to take place, not of the Jesus we first knew, but of a new messiah, a “rough beast,” the slouching sphinx rousing itself in the desert and lumbering toward Bethlehem. This brief exposition, though intriguingly blasphemous, is not terribly complicated; but the question of what it should signify to a reader is another story entirely.

Yeats spent years crafting an elaborate, mystical theory of the universe that he described in his book *A Vision*. This theory issued in part from Yeats’s lifelong fascination with the occult and mystical, and in part from the sense of responsibility Yeats felt to order his experience within a structured belief system. The system is extremely complicated and not of any lasting importance—except for the effect that it had on his poetry, which is of extraordinary lasting importance. The theory of history Yeats articulated in *A Vision* centers on a diagram made of two conical spirals, one inside the other, so that the widest part of one of the spirals rings around the narrowest part of the other spiral, and vice versa. Yeats believed that this image (he called the spirals “gyres”) captured the contrary motions inherent within the historical process, and he divided each gyre into specific regions that represented particular kinds of historical periods (and could also represent the psychological phases of an individual’s development).

“The Second Coming” was intended by Yeats to describe the current historical moment (the poem appeared in 1921) in terms of these gyres. Yeats believed that the world was on the threshold of an apocalyptic revelation, as history reached the end of the outer gyre (to speak roughly) and began moving along the inner gyre. In his definitive edition of Yeats’s poems, Richard J. Finneran quotes Yeats’s own notes:

The end of an age, which always receives the revelation of the character of the next age, is represented by the coming of one gyre to its place of greatest expansion and of the other to its place of greatest contraction... The revelation [that] approaches will... take its character from the contrary movement of the interior gyre...

In other words, the world’s trajectory along the gyre of science, democracy, and heterogeneity is now coming apart, like the frantically widening flight-path of the falcon that has lost contact with the falconer; the next age will take its character not from the gyre of science, democracy, and speed, but from the contrary inner gyre—which, presumably, opposes mysticism, primal power, and slowness to the science and democracy of the outer gyre. The “rough beast” slouching toward Bethlehem is the symbol of this new age; the speaker’s vision of the rising sphinx is his vision of the character of the new world.

This seems quite silly as philosophy or prophecy (particularly in light of the fact that it has not come true as yet). But as poetry, and understood more broadly than as a simple reiteration of the mystic theory of *A Vision*, “The Second Coming” is a magnificent statement about the contrary forces at work in history, and about the conflict between the modern world and the ancient world. The poem may not have the thematic relevance of Yeats’s best work, and may not be a poem with which many people can personally identify; but the aesthetic experience of its passionate language is powerful enough to ensure its value and its importance in Yeats’s work as a whole.

### 30.4.2 Yeats as an Irish Poet

The Irish poet and dramatist William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) was the leader of the Irish Literary Renaissance during the early 20th century. Yeats’s early lyrical poetry and drama drew inspiration from Irish legend and occult learning, but his later writing became increasingly engaged with his own time.

W. B. Yeats, b. Dublin, June 13, 1865, d. Jan. 28, 1939, was perhaps the greatest English-language poet of the 20th century. The major defining elements of Yeats’s poetic career were visible by his 24th year. He had formed a profound attachment to the county of Sligo, where he stayed for long periods while living in London (1867-83); his interest in the occult led him to found (1885) the Dublin Hermetic Society and to join (1887) the London Lodge of Theosophists; his 1885 meeting with the nationalist John O’Leary prompted his discovery of Ireland as a literary subject and his commitment to the cause of Irish national identity; in 1889 he fell in love with Maud Gonne and published *The Wanderings of Oisín*. Yeats’s lifework was an attempt to “hammer into unity” these evolving areas of his experience.

Between 1889 and 1902, Yeats sustained these original commitments. Irish myth and landscapes fill the poems of *The Rose* (1893). William Butler Yeats’ edition of Blake (1893; with Edwin Ellis) influenced his own thought. He enshrined his unrequited love for Maud Gonne in the stylized, erotic, symbolic verses of *The Wind among the Reeds* (1899). A meeting (1896) with Lady Isabella Augusta Gregory and visits to Coole Park provided a model of social grace and generosity that was practically useful and, in his poetry, of symbolic importance. Head of the Order of the Golden Dawn (London, 1900), he became (1902) President of the Irish National Theatre Society (later the Abbey Theatre) for which he had written, among other plays, the patriotic *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902). Motivating such activities was Yeats’s desire to raise national consciousness by cultural means and to extend his own awareness of himself as a poet, as a shaper not only of verses but of the world.

## Notes

**30.5 Summary**

- The Lady of Shallot is a magical being who lives alone on an island upstream from King Arthur's Camelot.
- "Ulysses" is a poem in blank verse by the Victorian poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809–1892), written in 1833 and published in 1842.
- The poem begins with a description of a river and a road that pass through long fields of barley and rye before reaching the town of Camelot.
- As the sky breaks out in rain and storm, the Lady of Shalott descends from her tower and finds a boat.
- "The Lady of Shalott" to be about the conflict between art and life.
- Ulysses declares that it is boring to stay in one place, and that to remain stationary is to rust rather than to shine;
- The Poet, Mathew Arnold is standing by the seashore and watching the gentle waves splashing the sandy shores of the Straits.
- The metaphor with which the poem ends is most likely an allusion to a passage in Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War.
- William Butler Yeats was an Irish poet and playwright, and one of the foremost figures of 20th century literature.

**30.6 Keywords**

- Ulysses* : "Ulysses" is a poem in blank verse by the Victorian poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809–1892)
- Idylls of the King* : Idylls of the King, published between 1856 and 1885, is a cycle of twelve narrative poems by the English poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson.
- King Arthur* : King Arthur is a legendary British leader of the late 5th and early 6th centuries, who, according to medieval histories and romances, led the defence of Britain against Saxon invaders in the early 6th century.
- The Second Coming* : "The Second Coming" was intended by Yeats to describe the current historical moment (the poem appeared in 1921) in terms of these gyres.
- W.B.Yeats* : William Butler Yeats was born in County Dublin on June 13, 1865.

**30.7 Review Questions**

1. Describe the analysis of the Lord Tennyson's, "The Lady of Shallot and Ulysses".
2. Critically appreciate the Mathew Arnold's "Dover beach".
3. Discuss the Introduction of the W.B.Yeats and his poem, "A prayer for my daughter".
4. Examine the theme of W.B.Yeats's, "Second Coming".
5. Consider W.B.Yeats as an Irish poet.

**Answers: Self Assessment**

- |        |        |        |        |         |
|--------|--------|--------|--------|---------|
| 1. (c) | 2. (c) | 3. (d) | 4. (b) | 5. (d)  |
| 6. (d) | 7. (a) | 8. (c) | 9. (d) | 10. (b) |

## 30.8 Further Readings

Notes



*Books*

- |                                      |                        |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------|
| W. B. Yeats: a critical introduction | — Stan Smith           |
| The Collected poems of W.B.Yeats     | — W.B.Yeats            |
| Lord Tennyson: a biographical sketch | — Henry James          |
| Selected Poems Tennyson              | — Alfred Lord Tennyson |



*Online links*

- [http://classiclit.about.com/od/ladyofshallott/fr/aafpr\\_shalott.htm](http://classiclit.about.com/od/ladyofshallott/fr/aafpr_shalott.htm)  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Lady\\_of\\_Shalott](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Lady_of_Shalott)  
<http://isexamnotes-content.blogspot.in/2010/07/>

## Unit 31: Hughes and T.S. Eliot

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### Objectives

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- Understand the biography of Ted Hughes

- Describe the detailed analysis of the poem, "The Thought Fox"
- Describe the analysis of the poem, "Thrushes"
- Understand the biography of T.S. Eliot
- Explain the detailed analysis of Eliot's "The Waste Land"
- Discuss Ted Hughes as an Animal Poet

## Notes

## Introduction

Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965) was born in St. Louis, Missouri, of an old New England family. He was educated at Harvard and did graduate work in philosophy at the Sorbonne, Harvard, and Merton College, Oxford. He settled in England, where he was for a time a schoolmaster and a bank clerk, and eventually literary editor for the publishing house Faber & Faber, of which he later became a director. He founded and, during the seventeen years of its publication (1922-1939), edited the exclusive and influential literary journal *Criterion*. In 1927, Eliot became a British citizen and about the same time entered the Anglican Church.

Eliot has been one of the most daring innovators of twentieth-century poetry. Never compromising either with the public or indeed with language itself, he has followed his belief that poetry should aim at a representation of the complexities of modern civilization in language and that such representation necessarily leads to difficult poetry. Despite this difficulty his influence on modern poetic diction has been immense. Eliot's poetry from *Prufrock* (1917) to the *Four Quartets* (1943) reflects the development of a Christian writer: the early work, especially *The Waste Land* (1922), is essentially negative, the expression of that horror from which the search for a higher world arises. In *Ash Wednesday* (1930) and the *Four Quartets* this higher world becomes more visible; nonetheless Eliot has always taken care not to become a religious poet and often elittled the power of poetry as a religious force. However, his dramas *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) and *The Family Reunion* (1939) are more openly Christian apologies. In his essays, especially the later ones, Eliot advocates a traditionalism in religion, society, and literature that seems at odds with his pioneer activity as a poet. But although the Eliot of *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (1948) is an older man than the poet of *The Waste Land*, it should not be forgotten that for Eliot tradition is a living organism comprising past and present in constant mutual interaction. Eliot's plays *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), *The Family Reunion* (1939), *The Cocktail Party* (1949), *The Confidential Clerk* (1954), and *The Elder Statesman* (1959) were published in one volume in 1962; *Collected Poems 1909-62* appeared in 1963.

## 31.1 Ted Hughes: The Thought Fox

### 31.1.1 Introduction of the Poet

Edward James Hughes OM (17 August 1930 – 28 October 1998), more commonly known as Ted Hughes, was an English poet and children's writer. Critics routinely rank him as one of the best poets of his generation. Hughes was British Poet Laureate from 1984 until his death.

Hughes was married to the American poet Sylvia Plath, from 1956 until her death by suicide in 1963 at the age of 30. His part in the relationship became controversial to some feminists and (particularly) American admirers of Plath. His last poetic work, *Birthday Letters* (1998), explored their complex relationship. These poems make reference to Plath's suicide, but none of them addresses directly the circumstances of her death. A poem discovered in October 2010, *Last letter*, describes what happened during the three days leading up to Plath's suicide.

In 2008 *The Times* ranked Hughes fourth on their list of "The 50 greatest British writers since 1945". On 22 March 2010, it was announced that Hughes would be commemorated with a memorial in Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey, to be installed in early 2011.

## Notes

Hughes' first collection, *Hawk in the Rain* (1957) attracted considerable critical acclaim. In 1959 he won the Galbraith prize which brought \$5,000. His most significant work is perhaps *Crow* (1970), which whilst it has been widely praised also divided critics, combining an apocalyptic, bitter, cynical and surreal view of the universe with what sometimes appeared simple, childlike verse.



*Notes* In a 1971 interview with *London Magazine*, Hughes cited his main influences as including Blake, Donne, Hopkins and Eliot. And he mentioned also Schopenhauer, Robert Graves' book *The White Goddess* and *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.

Hughes worked for 10 years on a prose poem, "Gaudete", which he hoped to have made into a film. It tells the story of the vicar of an English village who is carried off by elemental spirits, and replaced in the village by his enantiomorphic double, a changeling, fashioned from a log, who nevertheless has the same memories as the original vicar. The double is a force of nature who organises the women of the village into a "love coven" in order that he may father a new messiah. When the male members of the community discover what is going on, they murder him. The epilogue consists of a series of lyrics spoken by the restored priest in praise of a nature goddess, inspired by Robert Graves' *White Goddess*. It was printed in 1977. Hughes was very interested in the relationship between his poetry and the book arts and many of his books were produced by notable presses and in collaborative editions with artists, for instance with Leonard Baskin.

In addition to his own poetry, Hughes wrote a number of translations of European plays, mainly classical ones his *Tales from Ovid* (1997) contains a selection of free verse translations from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. He also wrote both poetry and prose for children, one of his most successful books being *The Iron Man*, written to comfort his children after Sylvia Plath's suicide. It later became the basis of Pete Townshend's rock opera of the same name, and of the animated film *The Iron Giant*.

Hughes was appointed as Poet Laureate in 1984 following the death of John Betjeman. It was later known that Hughes was second choice for the appointment. Philip Larkin, the preferred nominee, had declined, because of ill health and writer's block. Hughes served in this position until his death in 1998.

In 1992, Hughes published *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, a monumental work inspired by Graves' *The White Goddess*. In *Birthday Letters*, his last collection, Hughes broke his silence on Plath, detailing aspects of their life together and his own behaviour at the time. The cover artwork was by their daughter Frieda. Hughes' definitive 1,333-page *Collected Poems* (Faber & Faber) appeared (posthumously) in 2003. A poem discovered in October 2010, "Last letter", describes what happened during the three days leading up to Plath's suicide. It was published in *New Statesman* on National Poetry Day, October 2010.

In 2011 several previously unpublished letters from Hughes to Craig Raine were published in the literary review *Arete*. They relate mainly to the process of editing *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, and also contain a sequence of drafts of letters in which Raine attempts to explain to Hughes his disinclination to publish Hughes' poem *The Cast* in an anthology he was editing, on the grounds that it might open Hughes to further attack on the subject of Sylvia Plath. "Dear Ted, Thanks for the poem. It is very interesting and would cause a minor sensation" (4 April 1997). The poem was eventually published in *Birthday Letters* and Hughes makes a passing reference to this then unpublished collection: "I have a whole pile of pieces that are all-one way or another-little bombs for the studious and earnest to throw at me" (5 April 1997).

