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BRITISH POETRY

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The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales. (In the Beginning, The Wife of Bath)

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. Before continuing the tale, the narrator declares his intent to list and describe each of the members of the group.

Analysis

The invocation of spring with which the General Prologue begins is lengthy and formal compared to the language of the rest of the Prologue. The first lines situate the story in a particular time and place, but the speaker does this in cosmic and cyclical terms, celebrating the vitality and richness of spring. This approach gives the opening lines a dreamy, timeless, unfocused quality, and it is therefore surprising when the narrator reveals that he's going to describe a pilgrimage that he himself took rather than telling a love story.

A pilgrimage is a religious journey undertaken for penance and grace. As pilgrimages went, Canterbury was not a very difficult destination for an English person to reach. It was, therefore,

very popular in fourteenth-century England, as the narrator mentions. Pilgrims traveled to visit the remains of Saint Thomas Becket, archbishop of Canterbury, who was murdered in 1170 by knights of King Henry II. Soon after his death, he became the most popular saint in England. The pilgrimage in *The Canterbury Tales* should not be thought of as an entirely solemn occasion, because it also offered the pilgrims an opportunity to abandon work and take a vacation.

In line 20, the narrator abandons his unfocused, all-knowing point of view, identifying himself as an actual person for the first time by inserting the first person—"I"—as he relates how he met the group of pilgrims while staying at the Tabard Inn. He emphasizes that this group, which he encountered by accident, was itself formed quite by chance (25–26). He then shifts into the first-person plural, referring to the pilgrims as "we" beginning in line 29, asserting his status as a member of the group.

The narrator ends the introductory portion of his prologue by noting that he has "time and space" to tell his narrative. His comments underscore the fact that he is writing sometime after the events of his story, and that he is describing the characters from memory. He has spoken and met with these people, but he has waited a certain length of time before sitting down and describing them. His intention to describe each pilgrim as he or she seemed to him is also important, for it emphasizes that his descriptions are not only subject to his memory but are also shaped by his individual perceptions and opinions regarding each of the characters. He positions himself as a mediator between two groups: the group of pilgrims, of which he was a member, and us, the audience, whom the narrator explicitly addresses as "you" in lines 34 and 38.

On the other hand, the narrator's declaration that he will tell us about the "condicioun," "degree," and "array" (dress) of each of the pilgrims suggests that his portraits will be based on objective

facts as well as his own opinions. He spends considerable time characterizing the group members according to their social positions. The pilgrims represent a diverse cross section of fourteenth-century English society. Medieval social theory divided society into three broad classes, called “estates”: the military, the clergy, and the laity. (The nobility, not represented in the General Prologue, traditionally derives its title and privileges from military duties and service, so it is considered part of the military estate.)

In the portraits that we will see in the rest of the General Prologue, the Knight and Squire represent the military estate. The clergy is represented by the Prioress (and her nun and three priests), the Monk, the Friar, and the Parson. The other characters, from the wealthy Franklin to the poor Plowman, are the members of the laity. These lay characters can be further subdivided into landowners (the Franklin), professionals (the Clerk, the Man of Law, the Guildsmen, the Physician, and the Shipman), laborers (the Cook and the Plowman), stewards (the Miller, the Manciple, and the Reeve), and church officers (the Summoner and the Pardoner). As we will see, Chaucer’s descriptions of the various characters and their social roles reveal the influence of the medieval genre of estates satire.

Summary: The Wife of Bath’s Prologue

The Wife of Bath begins the Prologue to her tale by establishing herself as an authority on marriage, due to her extensive personal experience with the institution. Since her first marriage at the tender age of twelve, she has had five husbands. She says that many people have criticized her for her numerous marriages, most of them on the basis that Christ went only once to a wedding, at Cana in Galilee. The Wife of Bath has her own views of Scripture and God’s plan.

She says that men can only guess and interpret what Jesus meant when he told a Samaritan woman that her fifth husband was not her husband. With or without this bit of Scripture, no man has ever been able to give her an exact reply when she asks to know how many husbands a woman may have in her lifetime. God bade us to wax fruitful and multiply, she says, and that is the text that she wholeheartedly endorses.

After all, great Old Testament figures, like Abraham, Jacob, and Solomon, enjoyed multiple wives at once. She admits that many great Fathers of the Church have proclaimed the importance of virginity, such as the Apostle Paul. But, she reasons, even if virginity is important, someone must be procreating so that virgins can be created. Leave virginity to the perfect, she says, and let the rest of us use our gifts as best we may—and her gift, doubtless, is her sexual power. She uses this power as an “instrument” to control her husbands.

At this point, the Pardoner interrupts. He is planning to marry soon and worries that his wife will control his body, as the Wife of Bath describes. The Wife of Bath tells him to have patience and to listen to the whole tale to see if it reveals the truth about marriage. Of her five husbands, three have been “good” and two have been “bad.” The first three were good, she admits, mostly because they were rich, old, and submissive. She laughs to recall the torments that she put these men through and recounts a typical conversation that she had with her older husbands.

She would accuse her husband of having an affair, launching into a tirade in which she would charge him with a bewildering array of accusations. If one of her husbands got drunk, she would claim he said that every wife is out to destroy her husband. He would then feel guilty and give her what she wanted. All of this, the Wife of Bath tells the rest of the pilgrims, was a pack of lies—her husbands never held these opinions, but she made these claims to give them grief.

Worse, she would tease her husbands in bed, refusing to give them full satisfaction until they promised her money. She admits proudly to using her verbal and sexual power to bring her husbands to total submission.

Analysis

In her lengthy Prologue, the Wife of Bath recites her autobiography, announcing in her very first word that “experience” will be her guide. Yet, despite her claim that experience is her sole authority, the Wife of Bath apparently feels the need to establish her authority in a more scholarly way. She imitates the ways of churchmen and scholars by backing up her claims with quotations from Scripture and works of antiquity. The Wife carelessly flings around references as textual evidence to buttress her argument, most of which don’t really correspond to her points. Her reference to Ptolemy’s *Almageste*, for instance, is completely erroneous—the phrase she attributes to that book appears nowhere in the work. Although her many errors display her lack of real scholarship, they also convey Chaucer’s mockery of the churchmen present, who often misused Scripture to justify their devious actions.

The text of the Wife of Bath’s Prologue is based in the medieval genre of allegorical “confession.” In a morality play, a personified vice such as Gluttony or Lust “confesses” his or her sins to the audience in a life story. The Wife is exactly what the medieval Church saw as a “wicked woman,” and she is proud of it—from the very beginning, her speech has undertones of conflict with her patriarchal society. Because the statements that the Wife of Bath attributes to her husbands were taken from a number of satires published in Chaucer’s time, which half-comically portrayed women as unfaithful, superficial, evil creatures, always out to undermine

their husbands, feminist critics have often tried to portray the Wife as one of the first feminist characters in literature.

This interpretation is weakened by the fact that the Wife of Bath herself conforms to a number of these misogynist and misogynist (antimarrriage) stereotypes. For example, she describes herself as sexually voracious but at the same time as someone who only has sex to get money, thereby combining two contradictory stereotypes. She also describes how she dominated her husband, playing on a fear that was common to men, as the Pardoner's nervous interjection reveals. Despite their contradictions, all of these ideas about women were used by men to support a hierarchy in which men dominated women.

Prothalamion

"Prothalamion" was written by the English poet Edmund Spenser in 1596 in celebration of the engagements of Elizabeth and Katherine Somerset, the daughters of the Earl of Somerset. The poem was innovative and unusual for its time. In fact, Spenser coined the word "prothalamion" specifically for it, modeling the title on the word "epithalamion," or "wedding song." Unlike an "epithalamion," which celebrates a wedding, a "prothalamion" celebrates a betrothal or engagement. The betrothals of the poem were more than matters of the heart, and were politically important events in England at the time. The poem thus meditates on the relationship between marriage, nature, and politics; it celebrates the beauty of the brides, the perfection of their marriages, and the natural world as a respite from the political complications of life at court. At the same time, however, the poem also suggests that the beauty and perfection that it describes is fleeting.

"Prothalamion" Summary

It was a calm day with a light breeze in the air, which cooled things down and lessened the heat of the brightly shining sun. I was frustrated with the time I'd wasted at court: my political ambitions had failed, and my hopes turned out to be empty illusions. To make myself feel better, I went for a walk along the banks of the River Thames. The shore and the meadows surrounding the river were covered with flowers—flowers so beautiful that they could be hung up in young women's rooms, or made into crowns for their fiancés in advance of their wedding day, which is not far away: please be quiet, River Thames, until I finish my poem.

In a meadow by the river, I saw a group of nymphs—the mythological daughters of the river. Their hair was green and hanging down loosely, and they looked like brides. Each of them was carrying a wicker basket woven from twigs and full of flowers that they'd gathered from the meadow. The nymphs quickly and skillfully plucked all kinds of flowers—including blue violets, daisies (which close at night), lilies (which are so white they seem virginal) primroses, and vermeil roses—which they would use to decorate their bridegrooms on their wedding day, which was not far away: please be quiet, river Thames, until I finish my poem.

I saw two beautiful swans swimming down the River Lee. I had never seen such beautiful birds. The snow on top of the famous Pindus mountain range has never been whiter than those swans. Not even the god Zeus, when he transformed himself into a swan in order to seduce the princess Leda, was as white as those swans. And though people say that Leda was as pale as Zeus was, neither Leda nor Zeus came close to being as white as the swans before me in the river. In fact, the swans were so white that even the calm river upon which they swam seemed to make them dirty; as such, the river told his waves not to touch the birds' silky feathers, in order to prevent the waves from dirtying the lovely birds and diminishing their beauty, which was as bright as the

sun will be on their wedding day, which was not far away: please be quiet, river Thames, until I finish my poem.

The nymphs, who had by this point collected enough flowers, ran to see those silver swans as they floated down the river. And when they saw them, the nymphs stood in stunned amazement, filling their eyes with the wonderful sight. The nymphs thought that they had never seen such lovely birds, and they assumed that they were angelic, or that they were the mythological swans who drew the goddess Venus's chariot through the sky. The swans were so beautiful it seemed impossible that they were born from any mortal creature; instead, the nymphs thought they were angels or the children of angels. Yet, the truth is that the swans were bred from the heat of the sun in the spring, when the earth was covered in fresh flowers and plants. They seemed as new and fresh as their wedding day, which was not far away: please be quiet, river Thames, until I finish my poem.

Then the nymphs took out of their baskets all the sweet-smelling flowers they'd picked and threw them onto the swans and onto the waves of the river, so that river seemed like the river Peneus in Greece, which flows through the Tempe Valley in Thessaly. Indeed, the river was so covered in lilies that it seemed like the floor of a bridal chamber. Two of the nymphs wove flower crowns from the freshest flowers they could find in the meadow; they presented these to the swans, who wore them on their foreheads. Meanwhile, another nymph sang the following song, which was prepared for the swans' wedding day, which was not far away: please be quiet, river Thames, until I finish my poem.

"You swans, who are the world's beautiful decoration and the glory of the skies: you are being led to your lovers, and I wish you joy and happiness in your marriage. I further pray that Venus,

the queen of love, and her son, Cupid, will smile on you, and with their smiles, remove all fights and conflicts from your marriages. I pray that your hearts will be full of peace, your kitchens full of food, and your bedrooms proper and fruitful, so that your children defeat your enemies, and that your joy will overflow on your wedding day, which is not far away: please be quiet, river Thames, until I finish my poem."

That was the end of the nymph's song, and everyone repeated her, announcing that the swans' wedding day wasn't far off—and the ground echoed with this line, which then echoed throughout the meadow. Thus the joyful swans went down the River Lee. Its waters murmured as they passed, almost as though the river would speak to them if he were able to talk. But he did make his affection clear by slowing down his current. And all the birds that lived on the river began to flock around the two swans, who were far more beautiful than those other birds—just as the moon is far more beautiful than the stars around it. In this way, they arranged themselves around the swans and waited on them, and lent them their best service for their wedding day, which was not far away: please be quiet, river Thames, until I finish my poem.

After a while, they all came to London, which was where I was born and raised, though I am named after a different place, and come from an old, well-known family. They came to a place where there were brick towers on the banks of the Thames, which serve now as housing for law students, though in the past they were the headquarters of the Knights Templar, until that order crumbled due to pride. Next to the brick towers there is a place where I often received favors from the important man who lives there—whose protection I sorely miss now, though it is inappropriate to meditate on such grievances here, and I should limit myself to talking about the joys of the wedding day, which is not far away: please be quiet, river Thames, until I finish my poem.

But in that place there now lives an aristocrat who brings honor to England—and whom the rest of the world admires. On a recent mission, he terrorized the Spanish and made the cliffs on either side of the straits of Gibraltar shake with fear. Man of honor, exceptional knight, the news of your triumphs travels across England. I hope you take joy in your victory and that you remain happy forever—since even your name promises that you will be happy. And I hope that through your skill and your victories in war, other countries won't be able to harm England. And I hope that Queen Elizabeth's name will be celebrated throughout the world, accompanied by your calls to arm, which some poet will preserve in song for the rest of human history on the day of the wedding, which is not far away: please be quiet, river Thames, until I finish my poem.

From the tall battlements of the house, the same aristocrat whom I described above came out like the evening star, Hesperus, who bathes his blond hair in the ocean all day and then rises above the horizon at night. The aristocrat came down to the river with many people following him. Among the crowd, two handsome knights stood out, who would've been a fitting match for any queen. Indeed, they were so intelligent and well-made that they seemed like Zeus's sons, Castor and Pollock, who, in Greek mythology became stars, part of the constellation Gemini. The two knights went down to the river to meet the two swans, whom they loved dearly. At the scheduled time they will get married, and that wedding day is not far away: please be quiet, river Thames, until I finish my poem.

Write down the themes of the poem Prothalamion

The Comfort of Nature

At the start of the poem, the speaker identifies himself as someone whose political ambitions have been frustrated. These frustrated ambitions form a kind of frame for everything that follows: they're the reason why the speaker goes out onto the bank of the Thames in the first place. As such, although he doesn't dwell on his own ambitions, they nevertheless form an important contrast to and backdrop for the poem's exploration of nature. Walking along the banks of the river eases the speaker's "pain," which suggests that nature is a soothing and restorative force. At the same time, the poem subtly but consistently blurs the distinction between nature and the human world.

In the first stanza, the speaker describes himself as someone who has spent a "long fruitless stay / In prince's court." Because the reader learns little else about the speaker, this introduction suggests that he thinks of himself mostly in relation to power: he bases his identity on his ambition and desire to get ahead in politics. In this regard, however, he has notably failed. His time in "prince's court" has been "idle"—meaning he hasn't really done anything—and his ambitions have revealed themselves to be "empty shadows." He flees from the vain and empty world of politics into the beautiful, soothing world of nature by walking along the Thames.

Nature is thus positioned as a restorative space outside the drama of the courtly world. In contrast to the "empty shadows" of the speaker's political ambition, the natural world is precise and concrete. The speaker spends much of the second stanza, for example, listing specific flowers that he—and the nymphs—encounter. Furthermore, as the speaker describes it, the natural world is courteous and responsive to human needs. For instance, he details in stanza three how the river refuses to wet the swans' "silken feathers." As such, when the speaker asks the Thames to "run softly, till I end my song," there is some reason to believe that the river might

actually listen to him; unlike the world of politics, where his ambitions remain fruitless and useless, in nature the world actually responds to the speaker's desires.

As the poem proceeds however, and the swans float down the Thames, the divide between the human and the natural realms loses its distinction. The same river, for instance, that the speaker turns to for solace from political life also runs by brick towers where law students study and by the house where the respected Earl of Essex lives (described as “a noble Peer, / Great England’s glory and the world’s wide wonder”). More importantly, the swans that the speaker encounters on the banks of the Thames are preparing to return to London—a city—for their marriage.

These moments suggest that nature is not absolutely separate from politics. In fact, they suggest that nature in this poem serves as a metaphor for some of the most important moments of people's lives—like the marriages of key political figures. Indeed, the swans specifically serve as metaphors for Elizabeth and Katherine Somerset, daughters of the Earl of Somerset; the poem was initially written in celebration of their weddings. Thus even though these moments that reference the human, cosmopolitan world seem somewhat out of place—maybe even extraneous—they still shape the way one reads the poem and its description of a beautiful natural world. Overall, they suggest that nature is not purely a space of comfort and retreat, but that it is also intimately linked to human political life.

Marriage and the Natural World

Though the poem describes the natural world as a space of comfort and beauty, the speaker doesn't always enjoy nature for its own sake. Instead, he focuses on the way that the natural world might be used for human ends—for example, for something like marriage. This is fitting for a poem originally written to celebrate two politically important engagements—that of Elizabeth and Katherine Somerset, the daughters of the Earl of Somerset. By focusing on the natural world as he celebrates these betrothals, the speaker suggests that a proper marriage is actually part of nature; such a marriage follows the natural order, the poem argues, and also uses nature for both its celebrations and as a model for how a good partnership should look.

The speaker reflects on the beauty of the natural world as he walks along the river. He notes its many flowers, and imagines a specific use for them: these flowers are pretty enough to decorate young women's rooms, as well as to adorn their soon-to-be-husbands on their wedding day. The speaker doesn't just enjoy nature for its own sake; he wants to use it to glorify the ritual of marriage.

Similarly, in the second stanza, the speaker sees a group of nymphs out gathering flowers. The end of the stanza reveals that they are doing so specifically for wedding decorations. The nymphs then use the flowers in stanza 5, throwing their petals onto the river as the two swans (representing the brides-to-be for whom the poem was written) pass and making flower crowns for them. For the speaker, this transforms the natural world into a very human space: the harvested flowers make the river seem like a bridal chamber, thereby directly including nature in this human experience, and also making the human ritual seem all the more natural.

Likewise, the nymph's song in stanza 6 describes the wedding bed as a “blissful bower.” The description is traditional in the English Renaissance, but in the context of this particular poem it

seems especially significant. Just as the nymphs work to make nature part of the wedding ceremony, so too is the place where the wedding will be consummated compared, metaphorically, to a natural space.

As the nymph's song continues, she outlines what a successful marriage looks like: a union filled with peace, harmony, and fruitfulness. It seems almost as though she is describing the condition of the pastoral world along the banks of the River Thames, with its abundance of flowers and happy nymphs. In this sense, the poem makes an argument about what marriage actually is. A successful marriage, in the speaker's opinion, is one which makes use of the comfort of nature while also directly taking on nature's most beautiful and peaceful characteristics. The distinction between natural abundance and the human institution of marriage is ultimately a false one, and the poem works to show its readers how one serves the other. In other words, a good marriage is entirely natural, and like the natural world, it is filled with beauty, peace, and abundance.

Of course, the marriages-to-be of Elizabeth and Katherine Somerset are importantly different from modern marriages, which stress companionship and compatibility between partners. Marriage in Spencer's time was as much a political alliance as a matter of the heart. For Spencer's readers, then, the intrusion of marriage into the natural world would mark another place where the distinction between politics and nature breaks down. By drawing his readers attention to nature as a model for marriage, Spencer attempts to bring the lessons of nature into politics, rather than separating the two.

The Fragility of Perfection

The world of the “Prothalamion” seems utterly perfect—almost unbelievably so. The weather’s calm and warm, but not too hot. The flowers are all in bloom. The river refuses to wet the swans’ “silken feathers,” and the grooms are so handsome they look like the sons of a god. If this seems a bit hyperbolic, the speaker gives readers a series of hints that there lingers darker, more violent dynamics under the surface of this perfect beauty. The poem’s gorgeous celebration of marriage and political order is actually somewhat equivocal and ambiguous in the end: even as it celebrates nature, it marks the way that nature is marred by decay and violence. The perfection the poem displays is conditional, under threat, and possibly a fantasy.

For instance, in the opening lines of the poem, the speaker notes the delicacy and beauty of the weather. Yet he describes this perfection as temporary: “Zephyrus” might “delay / Hot Titans beams.” It’s unclear how long this delay can last, and the word “delay” itself suggests that it definitely won’t last forever; it can only be forestalled. Eventually, the unpleasant characteristics of nature will return—and so too, will the darker side of marriage.