### 31.1.2 The Thought Fox – Text

I imagine this midnight moment's forest:  
 Something else is alive  
 Beside the clock's loneliness

And this blank page where my fingers move.

Through the window I see no star:

Something more near

Though deeper within darkness

Is entering the loneliness:

Cold, delicately as the dark snow

A fox's nose touches twig, leaf;

Two eyes serve a movement, that now

And again now, and now, and now

Sets neat prints into the snow

Between trees, and warily a lame

Shadow lags by stump and in hollow

Of a body that is bold to come

Across clearings, an eye,

A widening deepening greenness,

Brilliantly, concentratedly,

Coming about its own business

### 31.1.3 Themes

Hughes' earlier poetic work is rooted in nature and, in particular, the innocent savagery of animals, and an interest from an early age. He wrote frequently of the mixture of beauty and violence in the natural world. Animals serve as a metaphor for his view on life: animals live out a struggle for the survival of the fittest in the same way that humans strive for ascendancy and success. Examples can be seen in the poems "Hawk Roosting" and "Jaguar".

The West Riding dialect of Hughes' childhood remained a staple of his poetry, his lexicon lending a texture that is concrete, terse, emphatic, economical yet powerful. The manner of speech renders the hard facts of things and wards off self-indulgence.



*Did u know?* Hughes later work is deeply reliant upon myth and the British bardic tradition, heavily inflected with a modernist, Jungian and ecological viewpoint. He re-worked classical and archetypal myth working with a conception of the dark subconscious.

### 31.1.4 Detailed Analysis

"The Thought-Fox" is a poem about writing a poem; it explicates the nature of literary inspiration and literary creation. The action of the poem takes place at midnight where the poet is sitting alone at his desk accompanied only by the ticking off the clock. The image evoked is one of quiet and solitude where the poet is cut off from the world ready to be transported by his literary imagination. The poet's imagination is like a presence which disturbs the stillness of the night, the stillness of things yet unknown, and is depicted as if creeping silently upon the poet evoking a sense of stealth:

Notes

“Through the window I see no star:  
Something more near  
Though deeper within darkness  
Is entering the loneliness:”

The night itself is of course a metaphor for the more intimate darkness of the poet’s imagination and creative inspiration that creeps silently and without warning upon the poet, “cold, delicately as the dark snow”. The mysterious nature of the stirrings of imagination is compared to the indistinct shadow of a fox that moves stealthily in the darkness of the night. The shadow in the night suggests the amorphousness and abstract nature of literary inspiration that sneaks in like a fox mysteriously and without warning. The fox seems to materialise out of the formlessness of the snow, it is a faint shadow against the snow that will take the form “of a body that is bold to come”. The image of the fox taking shape is thus equivalent to the process of creative imagination, which slowly forms itself in the dark recesses of the poet’s mind to produce a work of art:

“Brilliantly, concentratedly,  
Coming about its own business  
Till, with sudden sharp hot stink of fox  
It enters the dark hole of the head.”

The fox penetrates the deep and intimate darkness of the poet’s mind to evoke the moment when the desirable vision is attained. The poem ends as it has begun, turning in full circle.

“The window is starless still; the clock ticks,  
The page is printed.”

The fox is the process of artistic creation that is almost a mystical experience forming itself out of nothingness through the poetic imagination. “And I suppose,” Ted Hughes has written, “that long after I am gone, as long as a copy of the poem exists, every time anyone reads it the fox will get up somewhere out of the darkness and come walking towards them”. The fox, therefore, also seems to represent the epiphanies of reading that embrace the reader when he becomes engrossed in reading a work of art.



*Task* Write a short note on “The Thought Fox.”

Ted Hughes’s “The Thought Fox” enacts the solitude that surrounds a work of art. In Hughes’s poem, we perceive that the last line also has a sort of fatalism and a notion of wistfulness. For although, the last stanza expresses the excitement of poetic creation, the matter-of-factness of the last line seems to plunge us back to reality evoking an almost palpable sense of relief that the poem is over. The blank white page full of potentiality for poetry is now printed and the writer knows that the poem that has been written is always a pale reflection of the poem or poems that could have been written.

The Thought Fox has often been acknowledged as one of the most completely realised and artistically satisfying of the poems in Ted Hughes’s first collection, *The Hawk in the Rain*. At the same time it is one of the most frequently anthologised of all Hughes’s poems. In this essay I have set out to use what might be regarded as a very ordinary analysis of this familiar poem in order to focus attention on an aspect of Hughes’s poetry which is sometimes neglected. My particular interest is in the

underlying puritanism of Hughes's poetic vision and in the conflict between violence and tenderness which seems to be directly engendered by this puritanism.

'The thought-fox' is a poem about writing a poem. Its external action takes place in a room late at night where the poet is sitting alone at his desk. Outside the night is starless, silent, and totally black. But the poet senses a presence which disturbs him:

Through the window I see no star:  
 Something more near  
 Though deeper within darkness  
 Is entering the loneliness

The disturbance is not in the external darkness of the night, for the night is itself a metaphor for the deeper and more intimate darkness of the poet's imagination in whose depths an idea is mysteriously stirring. At first the idea has no clear outlines; it is not seen but felt—frail and intensely vulnerable. The poet's task is to coax it out of formlessness and into fuller consciousness by the sensitivity of his language. The remote stirrings of the poem are compared to the stirrings of an animal—a fox, whose body is invisible, but which feels its way forward nervously through the dark undergrowth:

Cold, delicately as the dark snow,  
 A fox's nose touches twig, leaf;

The half-hidden image which is contained within these lines is of soft snow brushing against the trees as it falls in dark flakes to the ground. The idea of the delicate dark snow evokes the physical reality of the fox's nose which is itself cold, dark and damp, twitching moistly and gently against twig and leaf. In this way the first feature of the fox is mysteriously defined and its wet black nose is nervously alive in the darkness, feeling its way towards us. But by inverting the natural order of the simile, and withholding the subject of the sentence, the poet succeeds in blurring its distinctness so that the fox emerges only slowly out of the formlessness of the snow. Gradually the fox's eyes appear out of the same formlessness, leading the shadowy movement of its body as it comes closer:

Two eyes serve a movement, that now  
 And again now, and now, and now  
 Sets neat prints into the snow  
 Between trees, and warily a lame  
 Shadow lags by stump and in hollow. ..

In the first two lines of this passage the rhythm of the verse is broken by the punctuation and the line-endings, while at the same time what seemed the predictable course of the rhyme-scheme is deliberately departed from. Both rhythmically and phonetically the verse thus mimes the nervous, unpredictable movement of the fox as it delicately steps forward, then stops suddenly to check the terrain before it runs on only to stop again. The tracks which the fox leaves in the snow are themselves duplicated by the sounds and rhythm of the line 'Sets neat prints into the snow'. The first three short words of this line are internal half-rhymes, as neat, as identical and as sharply outlined as the fox's paw-marks, and these words press down gently but distinctly into the soft open vowel of 'snow'. The fox's body remains indistinct, a silhouette against the snow. But the phrase 'lame shadow' itself evokes a more precise image of the fox, as it freezes alertly in its tracks, holding one front-paw in mid-air, and then moves off again like a limping animal. At the end of the stanza the words 'bold to come' are left suspended—as though the fox is pausing at the outer edge of some trees. The gap between the stanzas is itself the clearing which the fox, after hesitating warily, suddenly shoots across: 'Of a body that is bold to come / Across clearings. ..'

Notes

At this point in the poem the hesitant rhythm of that single sentence which is prolonged over five stanzas breaks into a final and deliberate run. The fox has scented safety. After its dash across the clearing of the stanza-break, it has come suddenly closer, bearing down upon the poet and upon the reader:

an eye,  
A widening deepening greenness,  
Brilliantly, concentratedly,  
Coming about its own business. ..

It is so close now that its two eyes have merged into a single green glare which grows wider and wider as the fox comes nearer, its eyes heading directly towards ours: 'Till, with a sudden sharp hot stink of fox/It enters the dark hole of the head'. If we follow the 'visual logic' of the poem we are compelled to imagine the fox actually jumping through the eyes of the poet – with whom the reader of the poem is inevitably drawn into identification. The fox enters the lair of the head as it would enter its own lair, bringing with it the hot, sensual, animal reek of its body and all the excitement and power of the achieved vision.

The fox is no longer a formless stirring somewhere in the dark depths of the bodily imagination; it has been coaxed out of the darkness and into full consciousness. It is no longer nervous and vulnerable, but at home in the lair of the head, safe from extinction, perfectly created, its being caught for ever on the page. And all this has been done purely by the imagination. For in reality there is no fox at all, and outside, in the external darkness, nothing has changed: 'The window is starless still; the clock ticks, / The page is printed.' The fox is the poem, and the poem is the fox. 'And I suppose,' Ted Hughes has written, 'that long after I am gone, as long as a copy of the poem exists, every time anyone reads it the fox will get up somewhere out of the darkness and come walking towards them.'

After discussing 'The thought-fox' in his book *The Art of Ted Hughes*, Keith Sagar writes: 'Suddenly, out of the unknown, there it is, with all the characteristics of a living thing—"a sudden sharp hot stink of fox". A simple trick like pulling a kicking rabbit from a hat, but only a true poet can do it'. In this particular instance it seems to me that the simile Sagar uses betrays him into an inappropriate critical response. His comparison may be apt in one respect, for it is certainly true that there is a powerful element of magic in the poem. But this magic has little to do with party-conjurors who pull rabbits out of top-hats. It is more like the sublime and awesome magic which is contained in the myth of creation, where God creates living beings out of nothingness by the mere fiat of his imagination.

The very sublimity and God-like nature of Hughes's vision can engender uneasiness. For Hughes's fox has none of the freedom of an animal. It cannot get up from the page and walk off to nuzzle its young cubs or do foxy things behind the poet's back. It cannot even die in its own mortal, animal way. For it is the poet's creature, wholly owned and possessed by him, fashioned almost egotistically in order to proclaim not its own reality but that of its imaginatively omnipotent creator. (I originally wrote these words before coming across Hughes's own discussion of the poem in *Poetry in the Making*: 'So, you see, in some ways my fox is better than an ordinary fox. It will live for ever, it will never suffer from hunger or hounds. I have it with me wherever I go. And I made it. And all through imagining it clearly enough and finding the living words'.

This feeling of uneasiness is heightened by the last stanza of the poem. For although this stanza clearly communicates the excitement of poetic creation, it seems at the same time to express an almost predatory thrill; it is as though the fox has successfully been lured into a hunter's trap. The bleak matter-of-factness of the final line—'The page is printed'—only reinforces the curious deadness

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of the thought-fox. If, at the end of the poem, there is one sense in which the fox is vividly and immediately alive, it is only because it has been pinned so artfully upon the page. The very accuracy of the evocation of the fox seems at times almost fussily obsessive. The studied and beautifully 'final' nature of the poem indicates that we are not in the presence of any untrained spontaneity, any primitive or naive vision. It might be suggested that the sensibility behind Hughes's poem is more that of an intellectual—an intellectual who, in rebellion against his own ascetic rationalism, feels himself driven to hunt down and capture an element of his own sensual and intuitive identity which he does not securely possess.

In this respect Hughes's vision is perhaps most nearly akin to that of D. H. Lawrence, who was also an intellectual in rebellion against his own rationalism, a puritan who never ceased to quarrel with his own puritanism. But Lawrence's animal poems, as some critics have observed, are very different from those of Hughes. Lawrence has a much greater respect for the integrity and independence of the animals he writes about. In 'Snake' he expresses remorse for the rationalistic, 'educated' violence which he inflicts on the animal. And at the end of the poem he is able, as it were, retrospectively to allow his dark sexual, sensual, animal alter ego to crawl off into the bowels of the earth, there to reign alone and supreme in a kingdom where Lawrence recognises he can have no part. Hughes, in 'The thought-fox' at least, cannot do this. It would seem that, possessing his own sensual identity even less securely than Lawrence, he needs the 'sudden sharp hot stink of fox' to pump up the attenuated sense he has of the reality of his own body and his own feelings. And so he pins the fox upon the page with the cruel purity of artistic form and locates its lair inside his own head. And the fox lives triumphantly as an idea—as a part of the poet's own identity—but dies as a fox.

If there is a difference between 'The thought-fox' and the animal poems of Lawrence there is also, of course, a difference between Hughes's poetic vision and that kind of extreme scientific rationalism which both Lawrence and Hughes attack throughout their work. For in the mind of the orthodox rationalist the fox is dead even as an idea. So it is doubly dead and the orthodox rationalist, who is always a secret puritan, is more than happy about this. For he doesn't want the hot sensual reek of fox clinging to his pure rational spirit, reminding him that he once possessed such an obscene thing as a body.

This difference may appear absolute. But it seems to me that it would be wrong to regard it as such, and that there is a much closer relationship between the sensibility which is expressed in Hughes's poem and the sensibility of 'puritanical rationalism' than would generally be acknowledged. The orthodox rationalist, it might be said, inflicts the violence of reason on animal sensuality in an obsessive attempt to eliminate it entirely. Hughes in 'The thought-fox' unconsciously inflicts the violence of an art upon animal sensuality in a passionate but conflict-ridden attempt to incorporate it into his own rationalist identity.