Similarly in stanza 3, the speaker compares the two swans to “Jove himself when he a swan would be / For love of Leda.” The ostensible purpose of the comparison is to emphasize how pure and white these swans are. But in making the comparison, the speaker introduces some dark and unsettling material. In the myth of Leda and the Swan, Zeus transforms himself into a swan and rapes Leda—an act which, eventually, precipitates the Trojan war.

The presence of this violent and disturbing myth in a poem celebrating marriage suggests that the speaker may have his doubts about the marriages in question—or about marriage in general. Though he presents a vision of a perfect, balanced marriage, he suggests that this balance is under threat, and perhaps unsustainable—just as “Hot Titans beams” can only be delayed, not

prevented altogether. That the speaker repeatedly asks the river to be quiet and gentle while he recites his poem also suggests that he knows the roar of the river will return soon enough, and that the marriage day is only a momentary respite from the harsh reality of the world.

There is thus a tension at the heart of the poem: even as it celebrates nature and its beauty, it also recognizes how fragile that beauty is. It marks the way that beauty is under threat—and may actually contain the seeds of violence that will undo the political order (in other words, the marriage) that emerges from it. This might be read as a call to honor this beauty while it lasts, or as a reminder to be wary of potential marital complications that could disturb the peace and harmony marriage is meant to create.

They Flee From Me

These days, my ex-lovers avoid me—the same people who used to sneak barefooted into my quarters. I remember them as shy, gentle creatures. Now they're wild, and don't even remember how they used to put themselves at risk just to come and take a piece of bread from my hand. Nowadays they roam about, constantly seeking something new.

I'm glad that things used to be better—much better, in fact. I remember one particularly special occasion when a lover came to see, scantily dressed after an enjoyable show. Her gown easily slipped off of her shoulders, and she held me in her long, small arms and gently kissed me, asking me in a whisper how I liked it.

That wasn't a dream: I was wide awake. But everything has changed because I was too gentle and nice, and now she totally ignores me. She lets me do my thing while she focuses on her own fickle needs. Since she's never blatantly mistreated me it's hard to know how to feel about her.

“They Flee From Me” Themes

Love and Relationships

“They Flee From Me” expresses an idea that most modern readers can relate to: love and relationships are complicated! In the poem, the speaker tries to make sense of the fact that while women use to “seek” him, now they actively avoid him. The speaker puzzles over how drastically the relationship between two people can change; how what was once an intense, exciting intimacy can so quickly become a cold kind of distance. Ultimately the poem presents love, on the one hand, as a deep and beautiful mystery, and, on the other as a rather cynical power game between people (which, in the England’s royal court during the 16th century, could literally be a matter of life and death!).

In the past, the speaker enjoyed receiving female visitors to his “chamber”—some of whom put themselves at risk “to take bread at [his] hand,” perhaps suggesting that the excitement of an illicit affair was in the atmosphere. The poem thus initially presents love as something thrilling, the key to a door of a special kind of intimate beauty. It also presents the speaker as squarely in control of these actions.

The speaker then recalls how a specific lover, wearing only a thin gown, kissed him “sweetly” and held him tight. The speaker cherishes this memory, marking it out as a particularly “special” time in his life. This is the simple side of love, in which life makes sense in the arms of another.

But the poem stresses that this kind of simplicity is fleeting (or, perhaps, “flee-ing”!). Love is not just sweetness and intimacy, then, but also a kind of power struggle. To emphasize this, the poem makes use of one Wyatt’s common metaphors: that love is a kind of hunt, an issue of predator vs. prey.

Wyatt’s speaker was once top of the food chain, so to speak, visited by “gentle, tame, and meek” creatures. But soon enough these roles are subverted—the hunted becomes the hunter, and the hunter (the speaker) becomes an irrelevance, “forsak[en]” by his lover. Nothing can be taken for granted when it comes to love, the poem implies, and yesterday’s prey could be tomorrow’s predator. The speaker’s lover is free to pursue other love interests—“to use newfangleness,” to sow her wild oats—leaving the speaker to wonder what happened.

With this in mind, the poem can be read as an expression of the confusion—and, perhaps, bitterness—caused by love. The speaker knows his love affair was “no dream,” but he doesn’t know how to feel about the new dynamic between himself and his lover now that she’s moved on. He’s not even sure if she “deserve[s]” his kindness or his anger. He wonders if her was too “gentle,” and should have asserted himself more strongly on his lover’s “wild[ness].” The poem, then, manages to highlight the way that love can seem so intense and real—as if it will last forever—while, on the other hand, feelings between two lovers can change beyond recognition almost in an instant.

Essay:

Sir Thomas Wyatt's "They Flee From Me" Critical appreciation

As the Roman author Cicero once pointed out, the only way to keep from growing old is to die young, so it isn't really logical to complain about the problems that come from living a long time.

Besides, Cicero adds, old age has its compensations. An old man can enjoy the bittersweet pleasure of reminiscing about the past. Wyatt's poem "They Flee From Me" allows the reader just such a glimpse of what it is really like to grow old by presenting both the bitter complaints and the pleasant memories of the speaker.

Wyatt's complaint is that the ladies no longer find him attractive. As the first stanza puts it, the ladies who used to seek him out and who even appeared bare-footed in his bed-chamber now "flee" from him. They used be like tame animals who would eat bread from his hand, but now they "range" far away from him like wild creatures and do not seem to remember that once they came to him willingly. Alas, time has robbed him of his role as a lady's man, and he is going to complain about it no matter what Cicero says!

Wyatt is especially bitter about one woman in particular. Although she and the poet were once special lovers, she now has taken up "newfangledness" and has dismissed him from her life; she has given him "leave to go"; she has treated him "unkindly." (In Wyatt's day, by the way, "unkindly" meant both "cruelly" and "unnaturally.") Thus the last comment of the poem really is especially bitter as the following paraphrase into modern English makes clear: "But since I have been so cruelly and unnaturally treated by her, I would really like to know what treatment she deserves." His tone is so bitter that we are sure he hopes that she will suffer in the same way when she grows old.

Perhaps the most powerful part of the poem, however, is the second stanza where he relives through pleasant memory a very special night, a night that was "twenty times better" than the condition he finds himself in now. As he lay in bed that night, she came into his room in her thin, loose nightgown, so loose that it was falling from her shoulders; and then she wrapped him in her

long, slender arms and kissed him sweetly and whispered "Dear heart, how like you this?" For most men such a night is only a dream, but not for Wyatt. As he says, "it was no dream. I lay broad waking." That seems a very fine memory to carry into old age.

Of course, there is much more to growing old than lamenting the passing of one's status as a lady's man or recalling a sweet and sensuous night from long ago. Nevertheless, the poem has endured for nearly five centuries because it presents an authentic recreation of one typical experience in the aging process. Some things never change.

Paradise Lost Book IX

Summary

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.

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.

Themes

The Importance of Obedience to God

The first words of *Paradise Lost* state that the poem's main theme will be "Man's first Disobedience." Milton narrates the story of Adam and Eve's disobedience, explains how and why it happens, and places the story within the larger context of Satan's rebellion and Jesus' resurrection. Raphael tells Adam about Satan's disobedience in an effort to give him a firm grasp of the threat that Satan and humankind's disobedience poses. In essence, *Paradise Lost* presents two moral paths that one can take after disobedience: the downward spiral of increasing sin and degradation, represented by Satan, and the road to redemption, represented by Adam and Eve.

While Adam and Eve are the first humans to disobey God, Satan is the first of all God's creation to disobey. His decision to rebel comes only from himself—he was not persuaded or provoked by others. Also, his decision to continue to disobey God after his fall into Hell ensures that God will not forgive him. Adam and Eve, on the other hand, decide to repent for their sins and seek forgiveness. Unlike Satan, Adam and Eve understand that their disobedience to God will be corrected through generations of toil on Earth. This path is obviously the correct one to take: the visions in Books XI and XII demonstrate that obedience to God, even after repeated falls, can lead to humankind's salvation.

The Hierarchical Nature of the Universe

Paradise Lost is about hierarchy as much as it is about obedience. The layout of the universe—with Heaven above, Hell below, and Earth in the middle—presents the universe as a hierarchy based on proximity to God and his grace. This spatial hierarchy leads to a social hierarchy of angels, humans, animals, and devils: the Son is closest to God, with the archangels and cherubs

behind him. Adam and Eve and Earth's animals come next, with Satan and the other fallen angels following last. To obey God is to respect this hierarchy.

Satan refuses to honor the Son as his superior, thereby questioning God's hierarchy. As the angels in Satan's camp rebel, they hope to beat God and thereby dissolve what they believe to be an unfair hierarchy in Heaven. When the Son and the good angels defeat the rebel angels, the rebels are punished by being banished far away from Heaven. At least, Satan argues later, they can make their own hierarchy in Hell, but they are nevertheless subject to God's overall hierarchy, in which they are ranked the lowest. Satan continues to disobey God and his hierarchy as he seeks to corrupt mankind.

Likewise, humankind's disobedience is a corruption of God's hierarchy. Before the fall, Adam and Eve treat the visiting angels with proper respect and acknowledgement of their closeness to God, and Eve embraces the subservient role allotted to her in her marriage. God and Raphael both instruct Adam that Eve is slightly farther removed from God's grace than Adam because she was created to serve both God and him. When Eve persuades Adam to let her work alone, she challenges him, her superior, and he yields to her, his inferior. Again, as Adam eats from the fruit, he knowingly defies God by obeying Eve and his inner instinct instead of God and his reason. Adam's visions in Books XI and XII show more examples of this disobedience to God and the universe's hierarchy, but also demonstrate that with the Son's sacrifice, this hierarchy will be restored once again.

The Fall as Partly Fortunate

After he sees the vision of Christ's redemption of humankind in Book XII, Adam refers to his own sin as a *felix culpa* or "happy fault," suggesting that the fall of humankind, while originally

seeming an unmitigated catastrophe, does in fact bring good with it. 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 humans can also experience mercy, salvation, and grace in ways they would not have been able to had they not disobeyed. While humankind has fallen from grace, individuals can redeem and save themselves through continued devotion and obedience to God. The salvation of humankind, in the form of The Son's 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.