The conflict of sensibility which Hughes unconsciously dramatises in 'The thought-fox' runs through all his poetry. On the one hand there is in his work an extraordinary sensuous and sensual generosity which coexists with a sense of abundance and a capacity for expressing tenderness which are unusual in contemporary poetry. These qualities are particularly in evidence in some of the most mysteriously powerful of all his poems—poems such as 'Crow's undersong', 'Littleblood', 'Full moon and little Frieda' and 'Bride and groom lie hidden for three days'. On the other hand his poetry—and above all his poetry in Crow—is notorious for the raging intensity of its violence, a violence which, by some critics at least, has been seen as destructive of all artistic and human values. Hughes himself seems consistently to see his own poetic sensitivity as 'feminine' and his poetry frequently gives the impression that he can allow himself to indulge this sensitivity only within a protective shell of hard, steely 'masculine' violence.

In 'The thought-fox' itself this conflict of sensibility appears in such an attenuated or suppressed form that it is by no means the most striking feature of the poem. But, as I have tried to show, the conflict may still be discerned. It is present above all in the tension between the extraordinary sensuous delicacy of the image which Hughes uses to describe the fox's nose and the predatory,

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impulse which seems to underlie the poem – an impulse to which Hughes has himself drawn attention by repeatedly comparing the act of poetic creation to the process of capturing or killing small animals. Indeed it might be suggested that the last stanza of the poem records what is, in effect, a ritual of tough ‘manly’ posturing. For in it the poet might be seen as playing a kind of imaginative game in which he attempts to outstare the fox – looking straight into its eyes as it comes closer and closer and refusing to move, refusing to flinch, refusing to show any sign of ‘feminine’ weakness. The fox itself does not flinch or deviate from its course. It is almost as though, in doing this, it has successfully come through an initiation-ritual to which the poet has unconsciously submitted it; the fox which is initially nervous, circumspect, and as soft and delicate as the dark snow, has proved that it is not ‘feminine’ after all but tough, manly and steely willed ‘brilliantly, concentratedly, coming about its own business’. It is on these conditions alone, perhaps, that its sensuality can be accepted by the poet without anxiety.

Whether or not the last tentative part of my analysis is accepted, it will perhaps be allowed that the underlying pattern of the poem is one of sensitivity-within- toughness; it is one in which a sensuality or sensuousness which might sometimes be characterised as ‘feminine’ can be incorporated into the identity only to the extent that it has been purified by, or subordinated to, a tough, rational, artistic will.

The same conflict of sensibility which is unconsciously dramatised in ‘The thought-fox’ also appears, in an implicit form, in one of the finest and most powerful poems in Lupercal, ‘Snowdrop’:

Now is the globe shrunk tight  
Round the mouse’s dulled wintering heart.  
Weasel and crow, as if moulded in brass,  
Move through an outer darkness Not in their right minds,  
With the other deaths. She, too, pursues her ends,  
Brutal as the stars of this month,  
Her pale head heavy as metal.

The poem begins by evoking, from the still and tiny perspective of the hibernating mouse, a vast intimacy with the tightening body of the earth. But the numbness of ‘wintering heart’ undermines the emotional security which might be conveyed by the initial image. The next lines introduce a harsh predatory derangement into nature through which two conventionally threatening animals, the weasel and the crow, move ‘as if moulded in brass’. It is only at this point, after a sense of petrified and frozen vitality has been established, that the snowdrop is, as it were, ‘noticed’ by the poem. What might be described as a conventional and sentimental personification of the snowdrop is actually intensified by the fact that ‘she’ can be identified only from the title. This lends to the pronoun a mysterious power through which the poem gestures towards an affirmation of ‘feminine’ frailty and its ability to survive even the cruel rigour of winter. But before this gesture can even be completed it is overlaid by an evocation of violent striving:

She, too, pursues her ends,  
Brutal as the stars of this month,  
Her pale head heavy as metal.

The last line is finely balanced between the fragility of ‘pale’ and the steeliness of ‘metal’—a word whose sound softens and moderates its sense. The line serves to evoke a precise visual image of the snowdrop, the relative heaviness of whose flower cannot be entirely supported by its frail stem. But at the same time the phrase ‘her pale head’ minimally continues the personification which is first established by the pronoun ‘she’. In this way the feminine snowdrop—a little incarnation, almost, of

the White Goddess—is located within that world of frozen and sleeping vitality which is created by the poem, a vitality which can only be preserved, it would seem, if it is encased within a hard, metallic, evolutionary will.

The beauty of this poem resides precisely in the way that a complex emotional ambivalence is reflected through language. But if we can withdraw ourselves from the influence of the spell which the poem undoubtedly casts, the vision of the snowdrop cannot but seem an alien one. What seems strange about the poem is the lack of any recognition that the snowdrop survives not because of any hidden reserves of massive evolutionary strength or will, but precisely because of its frailty—its evolutionary vitality is owed directly to the very delicacy, softness and flexibility of its structure. In Hughes's poem the purposeless and consciousnessless snowdrop comes very near to being a little Schopenhauer philosophising in the rose-garden, a little Stalin striving to disguise an unmanly and maidenly blush behind a hard coat of assumed steel. We might well be reminded of Hughes's own account of the intentions which lay behind his poem 'Hawk roosting'. 'Actually what I had in mind', Hughes has said, 'was that in this hawk Nature is thinking ... I intended some creator like the Jehovah in Job but more feminine.' But, as Hughes himself is obliged to confess, 'He doesn't sound like Isis, mother of the gods, which he is. He sounds like Hitler's familiar spirit.' In an attempt to account for the gap between intention and performance Hughes invokes cultural history: 'When Christianity kicked the devil out of Job what they actually kicked out was Nature. ..and nature became the devil.' This piece of rationalisation, however, seems all too like an attempt to externalise a conflict of sensibility which is profoundly internal. The conflict in question is the same as that which may be divined both in 'The thought-fox' and in 'Snowdrop', in which a frail sensuousness which might be characterised as, 'feminine' can be accepted only after it has been subordinated to a tough and rational will.

The conflict between violence and tenderness which is present in an oblique form throughout Hughes' early poetry is one that is in no sense healed or resolved in his later work. Indeed it might be suggested that much of the poetic and emotional charge of this later work comes directly from an intensification of this conflict and an increasingly explicit polarisation of its terms. The repressed tenderness of 'Snowdrop' or the tough steely sensibility which is expressed in 'Thrushes', with its idealisation of the 'bullet and automatic / Purpose' of instinctual life, is seemingly very different to the all but unprotected sensuous delicacy of 'Littleblood', the poem with which Hughes ends *Crow*:

O littleblood, little boneless little skinless  
 Ploughing with a linnet's carcass  
 Reaping the wind and threshing the stones.  
 Sit on my finger, sing in my ear, O littleblood.

But this poem must ultimately be located within the larger context which is provided by the *Crow* poems. This context is one of a massive unleashing of sadistic violence -a violence which is never endorsed by Hughes but which, nevertheless, seems to provide a kind of necessary psychological armour within which alone tenderness can be liberated without anxiety.

In pointing to the role which is played by a particular conflict of sensibility in Hughes's poetry I am not in any way seeking to undermine the case which can—and should—be made for what would conventionally be called Hughes's poetic 'greatness'. Indeed, my intention is almost the reverse of this. For it seems to me that one of the factors which moderates or diminishes the imaginative power of some of Hughes's early poetry is precisely the way in which an acute conflict which is central to his own poetic sensibility tends to be disguised or, suppressed. In *Crow*, which I take to be Hughes's most extraordinary poetic achievement to date, Hughes, almost for the first time, assumes imaginative responsibility for the puritanical violence which is present in his poetry from the very beginnings. In doing so he seems to take full possession of his own poetic powers. It is as

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though a conflict which had, until that point, led a shadowy and underworld existence, is suddenly cracked open in order to disgorge not only its own violence but also all that imaginative wealth and vitality which had been half locked up within it.

The most obvious precedent for such a violent eruption of imaginative powers is that which is provided by Shakespeare, and perhaps above all by *King Lear*. *Lear* is a play of extraordinary violence whose persistent image, as Caroline Spurgeon has observed, is that of a human body in anguished movement, tugged, wrenched, beaten, pierced, stung, scourged, dislocated, flayed, gashed, scalded, tortured, and finally broken on the rack'. But at the same time it is a play about a man who struggles to repossess his own tenderness and emotional vitality and to weep those tears which, at the beginning of the play, he contemptuously dismisses as soft, weak and womanly. The same conflict reappears throughout Shakespeare's poetry. We have only to recall *Lady Macbeth's* renunciation of her own 'soft' maternal impulses in order to appreciate the fluency of Shakespeare's own imaginative access to this conflict and the disturbing cruelty of its terms:

I have given suck, and know  
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:  
I would, while it was smiling in my face,  
Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums,  
And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn as you  
Have done to this. (I. vii)

The intense conflict between violence and tenderness which is expressed in these lines is, of course, in no sense one which will be found only in the poetic vision of Hughes and Shakespeare. It is present in poetry from the Old Testament onwards and indeed it might reasonably be regarded as a universal conflict, within which are contained and expressed some of the most fundamental characteristics of the human identity.

Any full investigation of the conflict and of its cultural significance would inevitably need to take account both of what Mark Spilka has called 'Lawrence's quarrel with tenderness' and of Ian Suttie's discussion of the extent and rigour of the 'taboo on tenderness' in our own culture. But such an investigation would also need to take into consideration a much larger cultural context, and perhaps above all to examine the way in which the Christian ideal of love has itself traditionally been expressed within the medium of violent apocalyptic fantasies.

**Self Assessment**

Multiple Choice Questions:

1. Who of the following did Ted Hughes influence?  
(a) Processing (programming language)      (b) Sylvia Plath  
(c) Dewi Zephaniah Phillips                      (d) William Butler Yeats
2. Hughes studied English, anthropology and archaeology at .....  
(a) Trinity College, Cambridge                      (b) Peterhouse, Cambridge  
(c) Queens' College, Cambridge                      (d) Pembroke College, Cambridge
3. Which of the following titles did Ted Hughes have?  
(a) Brain-Dead Poets Society                      (b) Poet Laureate of Freemasonry  
(c) British Poet Laureate                              (d) The Distrest Poet

4. What preceded Ted Hughes?  
 (a) Andrew Motion (b) Ted Hughes  
 (c) England (d) World War I
5. When did Ted Hughes die?  
 (a) 1998-08-23 (b) 1998-11-23  
 (c) 1998-10-28 (d) 1998-08-16

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The investigation which I describe is clearly beyond the scope of this essay. My more modest aim here has been to draw attention to the role which is played by this conflict in two of the most hauntingly powerful of Ted Hughes's early poems and to suggest that Hughes's poetic powers are fully realised not when this conflict is resolved but when it is unleashed in its most violent form.

In taking this approach I am motivated in part by the feeling that the discussion of Hughes's poetry has sometimes been too much in thrall to a powerful cultural image of Hughes's poetic personality one which he himself has tended to project. In this image Hughes is above all an isolated and embattled figure who has set himself against the entire course both of modern poetry and of modern history. He is rather like the hero in one of his most powerful poems 'Stealing trout on a May morning', resolutely and stubbornly wading upstream, his feet rooted in the primeval strength of the river's bed as the whole course of modern history and modern puritanical rationalism floods violently past him in the opposite direction, bearing with it what Hughes himself has called 'mental disintegration under the super-ego of Moses and the self-anaesthetising schizophrenia of St Paul', and leaving him in secure possession of that ancient and archaic imaginative energy which he invokes in his poetry.

The alternative to this Romantic view of Hughes's poetic personality is to see Hughes's poetry as essentially the poetry of an intellectual, an intellectual who is subject to the rigours of 'puritanical rationalism' just as much as any other intellectual but who, instead of submitting to those rigours, fights against them with that stubborn and intransigent resolution which belongs only to the puritan soul.

In reality perhaps neither of these views is wholly appropriate, and the truth comes somewhere between the two. But what does seem clear is that when Hughes talks of modern civilisation as consisting in 'mental disintegration under the super-ego of Moses and the self-anaesthetising schizophrenia of St Paul' he is once again engaging in that characteristic strategy of externalising a conflict of sensibility which is profoundly internal. For it must be suggested that Paul's own 'schizophrenia' consisted in an acute conflict between the impulse towards tenderness, abundance and generosity and the impulse towards puritanical violence—the violence of chastity. It is precisely this conflict which seems to be buried in Hughes's early poetry and which, as I have suggested, eventually erupts in the poetry of Crow. If, in Crow, Hughes is able to explore and express the internalised violence of the rationalist sensibility with more imaginative power than any other modern poet, it is perhaps because he does so from within a poetic sensibility which is itself profoundly intellectual, and deeply marked by that very puritanical rationalism which he so frequently—and I believe justifiably—attacks.

## **31.2 Ted Hughes: Thrushes; Ted Hughes as an Animal Poet**

### **31.2.1 Thrushes: Text of the Poem**

Terrifying are the attent sleek thrushes on the lawn,  
 More coiled steel than living—a poised  
 Dark deadly eye, those delicate legs  
 Triggered to stirrings beyond sense - with a start, a bounce,  
 a stab

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Overtake the instant and drag out some writhing thing.  
No indolent procrastinations and no yawning states,  
No sighs or head-scratchings. Nothing but bounce and stab  
And a ravening second.

Is it their single-mind-sized skulls, or a trained  
Body, or genius, or a nestful of brats  
Gives their days this bullet and automatic  
Purpose? Mozart's brain had it, and the shark's mouth  
That hungers down the blood-smell even to a leak of its own  
Side and devouring of itself: efficiency which  
Strikes too streamlined for any doubt to pluck at it  
Or obstruction deflect.

With a man it is otherwise. Heroisms on horseback,  
Outstripping his desk-diary at a broad desk,  
Carving at a tiny ivory ornament  
For years: his act worships itself - while for him,  
Though he bends to be blent in the prayer, how loud and  
above what  
Furious spaces of fire do the distracting devils  
Orgy and hosannah, under what wilderness  
Of black silent waters weep.

Ted Hughes' "Thrushes" is one of his frequently anthologized poems. The poet is enamoured at the violent streak in the thrushes rather than their singing ability. He is amused at their ability to "stab". They are by themselves 'sleek' or stylish. They are single-minded in purpose, and therefore very attentive. With their iron will, they come across as coils of steel rather than mundanely humane. The "dark deadly eye" foregrounds the scene fixed in its stare, and the poise they assume is indeed to be regarded. The fragile legs are triggered to stirrings beyond sense, that is, it is driven on instinct-"with a start, a bounce, a stab." Swiftly according to impulse, they prey on the writhing thing. They indulge in no irresolution, no lethargy and no postponing; they are characterized by immense presence of mind.

No indolent procrastinations and no yawning states,  
No sighs or head-scratchings  
It just takes a rapacious second for this predatory being to satisfy its urge.



Task Explain, Ted Hughes is a nature poet.

Is it their single-mindedness characterized by their solid skulls, or their body that is inherently well-trained, or is it the undeterred genius, or the poet asks is it the "nestful of brats" or the lineage

with the killer-instinct. The adjectives “bullet” and “automatic” exemplify how the act looks automated, mechanized and triggered. Further, it also portrays how objective the act is, without depending on external considerations and extraneous factors. Mozart had this innate genius and artistic drive for music that was not out of any ulterior motive. It existed in its own right. It was unique, stemmed from his brain as an extended metaphor of his genius. It was not inclined towards fame or appreciation. Likewise, the shark is unflinching in its act of preying, to the extent of smelling out even a leak of its own blood. It is so proactive in its endeavor that it may devour itself if the situation demands.



*Notes* The poet concretizes its efficiency as a streamline that doubt cannot pluck at or likens it to a streak of light that is not reflected on obstruction.

### 31.2.2 Ted Hughes as an Animal Poet

Ted Hughes’s ‘nature poetry’ comprises mainly of his poems that explore man’s relation with ‘animal life’ and ‘landscapes’-both constantly interacting with the elements of nature. His nature poetry predominantly deals with the problem of modern man’s alienation from nature. It is also an attempt to reunite man with nature.

In Hughes’s view, modern man has discarded his world of feelings, imagination and pure instincts which is true to nature. But he has done so, at the cost of his own existence. So, Hughes’s nature poems, on the one hand, hint at modern man’s present perilous existence and on the other, attempt to redeem man from his own predicament.

However, Hughes attributes modern man’s alienation from nature to his self-consciousness or his rational consciousness, to his religious compunctions and finally to his slavery to science and technology.

In contradiction to modern man and his flaws Hughes’s animals are endowed with certain significant qualities: they are distinctly non-rational in power, they are single minded in their action, self-centered, devoid of fantasy and act instinctually so as to condemn duality in man. Unlike man, they cope with elements perfectly to show their unity with nature and by innuendo, man’s alienation from nature. Through these poems Hughes evokes the pre-historic world that was obviously connected with the lost instinctual energies and attempts to put man in touch with those lost archaic energies. P.R. King says that Hughes’s animals are not mere descriptions of creatures but are intended as comments on aspects of human life.

### 31.2.3 Roles and Models of Animals

Thus Ted Hughes assumes a variety of roles as a fox, a hawk, a jaguar, an otter, a thrush, etc. Very often he is the protagonist as perceiver registering some startling or terrifying quality like the energy of the elemental energy, an immense pike, but making no claim to embody it in his own personality. At times, he can be a mere passive on-looker involving in recording and recreation of a slow movement in the midst of violence and suddenness. The voice or tone in almost all his poems is that of an omniscient narrator, and since Hughes is a poet of experience, his poetry, in this sense, is subjective and supremely and obsessively autobiographical. The following study of Hughes’ animal poems exemplifies his attitude to nature and animals.

### 31.2.4 Animal Monologue—Glorification of Animal Totalitarianism

Hawk Roosting is a dramatic monologue, as told from the point of view of the hawk sitting on the top of a tree in a trance. He is a monomaniac and a solipsist. He is single minded in his pursuit of his prey.

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He deals death to his victims and can crush them effortlessly. There is no 'falsifying dream' between his hooked head and hooked feet. Even in his sleep he contemplates killing and the simultaneity of his dream and achievement, denotes his unity with nature. The hawk sees himself as the apotheosis of power and thinks he is 'the self-styled ultimate heir of Creation'. He assumes that the whole creation is made suitable for his adaptation. The world revolves at his bidding and all the other creatures are only created for his prey':

It took the whole of Creation  
To produce my foot, my each feather:  
Now I hold Creation in my foot  
Or fly up, and revolve it all slowly-  
I kill where I please because it is all mine.  
There is no sophistry in my body:  
My manners are tearing off heads-  
The allotment of death. (The Hawk Roosting, Luperca, p.26)

There is no sophistry in his body and his manners mean simply tearing off heads. When he kills he does not think. He is not subject to self-doubt or self-deception unlike men who are victims of dissociation and inner schisms within their personalities. When critics misunderstood 'Hawk Roosting' as a glorification of totalitarianism and fascism, Ted Hughes remarked:

The poem of mine usually cited for violence is the one about 'Hawk Roosting', this drowsy hawk sitting in a wood and talking to itself. That bird is accused of being a fascist..... the symbol of some horrible totalitarian genocidal dictator. Actually what I had in mind was that in this hawk Nature is thinking. Simply Nature. It's not so simple may be because Nature is not no longer simple. I intended some Creator like the Jehovah in Job but more feminine. When Christianity kicked the devil out of job what they actually kicked out was Nature... and Nature became the devil.

### 31.3 T.S. Eliot: The Waste Land (Non-detailed): Introduction to the Author and Text

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#### 31.3.1 Introduction to the Author

Thomas Stearns Eliot was born in St. Louis in 1888 to a family with prominent New England roots. Eliot largely abandoned his Midwestern roots and chose to ally himself with both New and Old England throughout his life. He attended Harvard as an undergraduate in 1906, was accepted into the literary circles, and had a predilection for 16th- and 17th-century poetry, the Italian Renaissance (particularly Dante), Eastern religion, and philosophy. Perhaps the greatest influences on him, however, were 19th-century French Symbolists such as Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud, Stephane Mallarme, and Eliot's favorite, Jules Laforgue. Eliot took from them their sensual yet precise attention to symbolic images, a feature that would be the hallmark of his brand of Modernism.

Eliot also earned a master's degree from Harvard in 1910 before studying in Paris and Germany. He settled in England in 1914 at the outbreak of World War I, studying at Oxford, teaching, and working at a bank. In 1915 he married British writer Vivienne Haigh-Wood (they would divorce in 1933), a woman prone to poor physical and mental health, and in November of 1921, Eliot had a nervous breakdown.

By 1917 Eliot had already achieved great success with his first book of poems, *Prufrock and Other Observations* (which included "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," a work begun in his days at Harvard). Eliot's reputation was bolstered by the admiration and aid of esteemed contemporary

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poet Ezra Pound, the other tower of Modernist poetry. During Eliot's recuperation from his breakdown in a Swiss sanitarium, he wrote "The Waste Land," arguably the most influential English-language poem ever written.

Eliot was now the voice of Modernism, and in London he expanded the breadth of his writing. In addition to writing poetry and editing it for various publications (he also founded the quarterly *Criterion* in 1922, editing it until its end in 1939), he wrote philosophical reviews and a number of critical essays. Many of these, such as "Tradition and the Individual Talent," have become classics, smartly and affectionately dissecting other poets while subliminally informing us about Eliot's own work. Eliot declared his preference for poetry that does away with the poet's own personality and poetry that uses the "objective correlative" of symbolic, meaningful, and often chaotic concrete imagery.

Eliot joined the Church of England in 1927, and his work afterward reflects his Anglican attitudes. The six-part poem "Ash Wednesday" (1930) and other religious works in the early part of the 1930s, while stellar in their own right, retrospectively feel like a warm-up for his epic "Four Quartets" (completed and published together in 1943). Eliot used his wit, philosophical preoccupation with time, and vocal range to examine further religious issues.



*Task* Write the biography of T.S. Eliot.

Eliot continued his Renaissance man ways by writing his first play, "Murder in the Cathedral," in 1935. A verse drama about the murder of Archbishop Thomas Becket, the play's religious themes were forerunners of Eliot's four other major plays, "The Family Reunion" (1939), "The Cocktail Party" (1949), "The Confidential Clerk" (1953), and "The Elder Statesman" (1959). Religious verse dramas cloaked in secular conversational comedy, Eliot belied whatever pretensions his detractors may have found in his Anglophilia. He leapt ahead with this anti-pretension with "Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats" (1939), a book of verse for children that was eventually adapted into the Broadway musical "Cats."

As one might expect from his work, Eliot was unhappy for most of his life, but his second marriage in 1957 proved fruitful. When he died in 1965, he was the recipient of a Nobel Prize (1948), the author of the century's most influential poem, and arguably the century's most important poet. Perhaps due to the large shadow he casts, relatively few poets have tried to ape his style; others simply find him cold. Still, no one can escape the authority of Eliot's Modernism—it is as relevant today as it was in 1922. While Eliot may not have as much influence on poets today as some of his contemporaries, he has had a far greater impact on poetry.

### 31.3.2 Introduction to the Text

"The Waste Land" caused a sensation when it was published in 1922. It is today the most widely translated and studied English-language poem of the twentieth century. This is perhaps surprising given the poem's length and its difficulty, but Eliot's vision of modern life as plagued by sordid impulses, widespread apathy, and pervasive soullessness packed a punch when readers first encountered it.

#### Text

##### I. THE BURIAL OF THE DEAD

APRIL is the cruellest month, breeding

Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing

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Memory and desire, stirring  
Dull roots with spring rain.  
Winter kept us warm, covering  
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding  
A little life with dried tubers.  
Summer surprised us, coming over the Starnbergersee  
With a shower of rain; we stopped in the colonnade,  
And went on in sunlight, into the Hofgarten,  
And drank coffee, and talked for an hour.  
Bin gar keine Russin, stamm' aus Litauen, echt deutsch.  
And when we were children, staying at the archduke's,  
My cousin's, he took me out on a sled,  
And I was frightened. He said, Marie,  
Marie, hold on tight. And down we went.  
In the mountains, there you feel free.  
I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter.

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow  
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,  
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only  
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,  
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,  
And the dry stone no sound of water. Only  
There is shadow under this red rock,  
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),  
And I will show you something different from either  
Your shadow at morning striding behind you  
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;  
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

Frisch weht der Wind  
Der Heimat zu,  
Mein Irisch Kind,  
Wo weilest du?

"You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;  
They called me the hyacinth girl."  
—Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth garden,  
Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not  
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither  
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,  
Looking into the heart of light, the silence.  
Öd' und leer das Meer.

Madame Sosostris, famous clairvoyante,  
 Had a bad cold, nevertheless  
 Is known to be the wisest woman in Europe,  
 With a wicked pack of cards. Here, said she,  
 Is your card, the drowned Phoenician Sailor,  
 (Those are pearls that were his eyes. Look!)  
 Here is Belladonna, the Lady of the Rocks,  
 The lady of situations.  
 Here is the man with three staves, and here the Wheel,  
 And here is the one-eyed merchant, and this card,  
 Which is blank, is something he carries on his back,  
 Which I am forbidden to see. I do not find  
 The Hanged Man. Fear death by water.  
 I see crowds of people, walking round in a ring.  
 Thank you. If you see dear Mrs. Equitone,  
 Tell her I bring the horoscope myself:  
 One must be so careful these days.

Unreal City,  
 Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,  
 A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,  
 I had not thought death had undone so many.  
 Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,  
 And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.  
 Flowed up the hill and down King William Street,  
 To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours  
 With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine.  
 There I saw one I knew, and stopped him, crying "Stetson!  
 You who were with me in the ships at Mylae!  
 That corpse you planted last year in your garden,  
 Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?  
 Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?  
 Oh keep the Dog far hence, that's friend to men,  
 Or with his nails he'll dig it up again!  
 You! hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,—mon frère!"