A Valediction: forbidding Mourning

Summary

The speaker explains that he is forced to spend time apart from his lover, but before he leaves, he tells her that their farewell should not be the occasion for mourning and sorrow. In the same way that virtuous men die mildly and without complaint, he says, so they should leave without "tear-floods" and "sigh-tempests," for to publicly announce their feelings in such a way would profane their love. The speaker says that when the earth moves, it brings "harms and fears," but when the spheres experience "trepidation," though the impact is greater, it is also innocent. The love of "dull sublunary lovers" cannot survive separation, but it removes that which constitutes the love itself; but the love he shares with his beloved is so refined and "Inter-assured of the mind" that they need not worry about missing "eyes, lips, and hands."

Though he must go, their souls are still one, and, therefore, they are not enduring a breach, they are experiencing an “expansion”; in the same way that gold can be stretched by beating it “to aery thinness,” the soul they share will simply stretch to take in all the space between them. If their souls are separate, he says, they are like the feet of a compass: His lover’s soul is the fixed foot in the center, and his is the foot that moves around it. The firmness of the center foot makes the circle that the outer foot draws perfect: “Thy firmness makes my circle just, / And makes me end, where I begun.”

Form

The nine stanzas of this Valediction are quite simple compared to many of Donne’s poems, which utilize strange metrical patterns overlaid jarringly on regular rhyme schemes. Here, each four-line stanza is quite unadorned, with an ABAB rhyme scheme and an iambic tetrameter meter.

Commentary

“A Valediction: forbidding Mourning” is one of Donne’s most famous and simplest poems and also probably his most direct statement of his ideal of spiritual love. For all his erotic carnality in poems, such as “The Flea,” Donne professed a devotion to a kind of spiritual love that transcended the merely physical. Here, anticipating a physical separation from his beloved, he invokes the nature of that spiritual love to ward off the “tear-floods” and “sigh-tempests” that might otherwise attend on their farewell. The poem is essentially a sequence of metaphors and comparisons, each describing a way of looking at their separation that will help them to avoid the mourning forbidden by the poem’s title.

First, the speaker says that their farewell should be as mild as the uncomplaining deaths of virtuous men, for to weep would be “profanation of our joys.” Next, the speaker compares harmful “Moving of th’ earth” to innocent “trepidation of the spheres,” equating the first with “dull sublunary lovers’ love” and the second with their love, “Inter-assured of the mind.” Like the rumbling earth, the dull sublunary (sublunary meaning literally beneath the moon and also subject to the moon) lovers are all physical, unable to experience separation without losing the sensation that comprises and sustains their love. But the spiritual lovers “Care less, eyes, lips, and hands to miss,” because, like the trepidation (vibration) of the spheres (the concentric globes that surrounded the earth in ancient astronomy), their love is not wholly physical. Also, like the trepidation of the spheres, their movement will not have the harmful consequences of an earthquake.

The speaker then declares that, since the lovers’ two souls are one, his departure will simply expand the area of their unified soul, rather than cause a rift between them. If, however, their souls are “two” instead of “one”, they are as the feet of a drafter’s compass, connected, with the center foot fixing the orbit of the outer foot and helping it to describe a perfect circle. The compass (the instrument used for drawing circles) is one of Donne’s most famous metaphors, and it is the perfect image to encapsulate the values of Donne’s spiritual love, which is balanced, symmetrical, intellectual, serious, and beautiful in its polished simplicity.

Like many of Donne’s love poems (including “The Sun Rising” and “The Canonization”), “A Valediction: forbidding Mourning” creates a dichotomy between the common love of the everyday world and the uncommon love of the speaker. Here, the speaker claims that to tell “the laity,” or the common people, of his love would be to profane its sacred nature, and he is clearly contemptuous of the dull sublunary love of other lovers. The effect of this dichotomy is to create

a kind of emotional aristocracy that is similar in form to the political aristocracy with which Donne has had painfully bad luck throughout his life and which he commented upon in poems, such as “The Canonization”: This emotional aristocracy is similar in form to the political one but utterly opposed to it in spirit. Few in number are the emotional aristocrats who have access to the spiritual love of the spheres and the compass; throughout all of Donne’s writing, the membership of this elite never includes more than the speaker and his lover—or at the most, the speaker, his lover, and the reader of the poem, who is called upon to sympathize with Donne’s romantic plight.

Themes

Lovers as Microcosms

Donne incorporates the Renaissance notion of the human body as a microcosm into his love poetry. During the Renaissance, many people believed that the microcosmic human body mirrored the macrocosmic physical world. According to this belief, the intellect governs the body, much like a king or queen governs the land. Many of Donne’s poems—most notably “The Sun Rising” (1633), “The Good-Morrow” (1633), and “A Valediction: Of Weeping” (1633)—envison a lover or pair of lovers as being entire worlds unto themselves. But rather than use the analogy to imply that the whole world can be compressed into a small space, Donne uses it to show how lovers become so enraptured with each other that they believe they are the only beings in existence. The lovers are so in love that nothing else matters. For example, in “The Sun Rising,” the speaker concludes the poem by telling the sun to shine exclusively on himself and his beloved. By doing so, he says, the sun will be shining on the entire world.

The Neoplatonic Conception of Love

Donne draws on the Neoplatonic conception of physical love and religious love as being two manifestations of the same impulse. In the *Symposium* (ca. third or fourth century b.c.e.), Plato describes physical love as the lowest rung of a ladder. According to the Platonic formulation, we are attracted first to a single beautiful person, then to beautiful people generally, then to beautiful minds, then to beautiful ideas, and, ultimately, to beauty itself, the highest rung of the ladder. Centuries later, Christian Neoplatonists adapted this idea such that the progression of love culminates in a love of God, or spiritual beauty. Naturally, Donne used his religious poetry to idealize the Christian love for God, but the Neoplatonic conception of love also appears in his love poetry, albeit slightly tweaked. For instance, in the bawdy “Elegy 19. To His Mistress Going to Bed” (1669), the speaker claims that his love for a naked woman surpasses pictorial representations of biblical scenes. Many love poems assert the superiority of the speakers’ love to quotidian, ordinary love by presenting the speakers’ love as a manifestation of purer, Neoplatonic feeling, which resembles the sentiment felt for the divine.

Religious Enlightenment as Sexual Ecstasy

Throughout his poetry, Donne imagines religious enlightenment as a form of sexual ecstasy. He parallels the sense of fulfillment to be derived from religious worship to the pleasure derived from sexual activity—a shocking, revolutionary comparison, for his time. In *Holy Sonnet 14* (1633), for example, the speaker asks God to rape him, thereby freeing the speaker from worldly concerns. Through the act of rape, paradoxically, the speaker will be rendered chaste. In *Holy Sonnet 18* (1899), the speaker draws an analogy between entering the one true church and entering a woman during intercourse. Here, the speaker explains that Christ will be pleased if the speaker sleeps with Christ’s wife, who is “embraced and open to most men” (14). Although these poems seem profane, their religious fervor saves them from sacrilege or scandal. Filled with

religious passion, people have the potential to be as pleurably sated as they are after sexual activity.

The Search for the One True Religion

Donne's speakers frequently wonder which religion to choose when confronted with so many churches that claim to be the one true religion. In 1517, an Augustinian monk in Germany named Martin Luther set off a number of debates that eventually led to the founding of Protestantism, which, at the time, was considered to be a reformed version of Catholicism. England developed Anglicanism in 1534, another reformed version of Catholicism. This period was thus dubbed the Reformation. Because so many sects and churches developed from these religions, theologians and laypeople began to wonder which religion was true or right. Written while Donne was abandoning Catholicism for Anglicanism, "Satire 3" reflects these concerns. Here, the speaker wonders how one might discover the right church when so many churches make the same claim. The speaker of Holy Sonnet 18 asks Christ to explain which bride, or church, belongs to Christ. Neither poem forthrightly proposes one church as representing the true religion, but nor does either poem reject outright the notion of one true church or religion.

Essay

Write a critical summary of the poem In the beginning of Donne's poem, the speaker is explaining that he is soon going to be separated from his lover. Before he leaves, he tells her his leaving should not be a time for mourning and sadness. He then tries to make things better by comparing their love to various things such as a noble man's death, a drawing compass, and the planets. He implies that death should not be feared but be accepted with little sadness. The narrator wants his love to wait for him until his return, and he states their love is too strong not to

endure the separation. He explains that their love goes beyond physical love, and that they have a spiritual love that goes beyond the material world and what their bodies can endure.

He believes although he is leaving, their souls are still one, and the couple will now experience “expansion”. Expansion can be defined as the act of increasing in size or volume. The narrator compares this to the way gold can be stretched by beating. He believes the one soul they have will stretch, and it will take the place of the distance between the two. The narrator also uses another example such as the compass.

A compass shows a fixed point and one that moves in relation to the north pole. The compass is used to show that when the two are separated his love is the fixed foot on the compass, and he is the foot that moves. The narrator then says, “Thy firmness makes my circle just, and makes me end, where I began.” He compares his soul and the soul of his love to a “twin-compass”. Compasses assist sailors in navigating the ocean, and metaphorically they help the two lovers remain linked no matter what the distance. On the compass, no matter how many times the moving foot goes around the circle, the two legs are eventually joined again.

The first four lines of the poem suggest that one’s soul is only part of the body until death when it “goes”. The author using the word “whisper”, indicates that the soul and the body can communicate with each other. One of the most important parts of the poem is the separation of the body and soul. The narrator believes that even death cannot separate his lover and himself because they share the same soul. This needs to be accepted for Donne’s point to be proven and by the line “Whilst some of their sad friends do say. The breath goes now, and some say, No”. This shows that not all “friends” agree with the narrator’s point of view.

Donne concludes with two souls cannot be separated like two bodies can. Therefore, if the two lovers' bodies are separated by great distance they will be like the compass mentioned earlier in the poem. The points on the compass are wide, but the handle always joins the two together. Throughout the poem Donne argues that although the couple is physically separated they are connected by the soul. Therefore, the distance between the two lovers is insignificant. Although they are spread apart they are not broken. The two still share a strong connection.