## II. A GAME OF CHESS

The Chair she sat in, like a burnished throne,  
 Glowed on the marble, where the glass  
 Held up by standards wrought with fruited vines

Notes

From which a golden Cupidon peeped out  
(Another hid his eyes behind his wing)  
Doubled the flames of sevenbranched candelabra  
Reflecting light upon the table as  
The glitter of her jewels rose to meet it,  
From satin cases poured in rich profusion;  
In vials of ivory and coloured glass  
Unstoppered, lurked her strange synthetic perfumes,  
Unguent, powdered, or liquid—troubled, confused  
And drowned the sense in odours; stirred by the air  
That freshened from the window, these ascended  
In fattening the prolonged candle-flames,  
Flung their smoke into the laquearia,  
Stirring the pattern on the coffered ceiling.  
Huge sea-wood fed with copper  
Burned green and orange, framed by the coloured stone,  
In which sad light a carved dolphin swam.  
Above the antique mantel was displayed  
As though a window gave upon the sylvan scene  
The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king  
So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale  
Filled all the desert with inviolable voice  
And still she cried, and still the world pursues,  
“Jug Jug” to dirty ears.  
And other withered stumps of time  
Were told upon the walls; staring forms  
Leaned out, leaning, hushing the room enclosed.  
Footsteps shuffled on the stair,  
Under the firelight, under the brush, her hair  
Spread out in fiery points  
Glowed into words, then would be savagely still.  
  
“My nerves are bad to-night. Yes, bad. Stay with me.  
Speak to me. Why do you never speak? Speak.  
What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?  
I never know what you are thinking. Think.”  
  
I think we are in rats’ alley  
Where the dead men lost their bones.

"What is that noise?"

The wind under the door.

"What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?"

Nothing again nothing.

"Do

You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember  
Nothing?"

I remember

Those are pearls that were his eyes.

"Are you alive, or not? Is there nothing in your head?"

But

O O O O that Shakespeherian Rag

It's so elegant

So intelligent

"What shall I do now? What shall I do?

I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street

With my hair down, so. What shall we do to-morrow?

What shall we ever do?"

The hot water at ten.

And if it rains, a closed car at four.

And we shall play a game of chess,

Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door.

When Lil's husband got demobbed, I said,

I didn't mince my words, I said to her myself,

HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME

Now Albert's coming back, make yourself a bit smart.

He'll want to know what you done with that money he gave you

To get yourself some teeth. He did, I was there.

You have them all out, Lil, and get a nice set,

He said, I swear, I can't bear to look at you.

And no more can't I, I said, and think of poor Albert,

He's been in the army four years, he wants a good time,

And if you don't give it him, there's others will, I said.

Oh is there, she said. Something o' that, I said.

Then I'll know who to thank, she said, and give me a straight look.

HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME

Notes

If you don't like it you can get on with it, I said,  
Others can pick and choose if you can't.  
But if Albert makes off, it won't be for lack of telling.  
You ought to be ashamed, I said, to look so antique.  
(And her only thirty-one.)  
I can't help it, she said, pulling a long face,  
It's them pills I took, to bring it off, she said.  
(She's had five already, and nearly died of young George.)  
The chemist said it would be alright, but I've never been the same.  
You are a proper fool, I said.  
Well, if Albert won't leave you alone, there it is, I said,  
What you get married for if you don't want children?  
HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME  
Well, that Sunday Albert was home, they had a hot gammon,  
And they asked me in to dinner, to get the beauty of it hot  
HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME  
HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME  
Goonight Bill. Goonight Lou. Goonight May. Goonight.  
Ta ta. Goonight. Goonight.  
Good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good night, good night.

III. THE FIRE SERMON

The river's tent is broken: the last fingers of leaf  
Clutch and sink into the wet bank. The wind  
Crosses the brown land, unheard. The nymphs are departed.  
Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.  
The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,  
Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends  
Or other testimony of summer nights. The nymphs are departed.  
And their friends, the loitering heirs of city directors;  
Departed, have left no addresses.  
By the waters of Leman I sat down and wept...  
Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song,  
Sweet Thames, run softly, for I speak not loud or long.  
But at my back in a cold blast I hear  
The rattle of the bones, and chuckle spread from ear to ear.  
  
A rat crept softly through the vegetation  
Dragging its slimy belly on the bank

## Notes

While I was fishing in the dull canal  
 On a winter evening round behind the gashouse.  
 Musing upon the king my brother's wreck  
 And on the king my father's death before him.  
 White bodies naked on the low damp ground  
 And bones cast in a little low dry garret,  
 Rattled by the rat's foot only, year to year.  
 But at my back from time to time I hear  
 The sound of horns and motors, which shall bring  
 Sweeney to Mrs. Porter in the spring.  
 O the moon shone bright on Mrs. Porter  
 And on her daughter  
 They wash their feet in soda water  
 Et, O ces voix d'enfants, chantant dans la coupole!

Twit twit twit  
 Jug jug jug jug jug jug  
 So rudely forc'd.  
 Tereu

Unreal City  
 Under the brown fog of a winter noon  
 Mr Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant  
 Unshaven, with a pocket full of currants  
 C. i. f. London: documents at sight,  
 Asked me in demotic French  
 To luncheon at the Cannon Street Hotel  
 Followed by a week-end at the Metropole.

At the violet hour, when the eyes and back  
 Turn upward from the desk, when the human engine waits  
 Like a taxi throbbing waiting,  
 I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives,  
 Old man with wrinkled female breasts, can see  
 At the violet hour, the evening hour that strives  
 Homeward, and brings the sailor home from sea,  
 The typist home at tea-time, clears her breakfast, lights  
 Her stove, and lays out food in tins.  
 Out of the window perilously spread  
 Her drying combinations touched by the sun's last rays,

Notes

On the divan are piled (at night her bed)  
Stockings, slippers, camisoles, and stays.  
I Tiresias, old man with wrinkled dugs  
Perceived the scene, and foretold the rest—  
I too awaited the expected guest.  
He, the young man carbuncular, arrives,  
A small house-agent's clerk, with one bold stare,  
One of the low on whom assurance sits  
As a silk hat on a Bradford millionaire.  
The time is now propitious, as he guesses,  
The meal is ended, she is bored and tired,  
Endeavours to engage her in caresses  
Which still are unreproved, if undesired.  
Flushed and decided, he assaults at once;  
Exploring hands encounter no defence;  
His vanity requires no response,  
And makes a welcome of indifference.  
(And I Tiresias have foresuffered all  
Enacted on this same divan or bed;  
I who have sat by Thebes below the wall  
And walked among the lowest of the dead.)  
Bestows one final patronizing kiss,  
And gropes his way, finding the stairs unlit...

She turns and looks a moment in the glass,  
Hardly aware of her departed lover;  
Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass:  
"Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over."  
When lovely woman stoops to folly and  
Paces about her room again, alone,  
She smooths her hair with automatic hand,  
And puts a record on the gramophone.

"This music crept by me upon the waters"  
And along the Strand, up Queen Victoria Street.  
O City City, I can sometimes hear  
Beside a public bar in Lower Thames Street,  
The pleasant whining of a mandoline  
And a clatter and a chatter from within  
Where fishmen lounge at noon: where the walls

Notes

Of Magnus Martyr hold  
Inexplicable splendour of Ionian white and gold.

The river sweats  
Oil and tar  
The barges drift  
With the turning tide  
Red sails  
Wide  
To leeward, swing on the heavy spar.

The barges wash  
Drifting logs  
Down Greenwich reach  
Past the Isle of Dogs.

Weialala leia  
Wallala leialala

Elizabeth and Leicester  
Beating oars  
The stern was formed  
A gilded shell  
Red and gold  
The brisk swell  
Rippled both shores  
South-west wind  
Carried down stream  
The peal of bells  
White towers  
Weialala leia  
Wallala leialala

"Trams and dusty trees.  
Highbury bore me. Richmond and Kew  
Undid me. By Richmond I raised my knees  
Supine on the floor of a narrow canoe."

"My feet are at Moorgate, and my heart  
Under my feet. After the event  
He wept. He promised 'a new start.'  
I made no comment. What should I resent?"  
"On Margate Sands.

Notes

I can connect  
Nothing with nothing.  
The broken finger-nails of dirty hands.  
My people humble people who expect  
Nothing.”

la la

To Carthage then I came  
  
Burning burning burning burning  
O Lord Thou pluckest me out  
O Lord Thou pluckest  
  
burning

IV. DEATH BY WATER

Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead,  
Forgot the cry of gulls, and the deep seas swell  
And the profit and loss.

A current under sea

Picked his bones in whispers. As he rose and fell  
He passed the stages of his age and youth  
Entering the whirlpool.

Gentile or Jew

O you who turn the wheel and look to windward,  
Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you.

V. WHAT THE THUNDER SAID

After the torch-light red on sweaty faces  
After the frosty silence in the gardens  
After the agony in stony places  
The shouting and the crying  
Prison and place and reverberation  
Of thunder of spring over distant mountains  
He who was living is now dead  
We who were living are now dying  
With a little patience

Here is no water but only rock  
Rock and no water and the sandy road  
The road winding above among the mountains

Notes

Which are mountains of rock without water  
If there were water we should stop and drink  
Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think  
Sweat is dry and feet are in the sand  
If there were only water amongst the rock  
Dead mountain mouth of carious teeth that cannot spit  
Here one can neither stand nor lie nor sit  
There is not even silence in the mountains  
But dry sterile thunder without rain  
There is not even solitude in the mountains  
But red sullen faces sneer and snarl  
From doors of mud-cracked houses

    If there were water

And no rock  
If there were rock  
And also water  
And water  
A spring  
A pool among the rock  
If there were the sound of water only  
Not the cicada  
And dry grass singing  
But sound of water over a rock  
Where the hermit-thrush sings in the pine trees  
Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop  
But there is no water

Who is the third who walks always beside you?  
When I count, there are only you and I together  
But when I look ahead up the white road  
There is always another one walking beside you  
Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded  
I do not know whether a man or a woman  
—But who is that on the other side of you?

What is that sound high in the air  
Murmur of maternal lamentation  
Who are those hooded hordes swarming  
Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth  
Ringed by the flat horizon only

Notes

What is the city over the mountains  
Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air  
Falling towers  
Jerusalem Athens Alexandria  
Vienna London  
Unreal

A woman drew her long black hair out tight  
And fiddled whisper music on those strings  
And bats with baby faces in the violet light  
Whistled, and beat their wings  
And crawled head downward down a blackened wall  
And upside down in air were towers  
Tolling reminiscent bells, that kept the hours  
And voices singing out of empty cisterns and exhausted wells.

In this decayed hole among the mountains  
In the faint moonlight, the grass is singing  
Over the tumbled graves, about the chapel  
There is the empty chapel, only the wind's home.  
It has no windows, and the door swings,  
Dry bones can harm no one.  
Only a cock stood on the roof-tree  
Co co rico co co rico  
In a flash of lightning. Then a damp gust  
Bringing rain  
Ganga was sunken, and the limp leaves  
Waited for rain, while the black clouds  
Gathered far distant, over Himavant.  
The jungle crouched, humped in silence.  
Then spoke the thunder  
DA

Datta: what have we given?  
My friend, blood shaking my heart  
The awful daring of a moment's surrender  
Which an age of prudence can never retract  
By this, and this only, we have existed  
Which is not to be found in our obituaries  
Or in memories draped by the beneficent spider  
Or under seals broken by the lean solicitor  
In our empty rooms

DA

Dayadhvam: I have heard the key  
 Turn in the door once and turn once only  
 We think of the key, each in his prison  
 Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison  
 Only at nightfall, aetherial rumours  
 Revive for a moment a broken Coriolanus

DA

Damyata: The boat responded  
 Gaily, to the hand expert with sail and oar  
 The sea was calm, your heart would have responded  
 Gaily, when invited, beating obedient  
 To controlling hands

I sat upon the shore

Fishing, with the arid plain behind me  
 Shall I at least set my lands in order?

London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down

Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina  
 Quando fiam ceu chelidon—O swallow swallow  
 Le Prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie  
 These fragments I have shored against my ruins  
 Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo's mad againe.  
 Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.

Shantih shantih shantih

Notes

"The Waste Land" is not quite the poem Eliot originally drafted. Eliot's close friend and colleague, Ezra Pound, significantly revised the poem, suggesting major cuts and compressions. Thanks to Pound's heavy editing, as well as suggestions (specifically about scenes relevant to their stormy, hostile marriage) from Haigh-Wood, "The Waste Land" defined Modernist poetry and became possibly the most influential poem of the century. Devoid of a single speaker's voice, the poem ceaselessly shifts its tone and form, instead grafting together numerous allusive voices from Eliot's substantial poetic repertoire; Dante shares the stage with nonsense sounds (a technique that also showcases Eliot's dry wit). Believing this style best represented the fragmentation of the modern world, Eliot focused on the sterility of modern culture and its lack of tradition and ritual.



*Notes* Despite this pessimistic viewpoint, many find its mythical, religious ending hopeful about humanity's chance for renewal.

Pound's influence on the final version of "The Waste Land" is significant. At the time of the poem's composition, Eliot was ill, struggling to recover from his nervous breakdown and languishing

## Notes

through an unhappy marriage. Pound offered him support and friendship; his belief in and admiration for Eliot were enormous. In turn, however, he radically trimmed Eliot's long first draft (nineteen pages, by some accounts), bringing the poem closer to its current version. This is not to say Eliot would not have revised the poem on his own in similar ways; rather, the two men seemed to have genuinely collaborated on molding what was already a loose and at times free-flowing work. Pound, like Eliot a crucible of modernism, called for compression, ellipsis, reduction. The poem grew yet more cryptic; references that were previously clear now became more obscure. Explanations were out the window. The result was a more difficult work—but arguably a richer one.

Eliot did not take all of Pound's notes, but he did follow his friend's advice enough to turn his sprawling work into a tight, elliptical, and fragmented piece. Once the poem was completed, Pound lobbied on its behalf, convincing others of its importance. He believed in Eliot's genius, and in the impact "The Waste Land" would have on the literature of its day. That impact ultimately stretched beyond poetry, to novels, painting, music, and all the other arts. John Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer* owes a significant debt to "The Waste Land," for example. Eliot's take on the modern world profoundly shaped future schools of thought and literature, and his 1922 poem remains a touchstone of the English-language canon.