John Donne uses the whole poem to make his point. He first says that when one passes, the soul separated from the body. He then asserts that two souls mix when two people are in love. They become one, and even death cannot break this bond. He uses the compass to demonstrate this point. By making these points, the narrator is showing his love not to be upset about his leaving. He states he is the "moving foot" on the compass and has no choice but to leave. However, the compass always makes a circle and he will always find a way back to his love. Even though the separation is temporary, it is very emotional and Donne feels the pain of the separation.

Mac Flecknoe Summary

The poem identifies itself as a satire of which the subject is "the True-blue Protestant Poet T.S." referring to the poet Thomas Shadwell.

The first line of the poem creates the illusion of its being an epic poem about a historical hero. The next lines talk about Mac Flecknoe, a monarch who instead of ruling an empire, rules over the realm of Nonsense. The king is old and thus must choose a successor to his throne. Dryden wonders whether the king will chose a poet who has talent and wit or if he will choose someone like him, a man with no literary talent.

Flecknoe decides upon his son Shadwell, a man with no talent and who is tedious, stupid, and always at war with wit. Shadwell is also described as a very corpulent man. Through Flecknoe's words, the poet continues to insult Shadwell in a mock-heroic tone, calling him a dunce, the "last great prophet of tautology," and "for anointed dullness he was made." Shadwell arrives in London, outfitted like a king and lauded by the people. Flecknoe chooses for his son's throne a neighborhood of brothels and theaters birthing bad actors. Inside those places, real drama does not exist; only simple plays are welcome. Dryden also alludes to some of the historical Shadwell's plays, like *Epsom Wells* and *Psyche*, and mocks another contemporary writer, Singleton, who is envious that he wasn't chosen as successor to the throne. It is clear that in this environment, Shadwell will rule over those who have no literary talent. The descriptions Dryden offers only serve the purpose of highlighting the incompetency of Shadwell and create the image of a fool ruling over peasants.

As the coronation begins, Dryden describes the streets as filled with the limbs of other poets, suggesting that Shadwell managed to get a hold on his position at the expense of talented writers. Once more, the poet mentions human waste and links it with Shadwell's writing and compares him with a historical figure, Hannibal, to suggest that Shadwell's purpose is to destroy wit and replace it with dullness.

During his coronation, the oil used to anoint a new king is replaced by ale, signifying the poet's dullness. After the crown is placed on his head, Shadwell sits on the throne and the former king prepares to give the cheering crowd a speech.

The former king begins by presenting the land over which the new king will rule, a territory where no one lives. Flecknoe urges his son to remain true to his writing and to not let anyone

make any changes in his work. Flecknoe praises Shadwell's abilities and then ends his speech by telling Shadwell to continue to remain dull and to avoid trying to be like Jonson.

Flecknoe concludes by exhorting his son not to focus on real plays but rather to work on acrostics or anagrams. His last words are cut off and he sinks below the stage. His mantle falls on Shadwell, which is appropriate because he has twice as much "talent" as his father.

Mac Flecknoe Themes

Wit versus Humour

Dryden is a proponent of wit while he sees Shadwell as someone caught up in extolling the "humors" in poetry. Characters who embodied the humors were one dimensional, inclined to predictability and indicative of a deterministic worldview. They were ruled by their passions and could never change; they were consistent and, according to Dryden, only duplicated "the follies and extravagances of Bedlam." Dryden cared about wit and repartee in comedy and saw humors as akin to farce. They were outdated and did not make for good and meaningful comedy.

Debasing of Poetry and Art

In the original version of the poem, Shadwell is spelled as "Sh--" (it is often spelled out fully for modern readers), which is an effective way to suggest that Shadwell's writings are, for lack of a more decorous term, "shit." Dryden indirectly accuses Shadwell of debasing poetry and art. Shadwell's dullness, lack of sense, ignorance, impudence, and reliance upon appealing to audience's baser proclivities contribute to the overall debasement of contemporary poetry (at least in Dryden's view). Dryden emphasizes his stance through the gross surroundings in which the coronation takes place.

Nature

In the final section of the poem, Flecknoe exhorts his son not "labour to be dull; But write thy best, and top; and in each line, Sir Formal's oratory will be thine" (lines 166-168). This is important because it shows that Shadwell is not adopting dullness of his own accord, and he doesn't even need to try to do so; rather, he is inherently dull. This is what he was born with, and this is what he will always be. He is a poetaster from birth. As critic Michael Alssid writes, in Shadwell "there is also an innate, divine disfigurement of intellect, an ironically irredeemable gift."

Creator versus Created

Critic Michael W. Alssid writes, "Dryden blurs the lines between creator and created... Shadwell's artistic life exists in the context of his characters' lives." This is not a compliment, for what Dryden is doing is indicating that Shadwell has no real creativity, intelligence, or originality. He writes characters who are essentially self-portraits: fatuous, overblown, self-important, and essentially empty creations. The evocation of Psyche, Sir Formal, and other characters from *The Virtuosos* hammer home the idea that Shadwell is a hack and possesses no real artistic merit.

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard is a poem by Thomas Gray, completed in 1750 and first published in 1751. The poem's origins are unknown, but it was partly inspired by Gray's thoughts following the death of the poet Richard West in 1742. Originally titled *Stanzas Wrote in a*

Country Church-Yard, the poem was completed when Gray was living near St Giles' parish church at Stoke Poges. It was sent to his friend Horace Walpole, who popularised the poem among London literary circles. Gray was eventually forced to publish the work on 15 February 1751 in order to preempt a magazine publisher from printing an unlicensed copy of the poem.

The poem is an elegy in name but not in form; it employs a style similar to that of contemporary odes, but it embodies a meditation on death, and remembrance after death. The poem argues that the remembrance can be good and bad, and the narrator finds comfort in pondering the lives of the obscure rustics buried in the churchyard. The two versions of the poem, Stanzas and Elegy, approach death differently; the first contains a stoic response to death, but the final version contains an epitaph which serves to repress the narrator's fear of dying.

Claimed as "probably still today the best-known and best-loved poem in English", the Elegy quickly became popular. It was printed many times and in a variety of formats, translated into many languages, and praised by critics even after Gray's other poetry had fallen out of favour. But while many have continued to commend its language and universal aspects, some have felt that the ending is unconvincing – failing to resolve the questions raised by the poem in a way helpful to the obscure rustic poor who form its central image.

Themes

The poem connects with many earlier British poems that contemplate death and seek to make it more familiar and tame, including Jonathan Swift's satirical *Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift*. But when compared to other works by the so-called Graveyard poets, such as Blair's *The Grave* (1743), Gray's poem has less emphasis on common images found there. His description of the

moon, birds and trees dispels the horror found in them, and he largely avoids mentioning the word "grave", instead using euphemisms.

There is a difference in tone between the two versions of the elegy; the early one ends with an emphasis on the narrator joining with the obscure common man, while the later version ends with an emphasis on how it is natural for humans to want to be known. The later ending also explores the narrator's own death, whereas the earlier version serves as a Christian consolation regarding death.

The first version of the elegy is among the few early poems composed by Gray in English, including "Sonnet on the Death of Richard West", his "Eton Ode", and his "Ode to Adversity". All four contain Gray's meditations on mortality that were inspired by West's death. The later version of the poem keeps the stoic resignation regarding death, for the narrator still accepts death. The poem concludes with an epitaph, which reinforces Gray's indirect and reticent manner of writing. Although the ending reveals the narrator's repression of feelings surrounding his inevitable fate, it is optimistic. The epitaph describes faith in a "trembling hope" that he cannot know while alive.

In describing the narrator's analysis of his surroundings, Gray employed John Locke's philosophy of the sensations, which argued that the senses were the origin of ideas. Information described in the beginning of the poem is reused by the narrator as he contemplates life near the end. The description of death and obscurity adopts Locke's political philosophy as it emphasises the inevitability and finality of death. The end of the poem is connected to Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* in that the beginning of the poem deals with the senses and the ending describes how we are limited in our ability to understand the world. The poem takes

the ideas and transforms them into a discussion of blissful ignorance by adopting Locke's resolution to be content with our limited understanding. Unlike Locke, the narrator of the poem knows that he is unable to fathom the universe, but still questions the matter.

On the difference between the obscure and the renowned in the poem, scholar Lord David Cecil argued: "Death, he perceives, dwarfs human differences. There is not much to choose between the great and the humble, once they are in the grave. It may be that there never was; it may be that in the obscure graveyard lie those who but for circumstance would have been as famous as Milton and Hampden." However, death is not completely democratic because "if circumstances prevented them from achieving great fame, circumstances also saved them from committing great crimes. Yet there is a special pathos in these obscure tombs; the crude inscriptions on the clumsy monuments are so poignant a reminder of the vain longing of all men, however humble, to be loved and to be remembered."

The poem ends with the narrator turning towards his own fate, accepting his life and accomplishments. The poem, like many of Gray's, incorporates a narrator who is contemplating his position in a transient world that is mysterious and tragic. Although the comparison between obscurity and renown is commonly seen as universal and not within a specific context with a specific political message, there are political ramifications for Gray's choices. Both John Milton and John Hampden spent time near the setting of Stoke Poges, which was also affected by the English Civil War. The poem's composition could also have been prompted by the entrance of Prince William, Duke of Cumberland into London or by a trial of Jacobite nobility in 1746.

Many scholars, including Lonsdale, believe that the poem's message is too universal to require a specific event or place for inspiration, but Gray's letters suggest that there were historical

influences in its composition. In particular, it is possible that Gray was interested in debates over the treatment of the poor, and that he supported the political structure of his day, which was to support the poor who worked but look down on those that refused to. However, Gray's message is incomplete, because he ignored the poor's past rebellions and struggles. The poem ignores politics to focus on various comparisons between a rural and urban life in a psychological manner. The argument between living a rural life or urban life lets Gray discuss questions that answer how he should live his own life, but the conclusion of the poem does not resolve the debate as the narrator is able to recreate himself in a manner that reconciles both types of life while arguing that poetry is capable of preserving those who have died. It is probable that Gray wanted to promote the hard work of the poor but to do nothing to change their social position. Instead of making claims of economic injustice, Gray accommodates differing political views. This is furthered by the ambiguity in many of the poem's lines, including the statement "Some Cromwell guiltless of his country's blood" that could be read either as Oliver Cromwell being guiltless for violence during the English Civil War or merely as villagers being compared to the guilty Cromwell. The poem's primary message is to promote the idea of "Englishness", and the pastoral English countryside. The earlier version lacks many of the later version's English aspects, especially as Gray replaced many classical figures with English ones: Cato the Younger by Hampden, Tully by Milton, and Julius Caesar by Cromwell.

Essays

Write an Essay on Elegy Written In a Country Churchyard

In his poem "Elegy Written In A Country Churchyard," Thomas Gray says, "The boast of heraldry, the pomp of pow'r, / Awaits alike th' inevitable hour" .Gray stresses here the equality

in “the inevitable hour” or, in other words, in death. He suggests that power, money, and social prestige will always fall to mortality. Even though certain people have opportunities and fame, in the end, everyone, he suggests, must face death. Gray understands the inequality in social class and writes his elegy about the people who never had the opportunity to reach their potential. He believes that there is no difference between the famous and the common people in the end, and he actually praises the common people for being humble and for being morally strong against the ridicule of the wealthy people. Gray speaks about death as an equalizer of all human beings in order to level distinctions between the upper class and the lower class. In doing so, he is then able to idealize and elevate the common pastoral man for their uncorrupted, though unharnessed, potential.

The poem begins with images of ending and gloom in order to set the somber tone and foreshadow death for the rest of the poem. In the first and second stanzas, Gray hints at loss and mortality. In the first stanza, Gray speaks about events that are coming to an end: a curfew bell tolling, a herd of cattle moving across the meadow, and a farmer returning home after a day’s work. By mixing descriptions of ending with despondent wording, Gray is able to set up a tone of somberness and finality that continues throughout the poem. For example, “The curfew tolls the knell of parting day, / The plowman homeward plods his weary way”. The words knell and weary convey the meaning of sadness. Knell means “the sound of a bell, especially when rung solemnly for a death or funeral” (OED Online). Gray uses this specific diction to foreshadow death and sadness.

The second stanza maintains the theme of somberness and ending of the first. After Gray describes the close of events in the first stanza, he begins the second by describing how the landscape is becoming less visible: “Now fades the glimm’ring landscape on the sight”. Gray

continues to develop the theme of ending through stating the loss of the appearance of scenery. Gray shows in the first two stanzas the end of routine lives and then the end of nature. By doing so, he suggests the end of living aspects and is transitioning into death.

After Gray alludes to death in the first two stanzas, he then states that death is an equalizer of all humans and no one can escape it. He observes that nothing can bring the dead back to life, no matter the advantages the wealthy and the powerful had. They are useless in the face of death. One such example is prestige: "Can Honour's voice provoke the silent dust". Gray expresses that honor and glory cannot make a person come back to life. No matter how famous he/she is, no matter how many times they are looked upon as leaders or heroes, nothing will make them come back from death. Gray also talks about flattery: "Or Flatt'ry soothe the dull cold ear of Death?". He states that flattering words cannot change the mind of death nor pacify the process of dying. Gray gives examples of advantages the upper class had in life but then shows how they are useless in the equalizing power of death.

By illustrating the equality of humans in death, Gray is then able to caution the wealthy not to ridicule the common people, for the wealthy are also susceptible to this inevitability. Gray speaks to members of the upper class and tells them not to look down on the simple, humble lives of the common people. He orders the rich not to laugh upon the poor people's unclear futures, their few possessions, or their few records in the annals. Gray not only personifies "ambition" and "grandeur" to refer to the determined people and the wealthy, powerful people, but his use of synecdoche emphasizes their significance on these traits. Gray refers to these traits because they are frequently considered desirable during life due to the happiness and satisfaction that follows them. However, he suggests here that, ultimately, they are worthless. Power and motivation will

not save a person from dying. Gray gives more examples of aspects and luxuries in life that do not survive in the face of death. It erases “heraldry”, “the pomp of pow’r”, and “all that beauty”. Coats of arms that represented the powerful people mean nothing when those people are deceased. All the ceremonies and parties of royalty are also obsolete. Death, Gray suggests, is absolute and inevitable: “The paths of glory lead but to the grave”.

Although he describes their humble and modest lives, Gray speaks about the unrevealed potential of the common people and their possibilities of greatness. He compares them to rough stones/jewels: “Full many a gem of purest ray serene, The dark unfathom’d caves of ocean bear”. In this line, Gray is comparing the humble, common people to undiscovered jewels in the caves at the bottom of the ocean. He suggests that this potential would stay hidden and no one would truly find their value. This line truly epitomizes the unique and priceless talent Gray believes the common people possessed. For example, he suggests that these people had abilities: “The rod of empire might have sway’d, / Or wak’d to ecstasy the living lyre”. He states that they could have the power and ability to lead an empire. He also says that another could have become a musician so great that it would seem the instrument was alive. The speaker suggests that these people had potential for ambition and grandeur.

However, Gray acknowledges that without opportunity, this potential lays untapped. He believes that if these people were given the opportunity, they could have achieved prominence. He states that the common people were full of ideas: “Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire” . Gray uses the metaphor celestial fire to describe the common people with abilities that God intended for them to have. But, he suggests this potential was never harnessed and these hidden talents were never revealed.

Although he speaks about their unharnessed potential, Gray praises the common people for not falling to vices and suggests the evil in power and wealth. Despite their unfulfilled destinies, he speaks highly of them for not falling towards immoral pathways such as greed, betrayal, etc. He suggests that wealth and prestige ultimately falls to corruption and other vices. Thus, Gray admires the common people because they did not become rich and famous. He believes they were constrained: "Their lot forbade their crimes confin'd". In this line, Gray explains that although the common people's circumstances restricted their opportunities, it also limited their wrongdoings. Because the common people did not have wealth, they were not affected by money or power-driven deeds.

After praising that they did not fall to vices, Gray then elevates the poor because they stayed humble with their simple lives. He respects them because they remained happy and satisfied with their families without money or prestige. Gray describes their happiness when doing their jobs: "How jocund did they drive their team afield! How bow'd the woods beneath their sturdy stroke!". He depicts them as cheerful people doing their work such as plowing their fields and raising crops to feed their families. Gray defines these people not by their belongings, but by their behavior and actions. He believes they never diverged from their modest living because they accepted their lifestyle: "Their sober wishes never learn'd to stray; / They kept the noiseless tenor of their way". Gray expresses that these people did not desire to change their quiet way of life. They remained faithful to their duty as the common people and embodied humility. Gray idealizes these people because of their humble acceptance of who they are.

Ultimately, Gray's "Elegy" is a *memento mori*, or in other words, a reminder of mortality. This concept is supported in Gray's elegy when the speaker walks in the cemetery. As he gazes at the

gravestones, he is not only reminded of the people that passed away but also of his own mortality as well. As he reads the simple graves, the speaker wonders about the people who were buried there. Gray then elevates these common people in his poem because he believes that the wealthy and the famous have already been given attention. For example, history books are dedicated to heroes and leaders. Gray acknowledges in this poem that the common people's poverty limited their opportunities and also their crimes. However, he does not speak about the endless opportunities that can be opened due to wealth and power. Humanity idolizes the successful, and Gray idolizes the poor. However, as he suggests, everyone is equal in death.

Ode on Intimations of Immortality

Summary

In the first stanza, the speaker says wistfully that there was a time when all of nature seemed dreamlike to him, "apparelled in celestial light," and that 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.

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.”

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).

Critical 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.

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

Dejection: An Ode

Summary

The speaker recalls a poem that tells the tale of Sir Patrick Spence: In this poem, the moon takes on a certain strange appearance that presages the coming of a storm. The speaker declares that if the author of the poem possessed a sound understanding of weather, then a storm will break on this night as well, for the moon looks now as it did in the poem. The speaker wishes ardently for a storm to erupt, for the violence of the squall might cure his numb feeling. He says that he feels

only a ‘dull pain,’ “a grief without a pang”—a constant deadening of all his feelings. Speaking to a woman whom he addresses as “O Lady,” he admits that he has been gazing at the western sky all evening, able to see its beauty but unable fully to feel it. He says that staring at the green sky will never raise his spirits, for no “outward forms” can generate feelings: Emotions can only emerge from within.

According to the speaker, “we receive but what we give”: the soul itself must provide the light by which we may hope to see nature’s true beauty—a beauty not given to the common crowd of human beings (“the poor loveless ever-anxious crowd”). Calling the Lady “pure of heart,” the speaker says that she already knows about the light and music of the soul, which is Joy. Joy, he says, marries us to nature, thereby giving us “a new Earth and new Heaven, / Undreamt of by the sensual and the proud.”

The speaker insists that there was a time when he was full of hope, when every tribulation was simply the material with which “fancy made me dreams of happiness.” But now his afflictions press him to the earth; he does not mind the decline of his mirth, but he cannot bear the corresponding degeneration of his imagination, which is the source of his creativity and his understanding of the human condition, that which enables him to construct “from my own nature all the natural man.” Hoping to escape the “viper thoughts” that coil around his mind, the speaker turns his attention to the howling wind that has begun to blow. He thinks of the world as an instrument played by a musician, who spins out of the wind a “worse than wintry song.” This melody first calls to mind the rush of an army on the field; quieting, it then evokes a young girl, lost and alone.

It is midnight, but the speaker has “small thoughts” of sleep. However, he hopes that his friend the Lady will be visited by “gentle Sleep” and that she will wake with joyful thoughts and “light heart.” Calling the Lady the “friend devoutest of my choice,” the speaker wishes that she might “ever, evermore rejoice.”

Form

The long ode stanzas of “Dejection” are metered in iambic lines ranging in length from trimeter to pentameter. The rhymes alternate between bracketed rhymes (ABBA) and couplets (CC) with occasional exceptions.

Commentary

In this poem, Coleridge continues his sophisticated philosophical exploration of the relationship between man and nature, positing as he did in “The Nightingale” that human feelings and the forms of nature are essentially separate. Just as the speaker insisted in the earlier poem that the nightingale’s song should not be called melancholy simply because it sounded so to a melancholy poet, he insists here that the beauty of the sky before the storm does not have the power to fill him with joy, for the source of human feeling is within. Only when the individual has access to that source, so that joy shines from him like a light, is he able to see the beauty of nature and to respond to it. (As in “Frost in Midnight,” the city-raised Coleridge insists on a sharper demarcation between the mind and nature than the country-raised Wordsworth would ever have done.)