### **31.4 T.S.Eliot: The Waste Land (Non-detailed): Discussion and Analysis**

#### **31.4.1 Section I: "The Burial of the Dead"**

"The Waste Land" begins with an excerpt from Petronius Arbiter's *Satyricon*, in Latin and Greek, which translates as: "For once I saw with my own eyes the Cumean Sibyl hanging in a jar, and when the boys asked her, 'Sibyl, what do you want?' she answered, 'I want to die.'" The quotation is followed by a dedication to Ezra Pound, Eliot's colleague and friend, who played a major role in shaping the final version of the poem.

The poem proper begins with a description of the seasons. April emerges as the "cruellest" month, passing over a desolate land to which winter is far kinder. Eliot shifts from this vague invocation of time and nature to what seem to be more specific memories: a rain shower by the Starnbergersee; a lake outside Munich; coffee in that city's Hofgarten; sledding with a cousin in the days of childhood.

The second stanza returns to the tone of the opening lines, describing a land of "stony rubbish"—arid, sterile, devoid of life, quite simply the "waste land" of the poem's title. Eliot quotes Ezekiel 2.1 and Ecclesiastes 12.5, using biblical language to construct a sort of dialogue between the narrator—the "son of man"—and a higher power. The former is desperately searching for some sign of life—"roots that clutch," branches that grow—but all he can find are dry stones, dead trees, and "a heap of broken images." We have here a forsaken plane that offers no relief from the beating sun, and no trace of water.

Suddenly Eliot switches to German, quoting directly from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. The passage translates as: "Fresh blows the wind / To the homeland / My Irish child / Where do you wait?" In Wagner's opera, *Isolde*, on her way to Ireland, overhears a sailor singing this song, which brings with it ruminations of love promised and of a future of possibilities. After this digression, Eliot offers the reader a snatch of speech, this time from the mouth of the "hyacinth girl." This girl, perhaps one of the narrator's (or Eliot's) early loves, alludes to a time a year ago when the narrator presented her with hyacinths. The narrator, for his part, describes in another personal account—distinct in tone, that is, from the more grandiloquent descriptions of the waste land, the seasons, and intimations of spirituality that have preceded it—coming back late from a hyacinth garden and feeling struck by a sense of emptiness. Looking upon the beloved girl, he "knew nothing"; that is to say, faced with love, beauty, and "the heart of light," he saw only "silence." At this point, Eliot returns to Wagner, with the line "Oed' und leer das Meer": "Desolate and empty is the sea." Also

plucked from *Tristan und Isolde*, the line belongs to a watchman, who tells the dying Tristan that Isolde's ship is nowhere to be seen on the horizon.

From here Eliot switches abruptly to a more prosaic mode, introducing Madame Sosostris, a "famous clairvoyante" alluded to in Aldous Huxley's *Crome Yellow*. This fortune-teller is known across Europe for her skills with Tarot cards. The narrator remembers meeting her when she had "a bad cold." At that meeting she displayed to him the card of the drowned Phoenician Sailor: "Here, said she, is your card." Next comes "Belladonna, the Lady of the Rocks," and then "the man with three staves," "the Wheel," and "the one-eyed merchant." It should be noted that only the man with three staves and the wheel are actual Tarot cards; Belladonna is often associated with da Vinci's "Madonna of the Rocks," and the one-eyed merchant is, as far as we can tell, an invention of Eliot's.

Finally, Sosostris encounters a blank card representing something the one-eyed merchant is carrying on his back—something she is apparently "forbidden to see." She is likewise unable to find the Hanged Man among the cards she displays; from this she concludes that the narrator should "fear death by water." Sosostris also sees a vision of a mass of people "walking round in a ring." Her meeting with the narrator concludes with a hasty bit of business: she asks him to tell Mrs. Equitone, if he sees her, that Sosostris will bring the horoscope herself.

The final stanza of this first section of "The Waste Land" begins with the image of an "Unreal City" echoing Baudelaire's "fourmillante cite," in which a crowd of people—perhaps the same crowd Sosostris witnessed—flows over London Bridge while a "brown fog" hangs like a wintry cloud over the proceedings. Eliot twice quotes Dante in describing this phantasmagoric scene: "I had not thought death had undone so many" (from Canto 3 of the *Inferno*); "Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled" (from Canto 4). The first quote refers to the area just inside the Gates of Hell; the second refers to Limbo, the first circle of Hell.

It seems that the denizens of modern London remind Eliot of those without any blame or praise who are relegated to the Gates of Hell, and those who were never baptized and who now dwell in Limbo, in Dante's famous vision. Each member of the crowd keeps his eyes on his feet; the mass of men flow up a hill and down King William Street, in the financial district of London, winding up beside the Church of Saint Mary Woolnoth. The narrator sees a man he recognizes named Stetson. He cries out to him, and it appears that the two men fought together in a war. Logic would suggest World War I, but the narrator refers to Mylae, a battle that took place during the First Punic War. He then asks Stetson whether the corpse he planted last year in his garden has begun to sprout. Finally, Eliot quotes Webster and Baudelaire, back to back, ending the address to Stetson in French: "hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,—mon frère!"

## Analysis

Eliot's opening quotation sets the tone for the poem as a whole. Sibyl is a mythological figure who asked Apollo "for as many years of life as there are grains in a handful of sand" (North, 3). Unfortunately, she did not think to ask for everlasting youth. As a result, she is doomed to decay for years and years, and preserves herself within a jar. Having asked for something akin to eternal life, she finds that what she most wants is death. Death alone offers escape; death alone promises the end, and therefore a new beginning.

Thus does Eliot begin his magisterial poem, labeling his first section "The Burial of the Dead," a title pulled from the Anglican Book of Common Prayer. He has been careful to lay out his central theme before the first stanza has even begun: death and life are easily blurred; from death can spring life, and life in turn necessitates death. Cleanth Brooks, Jr., in "The Waste Land: An Analysis," sees the poem's engine as a paradox: "Life devoid of meaning is death; sacrifice, even the sacrificial death, may be life-giving, an awaking to life." Eliot's vision is of a decrepit land inhabited by persons who languish in an in-between state, perhaps akin to that of Dante's Limbo: they live, but insofar as they seem to feel nothing and aspire to nothing, they are dead. Eliot once articulated his philosophy

## Notes

concerning these matters in a piece of criticism on Baudelaire, one of his chief poetic influences: in it, Eliot intimated that it may be better to do evil than to do nothing at all—that at least some form of action means that one exists.

This criterion for existence, perhaps an antecedent to Existentialism, holds action as inherently meaningful. Inaction is equated with waste. The key image in “The Waste Land” may then be Sosostris’s vision of “crowds of people, walking round in a ring.” They walk and walk, but go nowhere. Likewise, the inhabitants of modern London keep their eyes fixed to their feet; their destination matters little to them and they flow as an unthinking mass, bedecking the metropolis in apathy.

From this thicket of malaise, the narrator clings to memories that would seem to suggest life in all its vibrancy and wonder: summer rain in Munich, coffee in a German park, a girl wearing flowers. What is crucial to the poem’s sensibility, however, is the recognition that even these trips to the past, even these attempts to regain happiness, must end in failure or confusion. Identities are in flux. The Hofgarten memory precipitates a flurry of German: “Bin gar keine Russin, stamm’ aus Litauen, echt deutsch.” Translated, this line reads roughly as: “I’m not Russian at all; I come from Lithuania, a true German.” It is not clear who the speaker is, but whatever the case the line is nonsensical; three distinct regions of Europe are mentioned, though Lithuania arguably has far more to do with Russia than with Germany. The sentence itself depends on a non sequitur, anticipating by almost a century Europe’s current crisis of identity, with individual nations slowly losing ground to a collective union. In Eliot’s time, that continent was just emerging from the wreckage of World War I, a splintered entity teetering on chaos; Germany, in particular, suffered from a severe identity dilemma, with various factions competing for authority, classes that were distrustful of one another, and the old breed of military strong-men itching to renew itself for the blood-drenched decades to come.

The historical considerations will only go so far. Biographical interpretation is a slippery slope, but it should nonetheless be noted that Eliot was, at the time of the poem’s composition, suffering from acute nervous ailments, chief among them severe anxiety. It was during his time of recuperation that he was able to write much of “The Waste Land,” but his conflicted feelings about his wife, Vivienne, did not much help his state of mind. The ambiguity of love, the potential of that emotion to cause both great joy and great sorrow, informs the passage involving the hyacinth girl—another failed memory, as it were. In this case, Eliot describes a vision of youthful beauty in a piece of writing that seems at first to stem more from English Romanticism than from the arid modern world of the rest of the poem: “Your arms full, and your hair wet.” Water, so cherished an element and so lacking in this desolate wasteland, here brings forth flowers and hyacinth girls, and the possibility of happiness, however fleeting. That very vision, however, causes Eliot’s eyes to fail, his speech to forsake him; love renders him impotent, and he is left “neither living nor dead” – much like the aforementioned residents of Limbo. The paradox is that such joy and human warmth might elicit such pain and coldness. Eliot sums it up with the line: “Looking into the heart of light, the silence.” Using Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde* as a book-end device—the first such quotation alluding to the beginnings of love, the second describing the tragedy of a love lost—Eliot traces a swift passage from light to darkness, sound to silence, movement to stasis. (*Tristan* begins on a boat, with the wind freshly blowing, and ends on the shoreline, awaiting a boat that never comes.)

The same paradox is there at the very beginning of the poem: April is the cruelest month. Shouldn’t it be the kindest? The lovely image of lilacs in the spring is here associated with “the dead land.” Winter was better; then, at least, the suffering was obvious, and the “forgetful snow” covered over any memories. In spring, “memory and desire” mix; the poet becomes acutely aware of what he is missing, of what he has lost, of what has passed him by. Ignorance is bliss; the knowledge that better things are possible is perhaps the most painful thing of all. Eliot’s vision of modern life is therefore rooted in a conception of the lost ideal.

It is appropriate, then, that the narrator should turn next to a clairvoyant; after gazing upon the past, he now seeks to enter the future. Water, giver of life, becomes a token of death: the narrator is none other than the drowned Phoenician Sailor, and he must “fear death by water.” This realization paves the way for the famous London Bridge image. Eliot does not even describe the water of the Thames; he saves his verse for the fog that floats overhead, for the quality of the dawn-lit sky, and for the faceless mass of men swarming through the dead city. Borrowing heavily from Baudelaire’s visions of Paris, Eliot paints a portrait of London as a haunted (or haunting) specter, where the only sound is “dead” and no man dares even look beyond the confines of his feet. When the narrator sees Stetson, we return to the prospect of history. World War I is replaced by the Punic War; with this odd choice, Eliot seems to be arguing that all wars are the same, just as he suggests that all men are the same in the stanza’s final line: “You! hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,—mon frère!”: “Hypocrite reader!—my likeness,—my brother!” We are all Stetson; Eliot is speaking directly to us. Individual faces blur into the ill-defined mass of humanity as the burial procession inexorably proceeds.

### 31.4.2 Section II: “A Game of Chess”

The second section of “The Waste Land” begins with a description of a woman sitting on a beautiful chair that looks “like a burnished throne”—a nod to Cleopatra in Antony and Cleopatra. She occupies a splendid drawing room, replete with coffered ceilings and lavish decorations. The setting is a decidedly grandiose one. We are not sure who the woman is: perhaps Eliot’s wife Vivienne, perhaps a stand-in for all members of the upper crust, perhaps simply an unnamed personage whiling away the hours in a candlelit kingdom. Eliot writes of “satin cases poured forth in profusion,” “vials of ivory and coloured glass,” an “antique mantel” and “the glitter of [...] jewels.” Both the woman and the room are magnificently attired, perhaps to the point of excess.

One of the paintings in the room depicts the rape of Philomela, a scene pulled from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. In the original story, King Tereus’s wife bids him to bring her sister Philomela to her. Upon meeting Philomela, Tereus falls instantly and hopelessly in love; nothing must get in the way of his conquest. Racked with lust, he steals away with her and rapes her in the woods—the “sylvan scene” Eliot mentions. He then ties her up and cuts off her tongue so that she may not tell others of what has happened. He returns to his wife, but Philomela is able to weave on a loom what has befallen her; she gives the loom to her sister, who, upon discovering the truth, retrieves Philomela, slays Tereus’s son, and feeds his carcass to the king. When he finds out that he has been served his son for dinner, Tereus flies into a rage, chasing both Philomela and his wife out of the palace, and all three of them transform into birds. The speechless Philomela becomes a nightingale.

Snatches of dialogue follow. It seems plausible that the woman in the room is addressing the narrator. She complains that her nerves are bad, and requests that he stay with her. When she asks him what he is thinking, the narrator retorts, “I think we are in rats’ alley / Where the dead men lost their bones.” Still more harried questions follow; the woman demands to find out whether the narrator knows “nothing,” then asks what she should do now, what they should do tomorrow. The narrator answers with a rote itinerary: “The hot water at ten. / And if it rains, a closed car at four. / And we shall play a game of chess, / Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door.”