Coleridge blames his desolate numbness for sapping his creative powers and leaving him without his habitual method of understanding human nature. Despite his insistence on the separation

between the mind and the world, Coleridge nevertheless continues to find metaphors for his own feelings in nature: His dejection is reflected in the gloom of the night as it awaits the storm.

“Dejection” was written in 1802 but was originally drafted in the form of a letter to Sara Hutchinson, the woman Coleridge loved. The much longer original version of the poem contained many of the same elements as “The Nightingale” and “Frost at Midnight,” including the same meditation on his children and their natural education. This version also referred explicitly to “Sara” (replaced in the later version by “Lady”) and “William” (a clear reference to Wordsworth). Coleridge’s strict revision process shortened and tightened the poem, depersonalizing it, but the earlier draft hints at just how important the poem’s themes were to Coleridge personally and indicates that the feelings expressed were the poet’s true beliefs about his own place in the world.

A side note: The story of Sir Patrick Spence, to which the poet alludes in the first stanza, is an ancient Scottish ballad about a sailor who drowns with a boatload of Scottish noblemen, sailing on orders from the king but against his own better judgment. It contains lines that refer to the moon as a predictor of storms, which Coleridge quotes as an epigraph for his ode: “Late, late yestreen I saw the new Moon / With the old Moon in her arms; / And I fear, I fear, my Master dear! / We shall have a deadly storm.”

The Cloud

Summary

The cloud brings rain, moisture, hail, and snow, and gives shade. It is infused with electricity which acts as its guide in the form of lightning accompanied by thunder. When the cloud covers the rising sun, it causes its beams to be spread out over the sky. At evening the cloud floats over

the setting sun like a bird; at night, the cloud provides a thin covering for the moon. Where the cloud cover is removed by the wind, the moon and stars are reflected in the earth's bodies of water.

The cloud under certain conditions forms a ring around the sun and the moon. During storms the cloud spreads across the sky like a roof. At other times the rainbow acts as an arch of triumph for the cloud to march under. The cloud, formed in the sky, draws its substance from the earth and water below it and is part of a never-ending cycle in which it alternately disappears and reappears.

Analysis

In "The Cloud," Shelley is again the myth-maker. The cloud is not merely a physical substance but seems to be an immortal minor divinity (such as a naiad or a Nereid, which in classical mythology were associated with water). By employing this form of personification, Shelley is able to endow nature with the powers and attributes of immortals. Thus his cloud is not only capable of changing its form almost at will but is incapable of dying as well: "I change, but I cannot die."

Shelley's cloud is almost bewilderingly multiform. It begins as a gardener watering flowers, changes to a mother or nurse shading a child from the midday sun while the child takes a nap, becomes a bird that shakes dew from its wings to awaken the buds (which are babies rocked to rest on the breast of their mother the earth), and becomes a thresher wielding a flail. It laughs, sifts, sleeps, folds its wings like a bird, puts a girdle around the sun, becomes a roof, marches through a triumphal arch, is a baby daughter, passes "through the pores of the ocean and shores,"

and tears down an empty tomb. As a divinity, it can be and do a multiplicity of things. Shelley's "The Cloud" is compact with images, which, taken together, give the reader a good account of this natural phenomenon in the language of poetry.

Shelley's "Cloud," although extraordinarily rich in changing imagery, presents no special difficulty except perhaps in the second stanza, in which he makes lightning the pilot of the cloud. What Shelley is saying is that atmospheric electricity or lightning is formed in the tiny droplets of vapor that make up the clouds. He is merely asserting a familiar fact.

In addition to making lightning the guide of the cloud, Shelley subordinates the lightning to some force in the earth which attracts it. He has his cloud say:

Over earth and ocean, with gentle motion,

This pilot is guiding me,

Lured by the love of the genii that move

In the depths of the purple sea;

Over the rills, and the crags, and the hills,

Over the lakes and the plains,

Wherever he dream, under mountain or stream,

The Spirit he loves remains.

Shelley's genii are Moslem spirits that inhabit the earth and exercise supernatural power.

Erasmus Darwin, an eighteenth-century poet-scientist, had used the word metaphorically in his

Botanic Garden, where Shelley probably found it. The Spirit whom the lightning loves seems to be the genii in a singular form, but Shelley is not very clear here. He may have changed from the plural to the singular for the sake of a needed rhyme: remains. The genii are probably meant to poetically present the theory of atmospheric electricity, drawn by the sun from the earth as water vapor, returning to the earth as lightning, dew, frost, and rain. Shelley's genii therefore represents the phenomenon that when an electrically charged cloud approaches the earth's surface, an opposite charge is induced in the earth's surface. When there exists sufficient electrical potential, a lightning flash occurs. Shelley's knowledge of atmospheric electricity, although expressed in highly figurative language, is nevertheless accurate.

The Cloud Confines

Introduction

Composed in 1871, the poem is clearly recollecting Swinburne's great philosophical poem "Hertha", which Swinburne wrote in 1869-70 and published in 1871 in *Songs before Sunrise*. The two poems differ in the way that DGR's and Swinburne's critical departures from montheist ideology differ. DGR was far more uncertain and troubled than Swinburne on these matters, as is quite clear from this poem and the closely related "Soothsay", which was being composed at the same time as this work. In both DGR wants to express his theory of death not "of annihilation but of absorption", as he put it in letters to William Bell Scott and his brother (see below), "a real retributive future for the special atom of life to be re-embodied (if so it were) in a world which its own former identity had helped to fashion for pain or pleasure".

Textual History: Composition

The poem was composed in August 1871 and sent in a letter to William Bell Scott on either 11 or 13 August. Scott published this text, which is dated 9 August and whose manuscript text has not subsequently appeared, in his *Autobiographical Notes*, 146-148 (see also Doughty and Wahl, *Letters* 972-973 and Fredeman, *Correspondence* no. 71. 119). This version, which differs considerably from the received poem in its conclusion, is much closer to the version he sent to his brother in his letter of 10 September 1871.

A later fair copy is included among the miscellaneous poems DGR gathered at the back of the gift book of verses he gave to Mrs. Morris in 1874. A second fair copy is in the Tinker Library at Yale. Also at Yale is a fair copy fragment of stanza 4 that is scripted on the verso on a manuscript of “Beauty's Pageant”.

Textual History: Revision

DGR worried his poem, particularly the conclusion, in the letters he sent to William Bell Scott, Thomas Gordon Hake, and his brother in the early part of September 1871 (see Doughty and Wahl, *Letters* 989-1007 *passim* and Fredeman, *Correspondence* no. 71. 134-135, 144-146). These revisions eventually made their way into the 1872 printing. He was particularly concerned that some proposed changes might seem to reference “a personal God, which of course is not meant” (see his letters of 2 September to Scott and to Scott and to Hake, Fredeman, *Correspondence* no. 71. 134 and 135).

When DGR set about collecting the poem in 1881, he undertook a new set of revisions, but most of these were eventually rejected. Nonetheless, they are quite interesting in themselves. He began to experiment in one of his small notebooks (three passages at pages [16r], [24v], and [29v]). Two other draft efforts at revision survive: one at Princeton, the other in the British Library. The

latter is a pair of alternate stanzas that DGR composed in February 1873 and sent to Theodore Watts in a letter asking him for his view of their aptness.

Tithonus

Summary

The woods in the forests grow old and their leaves fall to the ground. Man is born, works the earth, and then dies and is buried underground. Yet the speaker, Tithonus, is cursed to live forever. Tithonus tells Aurora, goddess of the dawn, that he grows old slowly in her arms like a “white-hair’d shadow” roaming in the east.

Tithonus laments that while he is now a “gray shadow” he was once a beautiful man chosen as Aurora’s lover. He remembers that he long ago asked Aurora to grant him eternal life: “Give me immortality!” Aurora granted his wish generously, like a rich philanthropist who has so much money that he gives charity without thinking twice. However, the Hours, the goddesses who accompany Aurora, were angry that Tithonus was able to resist death, so they took their revenge by battering him until he grew old and withered. Now, though he cannot die, he remains forever old; and he must dwell in the presence of Aurora, who renews herself each morning and is thus forever young. Tithonus appeals to Aurora to take back the gift of immortality while the “silver star” of Venus rises in the morning. He now realizes the ruin in desiring to be different from all the rest of mankind and in living beyond the “goal of ordinance,” the normal human lifespan.

Just before the sun rises, Tithonus catches sight of the “dark world” where he was born a mortal. He witnesses the coming of Aurora, the dawn: her cheek begins to turn red and her eyes grow so bright that they overpower the light of the stars. Aurora’s team of horses awakes and converts the twilight into fire. The poet now addresses Aurora, telling her that she always grows beautiful and

then leaves before she can answer his request. He questions why she must “scare” him with her tearful look of silent regret; her look makes him fear that an old saying might be true—that “The Gods themselves cannot recall their gifts.”

Tithonus sighs and remembers his youth long ago, when he would watch the arrival of the dawn and feel his whole body come alive as he lay down and enjoyed the kisses of another. This lover from his youth used to whisper to him “wild and sweet” melodies, like the music of Apollo’s lyre, which accompanied the construction of Ilion (Troy).

Tithonus asks Aurora not to keep him imprisoned in the east where she rises anew each morning, because his eternal old age contrasts so painfully with her eternal renewal. He cringes cold and wrinkled, whereas she rises each morning to warm “happy men that have the power to die” and men who are already dead in their burial mounds (“grassy barrows”). Tithonus asks Aurora to release him and let him die. This way, she can see his grave when she rises and he, buried in the earth, will be able to forget the emptiness of his present state, and her return “on silver wheels” that stings him each morning.

Form

This poem is a dramatic monologue: the entire text is spoken by a single character whose words reveal his identity. The lines take the form of blank verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter). The poem as a whole falls into seven paragraph-like sections of varying length, each of which forms a thematic unit unto itself.