The last stanza of the section depicts two Cockney women talking in a pub at closing time – hence the repeated dictum: “HURRY UP PLEASE IT’S TIME.” The subject of conversation is a certain Lil, whose husband Albert was recently released from the army after the war. He gave Lil money to get a new set of teeth, but she has hesitated: “You ought to be ashamed, I said, to look so antique [...] I can’t help it, she said, pulling a long face.” Lil is apparently on pills, unhappy in her marriage, and mother to none. The dialogue grows more fractured and the closing time announcements become more frequent, and finally the stanza devolves into a quotation from Hamlet: Ophelia’s final words to Claudius and Gertrude, “Good night ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good night, good night.”

## Notes

## Analysis

This section once again ushers in the issue of biographical interpretation. It is tempting to read the woman on the “burnished throne” as Eliot’s wife, Vivienne; the passage then becomes a dissection of an estranged relationship. Some of the details point to failed romance or failed marriage: the “golden Cupidon” who must hide “his eyes behind his wing,” the depiction of Philomela’s rape—an example of love cascading into brutality and violence—and even the woman’s “strange synthetic perfumes” drowning “the sense in odours.”

Again the word “drowned” appears, and with it comes the specter of death by water. In this case, the thick perfumes seem to blot out authentic sensations, just as the splendid decorations of the room appear at times more menacing than beautiful. The trappings of a wealthy modern life come at a price. The carving of a dolphin is cast in a “sad light.” The grandiose portraits and paintings on the wall are but “withered stumps of time.” By the end of this first stanza, the room seems almost haunted: “staring forms/Leaned out, leaning, hushing the room enclosed.” The woman, for her part, is a glittering apparition, seated upon her Chair (Eliot capitalizes the word as if it were a kingdom) like a queen, recalling Cleopatra—and thus yet another failed love affair.

First Tristan and Isolde, now Cleopatra: twice now Eliot has alluded to tragic romances, filtered from antiquity through more modern sensibilities—first that of Wagner, the great modernizer of opera, and then that of Shakespeare, perhaps the first “modern” dramatist. Quotation and allusion is of course a quintessential component of Eliot’s style, particularly in “The Waste Land”; the poem is sometimes criticized for being too heavily bedecked in references, and too dependent on previous works and canons. The poet’s trick is to plumb the old in order to find the new. It may seem at first ironic that he relies so much on Ovid, the Bible, Dante, and other older works of literature to describe the modern age, but Eliot’s method is an essentially universalist one. Just as the Punic War is interchangeable with World War I—the truly “modern” war of Eliot’s time—so can past generations of writers and thinkers shed light on contemporary life. Eliot’s greatest model in this vein was probably Ulysses, in which James Joyce used Homer’s epic as a launching pad for a dissection of modern Dublin. In contrast to modernist poets such as Cendrars and Apollinaire, who used the choot-choot of trains, the spinning of wheels, and the billowing of fumes to evoke their era, or philosophers such as Kracauer and Benjamin, who dove into the sports shows and the arcade halls in search of a lexicon of the modern that is itself modern, Eliot is content to tease modernity out of the old.

This is not to say that “The Waste Land” is free of the specifics of 1920s life, but rather that every such specific comes weighted with an antiquarian reference. When Eliot evokes dance-hall numbers and popular ditties, he does so through the “Shakespearean Rag.” When he imitates the Cockney talk of women in a pub, he finishes the dialogue with a quotation from Hamlet, so that the rhythms of lower-class London speech give way to the words of the mad Ophelia.

That said, “A Game of Chess” is considerably less riddled with allusion and quotes than “The Burial of the Dead.” The name itself comes from Thomas Middleton’s seventeenth-century play *A Game of Chess*, which posited the said game as an allegory to describe historical machinations—specifically the brewing conflict between England and Spain. What might the game allegorize for Eliot? He offers it up as one of several activities, when the woman demands: “What shall we ever do?” Simply a slot in a strict numerical ordering of the day, chess recalls “lidless eyes,” as its players bide the time and wait “for a knock upon the door.” We are not far removed from the masses crowding London Bridge, their eyes fixed on their feet. Modern city-dwellers who float along in a fog are neither dead nor living; their world is an echo of Dante’s Limbo. Chess belongs therefore to this lifeless life; it is the quintessential game of the wasteland, dependent on numbers and cold strategies, devoid of feeling or human contact. Interaction is reduced to a set of movements on a checkered board.

## 31.4.3 Section III: "The Fire Sermon"

## Notes

Eliot opens this section with the image of a river, wind crossing silently overhead. We are on the banks of the Thames, and Eliot cites Spenser's "Prothalamion" with the line: "Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song." The river is empty; "the nymphs" of Spenser's poem have departed, as have "their friends, the loitering heirs of city directors." Eliot unspools imagery that evokes modern life—"empty bottles, sandwich papers, / Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends"—by describing what is not in the river. In other words, the Thames has become a kind of stagnant slate, devoid of detritus but also of life. The narrator remembers sitting by "the waters of Lemman"—French for Lake Geneva, where the poet recuperated while writing "The Waste Land"—and weeping. His tears are a reference to Psalm 137, in which the people of Israel, exiled to Babylon, cry by the river as they remember Jerusalem.

Suddenly the death-life of the modern world rears its head. "A cold blast" is sounded, bones rattle, and a rat creeps "through the vegetation / Dragging its slimy belly on the bank." Rats appear several times in "The Waste Land," and always they carry with them the specter of urban decay and death—a death which, unlike that of Christ or Osiris or other men-deities, brings about no life. At this point, the narrator, "fishing in the dull canal," assumes the role of the Fisher King, alluding to Jessie L. Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* and its description of the Grail legend. According to this study, of critical importance to the entirety of "The Waste Land," the Fisher King—so named probably because of the importance of fish as Christian fertility symbols—grows ill or impotent. As a result, his land begins to wither away; something akin to a drought hits, and what was once a fruitful kingdom is reduced to a wasteland. Only the Holy Grail can reverse the spell and save the king and his land. A typical addendum to this legend involves a prior crime or violation that serves as cause for the Fisher King's malady. By association, the rape of a maiden might sometimes lie at the root; hence Eliot's allusion to the tale of Philomela in "A Game of Chess."

The allusion to the Grail is doubled by a possible reference to Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*, a version of the Percival stories; in this account, the brother of the Fisher King (Anfortas) tells Parzival: "His name all men know as Anfortas, and I weep for him evermore." Eliot's lines "Musing upon the king my brother's wreck / And on the king my father's death before him" seem to combine the Percival legend with *The Tempest*, in which Ferdinand utters the verse: "Sitting on a bank, / Weeping again the King my father's wreck." (North, 11) Eliot has already twice quoted *The Tempest*—"Those are pearls that were his eyes," in "The Burial of the Dead" and "A Game of Chess"—and here he links Shakespeare's fantastical drama, and the accompanying image of water racked by turbulent weather, with Grail mythology.

As the impotent Fisher King, Eliot describes the wasteland that stretches out before him. "White bodies [lie] naked on the low damp ground," and bones are scattered "in a little dry garret, / Rattled by the rat's foot only, year to year." This last line echoes verses 115-116 in "A Game of Chess": "I think we are in the rats' alley / Where the dead men have lost their bones." In both cases, the setting is one of death, decay, a kind of modern hell. Eliot proceeds to allude to John Day's *The Parliament of Bees*, a seventeenth-century work that describes the tale of Actaeon and Diana: the former approaches the latter while she is bathing, and, surprising her, is transformed into a stag and killed by his own dogs. Here Actaeon is "Sweeney"—a character familiar from some of Eliot's other poems, and Diana is Mrs. Porter. It is springtime, suggesting love and fertility—but also cruelty, in Eliot's version—and Sweeney visits the object of his affection via "horns and motors." Again ancient mythology is updated, recast, and remolded. The stanza concludes with a quotation from Verlaine's "Parsifal," a sonnet describing the hero's successful quest for the Holy Grail.

Next come four bizarre lines: "Twit twit twit / Jug jug jug jug jug / So rudely forc'd. / Tereu." We recall "Jug jug jug" from "A Game of Chess," in which the onomatopoeia described the sound of Philomela as nightingale; "Twit twit twit" likewise seems to represent a bird's call. So we have returned to the tale of the woman who was violated and took her revenge, and "So rudely forc'd" refers to that violation. "Tereu," then, is Tereus.

## Notes

"Unreal City" reprises the line from "The Burial of the Dead," evoking Baudelaire once more and bringing the reader back to modern London. Mr. Eugenides, a merchant from Turkey (and probably the one-eyed merchant Madame Sosostriis described earlier) invites the narrator to luncheon at a hotel and to join him on a weekend excursion to Brighton. In the stanza that follows, the narrator, no longer himself and no longer the Fisher King, takes on the role of Tiresias, the blind prophet who has lived both as a man and a woman, and is therefore "throbbing between two lives." Tiresias sees a "young man carbuncular"—that is, a young man who has or resembles a boil—pay a visit to a female typist. She is "bored and tired," and the young man, like Tereus, is full of lust. He sleeps with her and then makes off, leaving her alone to think to herself: "Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over." She plays music on the gramophone.

The music seems to transport the narrator back to the city below. "This music crept by me upon the waters" is another quote from *The Tempest*, and Eliot proceeds to describe a bustling bar in Lower Thames Street filled with "fishmen." This account paves the way for another vision of the river itself: sweating "oil and tar," a murky, polluted body replete with barges and "drifting logs." Eliot quotes Wagner's *Die Gotterdammerung*, in which maidens upon the Rhine, having lost their gold, sing a song of lament: "Weialala leia / Wallala leialala." A quick allusion to Queen Elizabeth's boat-ride with her suitor the Earl of Leicester, described in James Anthony Froude's *History of England*, contains references to the rich woman of "A Game of Chess" ("A gilded shell") and another description of the sounds of the city—"The peal of bells / White towers."

Finally, one of the "maidens" raises her own voice, recounting her proper tragedy. "Highbury bore me. Richmond and Kew/Undid me": in other words, she was born in Highbury and lost her innocence in Richmond and Kew. Bitterly she recalls how the man responsible promised "a new start" afterwards; as it now stands, the maiden "can connect / Nothing with nothing." The stanza ends with references to St. Augustine's *Confessions* and Buddha's *Fire Sermon*—in each case to a passage describing the dangers of youthful lust.

### Analysis

The central theme of this section is, to put it simply, sex. If death permeates "The Burial of the Dead" and the tragically wronged woman—be it Philomela or Ophelia—casts a pall over "A Game of Chess," "The Fire Sermon" is in essence a sermon about the dangers of lust. It is important to recognize that Eliot culminates this passage with an invocation of both Eastern and Western philosophy; he even says so himself in his notes. "To Carthage then I came" refers to Augustine; "Burning burning burning" recalls Buddha's *Fire Sermon*, in which "All things, O priests, are on fire." Both Augustine and Buddha warn against purely physical urges, as they must inevitably serve as obstacles or barriers to true faith and spiritual peace. The image of fire, familiar from countless representations of Hell in Christian art, is here specifically linked to the animal drives that push men and women to commit sinful acts.

Of course, to interpret Eliot's poetry this moralistically is to miss much of its nuance and wit. While recalling the strictest of religious codes, Eliot is at his most literately playful here, spinning *Tempest* quotations into odes to Wagner, littering Spenser's Thames with "cardboard boxes" and "cigarette ends," replacing Actaeon and Diana with a certain Sweeney and a certain Mrs. Porter. There is a satirical edge that cuts through this writing — and perhaps real indignation as well. Much has already been made of the episode involving the typist and the carbuncular man. What is particularly fascinating about it is the way in which Eliot mixes and matches the violent with the nearly tender: the young man's first advances are "caresses" and he is later described as a "lover." At the same time, however, "he assaults at once," his vanity requiring "no response." It is close to a scene of rape, and the ambiguity makes it all the more troubling.

Eliot offers a voyeuristic glimpse of a young woman's home, her sexual liaison with a man, and her moments alone afterwards. Ironically, he presents this Peeping Tom's account from the narrative perspective of the blind Tiresias: the "Old man with wrinkled female breasts." The decrepit prophet

who once lived as a woman recalls his encounters with Antigone and Oedipus Rex (“I who have sat by Thebes below the wall”) and Odysseus in Hades (“And walked among the lowest of the dead”) while witnessing a quintessentially modern bit of business. That Eliot resurrects ancient tropes and characters within such a vulgar scene is an act of audacity that was shocking in 1922, and still packs a punch. Readers today are perhaps less surprised by the episode, but it is hard not to be moved; quoting from Oliver Goldsmith’s eighteenth-century novel *The Vicar of Wakefield*, Eliot describes the post-coital woman pacing about her room: “When lovely woman stoops to folly.” An image of potential perfection has been spoiled; all that is left now is a mirror and a gramophone.

It was surely this kind of scene that so stirred John Dos Passos, and it does indeed find numerous echoes in *Manhattan Transfer*. Eliot’s poem was a crucial inspiration for Dos Passos’ epic portrait of New York. An American transplanted to Europe, Eliot’s narrator floats through London in “The Fire Sermon,” beginning by the Thames and returning there to listen to the cry of the Rhine-maidens as they bemoan their fate: “Weialala leia/Wallala leialala.” Whether quoting older sources or capturing the rhyme and texture of modern life, Eliot is dealing in sadness; a sense of loss imbues the writing, bubbling to the surface in the maiden’s account of her lost innocence. Just as the narrator “knew nothing” when looking upon the hyacinth girl, so is the maiden faced with “nothing”: “I can connect/Nothing with nothing./The broken fingernails of dirty hands./My people humble people who expect/Nothing.”

From the typist to this last suffering woman, lust seems to portend sorrow, and that sorrow seems in turn to be an integral feature of the modern world. The typist is never named because she is ultimately a “type,” a representation of something larger and more widespread. Eliot is diagnosing his London and his world with a disease of the senses, through which sex has replaced love and meaningless physical contact has subsumed real emotional connection. Ironically, the Fisher King’s impotence then results from an excess of carnality. The image of the river sweating oil recalls a Biblical plague, and the “burning” at the end of the section brings Hell to mind. Through it all the river courses, carrying history along with it. All the poet can do, it seems, is weep.

#### 31.4.4 Section IV: “Death by Water” and “What the Thunder Said”

“Death by Water” is by far the shortest of the poem’s five sections, describing in eight lines “Phlebas the Phoenician” lying dead in the sea. An echo of the “drowned Phoenician” Madame Sosostri displayed in “The Burial of the Dead,” Phlebas is apparently a merchant, judging by the reference to “the profit and loss.” Now “a current under sea” picks his bones.

“What the Thunder Said,” the final section of “The Waste Land,” picks up the same thread, referring in the first stanza to the passion of Christ, another famous deceased. The “torchlight red on sweaty faces” perhaps indicates the guards who come to take Christ away; the “garden” is Gethsemane; “the agony in stony places” refers to the torture and the execution itself; and “of thunder of spring over distant mountains” describes the earthquake following the crucifixion. From Christ’s death springs life; similarly, the Phoenician is killed by water, that life-giving force, that symbol of fertility and rebirth. As in “The Burial of the Dead,” life and death are inextricably linked, their borders blurred at times: “He who was living is now dead/We who were living are now dying/With a little patience.”

The second stanza describes a land without any water: only rocks, sand, “Dead mountain mouth of carious teeth.” The thunder brings no rain and is therefore “sterile.” “Red sullen faces sneer and snarl” at the poet as he makes his way through this desolate land – another wasteland.



*Did u know?* The poet laments the absence of water, thirst imbuing his verse with longing; he imagines the “drip drop” of water on rocks, but concludes by acknowledging that, alas, “there is no water.”

## Notes

What follows is an allusion to Luke 24, as well as to a passage in Sir Ernest Shackleton's *South*; two travelers walk upon a road, and seem to be accompanied by a third, unnamed wanderer. Does this "third" exist, or is he merely an illusion? Shackleton's passage involves three men imagining a fourth by their side; in the Biblical scene, two travelers are joined by the resurrected Christ, but do not at first recognize that it is Him.

Eliot then moves from the individual to the collective, casting his gaze over all Europe and Asia, seeing "endless plains" and "hooded hordes." It is a nearly apocalyptic vision; the great ancient cities of the Mediterranean ("Jerusalem Athens Alexandria") and Europe ("Vienna London") all seem "unreal," as if they were already phantoms. Eliot refers to the "violet air," echoing the "violet hour" of "The Fire Sermon," but also suggesting the twilight not just of a day, but of all Western civilization. "Violet" is one of the liturgical colors associated with baptism; Eliot might be alluding to the Perilous Chapel in Jessie L. Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*, through which the knight must pass in order to obtain the Grail and which represents a sort of liminal passage or baptism. Certainly the next stanza, with "voices singing out of empty cisterns and exhausted wells" and "bats with baby faces," suggests the Perilous Chapel — a nightmarish place that tests the knight's gall and instills dread. Eliot describes towers that are upside down, and a woman who plays music with her hair, recalling the rich woman in "A Game of Chess" whose "hair / Spread out in fiery points / Glowed into words," and "tumbled graves." (In some versions of the Grail legend there is likewise a perilous graveyard.)

Finally, a "damp gust" brings rain. Immediately Eliot invokes the Ganges, India's sacred river ("Ganga" in the poem), and thunder, once sterile, now speaks: "Datta," "dayadhvam," and "damyata." The words the thunder offers belong to the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, and describe the three dictums God delivers to his disciples: "to give," "to control," and "to sympathize." This profoundly spiritual moment of communication between men and God, of a dialogue between the earth and the Heavens, seems to promise a new beginning. Civilization is crumbling—"London bridge is falling down falling down falling down"—yet the poem ends with a benediction: "Shantih shantih shantih."

### Analysis

The final stanzas of "The Waste Land" once again link Western and Eastern traditions, transporting the reader to the Ganges and the Himalayas, and then returning to the Thames and London Bridge. Eliot's tactic throughout his poem has been that of eclecticism, of mixing and matching and of diversity, and here this strain reaches a culmination. The relevant Upanishad passage, which Eliot quotes, describes God delivering three groups of followers—men, demons, and the gods—the sound "Da." The challenge is to pull some meaning out of this apparently meaningless syllable. For men, "Da" becomes "Datta," meaning to give; this order is meant to curb man's greed. For demons, "dayadhvam" is the dictum: these cruel and sadistic beings must show compassion and empathy for others. Finally, the gods must learn control—"damyata"—for they are wild and rebellious. Together, these three orders add up to a consistent moral perspective, composure, generosity, and empathy lying at the core.

Recalling his earlier allusion to Buddha's Fire Sermon, Eliot links "Datta" with a description of lust, of the dangers of "a moment's surrender / Which an age of prudence can never retract." This, it would seem, is the primary sin of man. Crucially, however, Eliot notes that "By this, and this only, we have existed"—reminding the reader of his work on Baudelaire, and his argument that an evil action, because it signifies existence, is better than inaction, which signifies nothing. Man's lustful deeds are "not to be found in our obituaries"; they remain intangible to some degree, not to be committed to paper or memory. But they linger on nonetheless, haunting the doers but also imbuing them with a sense of self; for once, Eliot almost seems to suggest the value of "a moment's surrender,"

## Notes

of giving up control for one fleeting instant, no matter the consequences. Indeed, such an act is perhaps preferable to that which the “beneficent spider”—a reference to Webster’s *The White Devil*, according to Eliot’s notes—allows; “empty rooms” and a “lean solicitor” cannot hope to understand the impulses that lead to an act of “folly.” Is “an age of prudence” even worth the trouble?

Next comes sympathy—“dayadvham”—as if Eliot were reminding the reader to show compassion for lustful men and women. We cannot help but remember the grief-stricken maiden of “The Fire Sermon” or the lonely typist with her gramophone; at the root of such tragedy is, after all, a sincere love for humanity. Eliot cares for these characters he has created, these refractions of his own modern world. The sermonizing of previous stanzas here gives way to a gentler view, albeit in the form of spiritual commandments. “I have heard the key/Turn in the door once and turn once only” refers to Dante’s *Inferno*, in which Count Ugolino starves to death after being locked in a tower for treason. The subsequent allusion to “Coriolanus” completes the cycle: a Roman who turned his back on Rome, Coriolanus is another example of an outcast. These distinctly male visions of loneliness and removal echo the female counterpart of the typist, alone in her room at night. Eliot asks us to sympathize with these figures, and to acknowledge their pain.

The following stanza lifts the spirits; after the wreckage of lust and the torment of isolation, “Damyata” invites a happier perspective. The boat responds “Gaily, to the hand expert with sail and oar,” like the boat upon which Isolde hears the sailor’s song in “The Burial of the Dead.” We have returned then to the beginnings of love, the promise of a joyful future. “Your heart” is perhaps even an address to Eliot’s wife, begging the question of whether their romance might be rekindled. It is worth noting the tense Eliot employs: “would have responded” implies a negative. It is possible that what we are seeing is merely a token of what might have been, and not what is.

More direct is the past tense the narrator uses in the next stanza, in which he sits upon the shore, fishing. He is once again the Fisher King, impotent and dying, and he is flanked by an “arid plain.” We are unable to fully escape the wasteland. Eliot tempers the hope of the previous lines with this evocation of despair. “Shall I at least set my lands in order?” the narrator asks. The end is drawing near. The world is collapsing: London Bridge falls, Dante is quoted yet again, and an excerpt from Nerval involving “Le Prince d’Aquitaine” points to a crumbling or destroyed tower—“la tour abolie.” The hellish imagery of earlier parts of the poem returns here, complete with another view of modern-day London, with its towers and bridges. The word “ruins” is of particular importance: “These fragments I have shored against my ruins.” The narrator is still attempting to stave off destruction...or perhaps he has at last surrendered, accepting his fate and that of the world.

## Self Assessment

Multiple Choice Questions:

6. Which month is the “Cruellest”?
 

(a) September	(b) December
(c) April	(d) May
7. Where is the Starnbergersee?
 

(a) Just outside London	(b) In Michigan
(c) In Paris	(d) Near Munich
8. “The river sweats....”
 

(a) oil and tar.”	(b) fumes and fire.”
(c) saffron and lilac.”	(d) water.”
9. Who is demobbed?
 

(a) Madame Sososttris	(b) Sweeney
(c) Prufrock	(d) Lil’s husband

## Notes

10. "Demobbed" means:
- |                                     |                              |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| (a) "killed"                        | (b) "lynched"                |
| (c) "awarded with a medal of honor" | (d) "released from the army" |
11. What battle did Stetson supposedly participate in?
- |                           |                             |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------|
| (a) the Battle of Britain | (b) the Battle of the Bulge |
| (c) Mylae                 | (d) Waterloo                |
12. Which of the following cities is mentioned in "The Waste Land"?
- |              |                |
|--------------|----------------|
| (a) Vienna   | (b) Marseilles |
| (c) Novgorod | (d) Timbuktu   |
13. The opening section of "The Waste Land" is entitled:
- |                              |                      |
|------------------------------|----------------------|
| (a) "The Burial of the Dead" | (b) "Death by Water" |
| (c) "The Fire Sermon"        | (d) "Shantih"        |
14. Who visits the typist?
- |                               |                            |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------|
| (a) Mrs. Porter               | (b) Prufrock               |
| (c) The young man carbuncular | (d) A Bradford Millionaire |
15. Who witnesses the visit?
- |                |                      |
|----------------|----------------------|
| (a) Ezra Pound | (b) Madame Sosostris |
| (c) Tiresias   | (d) Vivienne         |

"Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo's mad againe" is a reference to Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedie*, a late sixteenth-century text in which Hieronymo lapses into insanity after his son is murdered. The brutality and violence of man come to mind. What became of control, sympathy, and generosity? As if to answer the question, Eliot repeats the Eastern dictum: "Datta. Dayadvham. Damyata." Against the ills of the modern (and pre-modern) world, those three words still hold out the promise of salvation. "Shantih shantih shantih" is an acknowledgment of that salvation; it may be interpreted as a blessing of sorts, putting to rest the sins, faults, trials and tribulations that have preceded it. Redemption remains a possibility. Interpretations of "The Waste Land" as unrelentingly pessimistic do little justice to the hopefulness, however faltering, of these last lines. Rain has come, and with it a call from the heavens. The poem ends on a note of grace, allying Eastern and Western religious traditions to posit a more universal worldview. Eliot calls what he has assembled "fragments," and indeed they are; but together they add up to a vision that is not only European but global, a vision of the world as wasteland, awaiting the arrival of the Grail that will cure it of its ills. The end of the poem seems to suggest that that Grail is still within reach.

### 31.5 Summary

- Edward James Hughes OM (17 August 1930 – 28 October 1998), more commonly known as Ted Hughes, was an English poet and children's writer.
- In 2008 *The Times* ranked Hughes fourth on their list of "The 50 greatest British writers since 1945".
- Hughes' earlier poetic work is rooted in nature and, in particular, the innocent savagery of animals, and an interest from an early age.
- In Hughes's view, modern man has discarded his world of feelings, imagination and pure instincts which is true to nature.
- "Death by Water" is by far the shortest of the poem's five sections, describing in eight lines "Phlebas the Phoenician" lying dead in the sea.

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**31.6 Keywords**

*The Waste Land* : The Waste Land is a 434-line modernist poem by T. S. Eliot published in 1922.

*Poetry* : Poetry is a form of literary art in which language is used for its aesthetic and evocative qualities in addition to, or in lieu of, its apparent meaning.

*Cathedral* : Cathedral is a Christian church, which contains the seat of Bishop.

*Enantiodromic* : Enantiodromic refers to characteristic of something which has become its opposite.

*Amorphousness* : Amorphousness refers to state of lacking definite form.

**31.7 Review Questions**

1. Write an essay on the biography of Ted Hughes.
2. Describe the detailed analysis of the poem, "The Thought Fox".
3. Describe the analysis of the poem, "Thrushes".
4. Write an essay the biography of T.S. Eliot.
5. Explain the detailed analysis of Eliot's "The Waste Land".
6. Discuss Ted Hughes as an Animal Poet.

**Answers: Self Assessment**

- |         |         |         |         |         |
|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| 1. (b)  | 2. (d)  | 3. (c)  | 4. (a)  | 5. (c)  |
| 6. (c)  | 7. (d)  | 8. (a)  | 9. (d)  | 10. (d) |
| 11. (c) | 12. (a) | 13. (a) | 14. (c) | 15. (c) |

**31.8 Further Readings***Books*

Ted Hughes: the Life of a poet	— Elaine Feinstein
Ted Hughes: poems	— Ted Hughes
T.S.Eliot: the poems	— Martin Scofield
The Waste Land	— T.S. Eliot

*Online links*

<http://www.enotes.com/thought-fox-salem/thought-fox-681298>  
<http://www.pinkmonkey.com/booknotes/monkeynotes/pmWasteland02.asp>