Commentary

Like Ulysses, Tithonus is a figure from Greek mythology whom Tennyson takes as a speaker in one of his dramatic monologues (see the section on “Ulysses”). According to myth, Tithonus is the brother of Priam, King of Troy, and was loved by Aurora, the immortal goddess of the dawn, who had a habit of carrying off the beautiful young men whom she fancied. Aurora abducted Tithonus and asked Zeus to grant him immortality, which Zeus did. However, she forgot to ask that he also grant eternal youth, so Tithonus soon became a decrepit old man who could not die. Aurora finally transformed him into a grasshopper to relieve him of his sad existence. In this poem, Tennyson slightly alters the mythological story: here, it is Tithonus, not Aurora, who asks for immortality, and it is Aurora, not Zeus, who confers this gift upon him. The source of suffering in the poem is not Aurora’s forgetfulness in formulating her request to Zeus, but rather the goddesses referred to as “strong Hours” who resent Tithonus’s immortality and subject him to the ravages of time.

Tennyson wrote the first version of this poem as “Tithon” in 1833, and then completed the final version for publication in 1859 in the *Cornhill Magazine* edited by William Makepeace Thackeray. The 1833 version contained several significant differences from the version we know today: the poem began not with a repetition but with the lament “Ay me! ay me! The woods decay and fall”; the “swan,” which here dies after many summers was not a swan but a “rose”; and immortality was described as “fatal” rather than “cruel.”

The 1833 poem was initially conceived as a pendant, or companion poem, to “Ulysses.” “Ulysses” alludes to the danger that fulfillment may bring—“It may be that the gulfs will wash us down”; “Tithonus” represents the realization of this danger. For the character of Tithonus achieves that which Ulysses longs for and finds himself bitterly disappointed: Ulysses wanted to sail “beyond the sunset” because he sensed “how dull it is to pause”; Tithonus, in contrast,

questions why any man should want “to pass beyond the goal of ordinance where all should pause” (lines 30-31). “Tithonus” thus serves as an appropriate thematic follow-up to “Ulysses.”

This poem was one of a set of four works (also including “Morted’ Arthur,” “Ulysses,” and “Tiresias”) that Tennyson wrote shortly after Arthur Henry Hallam’s death in 1833. Whereas Hallam was granted youth without immortality, Tithonus is granted immortality without youth. Tennyson developed the idea for a poem about these themes of age and mortality after hearing a remark by Emily Sellwood, Tennyson’s fiancée: Sellwood lamented that unlike the Hallams, “None of the Tennysons ever die.” Appropriately, in depicting the futility of eternal life without youth, Tennyson drew upon a timeless figure: the figure of Tithonus is eternally old because he lives on forever as an old man in the popular imagination.

Themes

The Reconciliation of Religion and Science

Tennyson lived during a period of great scientific advancement, and he used his poetry to work out the conflict between religious faith and scientific discoveries. Notable scientific findings and theories of the Victorian period include stratigraphy, the geological study of rock layers used to date the earth, in 1811; the first sighting of an asteroid in 1801 and galaxies in the 1840s; and Darwin’s theory of evolution and natural selection in 1859. In the second half of the century, scientists, such as Fülöp Semmelweis, Joseph Lister, and Louis Pasteur, began the experiments and work that would eventually lead to germ theory and our modern understanding of microorganisms and diseases. These discoveries challenged traditional religious understandings of nature and natural history.

For most of his career, Tennyson was deeply interested in and troubled by these discoveries. His poem "Locksley Hall" (1842) expresses his ambivalence about technology and scientific progress. There the Speaker feels tempted to abandon modern civilization and return to a savage life in the jungle. In the end, he chooses to live a civilized, modern life and enthusiastically endorses technology. In *Memoriam* connects the despair Tennyson felt over the loss of his friend Arthur Hallam and the despair he felt when contemplating a godless world. In the end, the poem affirms both religious faith and faith in human progress. Nevertheless, Tennyson continued to struggle with the reconciliation of science and religion, as illustrated by some of his later work. For example, "Locksley Hall Sixty Years After" (1886) takes as its protagonist the speaker from the original "Locksley Hall," but now he is an old man, who looks back on his youthful optimism and faith in progress with scorn and skepticism.

The Virtues of Perseverance and Optimism

After the death of his friend Arthur Hallam, Tennyson struggled through a period of deep despair, which he eventually overcame to begin writing again. During his time of mourning, Tennyson rarely wrote and, for many years, battled alcoholism. Many of his poems are about the temptation to give up and fall prey to pessimism, but they also extol the virtues of optimism and discuss the importance of struggling on with life. The need to persevere and continue is the central theme of *In Memoriam* and "Ulysses" (1833), both written after Hallam's death. Perhaps because of Tennyson's gloomy and tragic childhood, perseverance and optimism also appear in poetry written before Hallam's death, such as "The Lotos-Eaters" (1832, 1842). Poems such as "The Lady of Shalott" (1832, 1842) and "The Charge of the Light Brigade" (1854) also vary this theme: both poems glorify characters who embrace their destinies in life, even though those destinies end in tragic death. The Lady of Shalott leaves her seclusion to meet the outer world,

determined to seek the love that is missing in her life. The cavalrymen in “The Charge of the Light Brigade” keep charging through the valley toward the Russian cannons; they persevere even as they realize that they will likely die.

The Glory of England

Tennyson used his poetry to express his love for England. Although he expressed worry and concern about the corruption that so dominated the nineteenth century, he also wrote many poems that glorify nineteenth-century England. “The Charge of the Light Brigade” praises the fortitude and courage of English soldiers during a battle of the Crimean War in which roughly 200 men were killed. As poet laureate, Tennyson was required to write poems for specific state occasions and to dedicate verse to Queen Victoria and her husband, Prince Albert. Nevertheless, Tennyson praised England even when not specifically required to do so. In the *Idylls of the King*, Tennyson glorified England by encouraging a collective English cultural identity: all of England could take pride in Camelot, particularly the chivalrous and capable knights who lived there. Indeed, the modern conception of Camelot as the source of loyalty, chivalry, and romance comes, in part, from Tennyson’s descriptions of it in the *Idylls of the King* and “The Lady of Shalott.”

A Grammarian's Funeral

Context: Grammarian’s Funeral is set in 14th century Italy, during Renaissance. The Renaissance was marked by a revival of interest in Greek and Latin learning, including the languages. ‘The Grammarian’ of the poem would have been a scholar of the classical languages, instrumental in the recovery of ancient texts (remember the brown manuscripts from ‘Bishop’?). These

grammarians were the foundation of the Renaissance but were often the butt of jokes and satirized.

The Poem is About. In this poem, the Grammarian's former students (one of which is the speaker) are performing his eulogy and carrying his corpse to its burial place atop a mountain. The Grammarian has passed away after spending his whole life in study. The poem is about his life, as seen by the speaker (his disciple). He speaks as they move the body from the plains to the mountain-top.

Summary of A Grammarian's Funeral

A Grammarian's Funeral is a Renaissance poem written by Victorian poet Robert Browning. The poem deals with the theme of intellectual depth of a grammarian who just died and is being taken for burial. In the following paragraph, I will try to shed some light into the life of the man and things that defined him.

The grammarian was a man of high ideals. He was very handsome and sweet-voiced, like Apollo. But he shunned all types of worldly pleasure and pursued knowledge single-mindedly. Like Shakespeare's Prospero in *The Tempest*, the grammarian preferred reading and attaining knowledge to anything else. He wanted to be an authority in his area of study—grammar. So he worked tirelessly even at the cost of his health and life. Due to the hard labour, he was attacked by disease and old age. Still, he ignored his physical condition and continued to study.

It is to Browning's credit that he could perfectly embody his own philosophy of life in the personality of the grammarian. According to Browning, man should have some higher ideal in his/her life and should struggle hard to live up to that. The grammarian had his own ideals and his whole life was a struggle to pursue those. Browning, however, does not seem to say that

struggle will bring a result in this very world. A man may encounter failure but he will be rewarded in the afterlife.

The grammarian's devotion to study comes from this belief. In fact, it is the "low-man" who thinks about momentary profit; the high-man, with higher pursuits in life, "throws himself on god". To the grammarian, time is endless: "What's time? Leave Now for dogs and apes! Man has Forever." Only the beast should think about the present moments of life; man should think of afterlife too.

In the poem, after his death his disciples are carrying his corpse to the high mountain to bury. They are passing through the hamlet of the ordinary people who do not have any refined sensibility. The leader of the procession explains that the mountaintop is the proper place for the burial of such a man. He draws a parallel between geographical landscape and man's intellectual depth. The common people live in the plain leading their life like animals. They eat, drink, breed and at last die. But the grammarian was a man of genius. He abandoned the common path. He devoted his life in search of knowledge. The dead body of such a man should not be buried in the common plain. Rather on the mountaintop, which is the symbol of the light of knowledge; the plain below is the symbol of ignorance.

The dead grammarian's ideals and principles were put into perspective throughout the poem. It is his high ideals that made him immortal. In this respect, he is different from other human beings since men of high ideals are different from the typical men of the world. Hence his disciples' argument that he deserves a burial in a place higher than other places. The scholar's disciples consider the peak of a mountain to be such a place.

Analysis

A Grammarian's Funeral by Robert Browning was published in the poetry collection Men and Women in 1855. The poem describes the life of a Grammarian who dedicates his life for the cause of learning. The speaker of the dramatic monologue 'A Grammarian's Funeral' is the disciple of the grammarian. In his speech, he glorifies the ardent devotion of his master, the grammarian. He argues in favour of meditative life and high ideals. It is a long poem of 148 lines written in the form of dramatic monologue that describes the movement of a funeral procession from the plain to the mountain top.

The poem A Grammarian's Funeral begins at a critical situation. The occasion is that of the funeral of the Grammarian. The speaker who is the disciple of the grammarian reveals that the corpse of the dead master has to be carried to a suitable place for burial. As the funeral procession moves the speaker reveals the details of the grammarian's life. It is decided to carry the corpse to the top of the mountain as it suits the man who dedicated his whole life for the pursuit of knowledge. The Grammarian was a scholar and, hence, the place of burial should be a specific one. They decide to carry the corpse far away from the plain because it did not match with the stature of this scholar. The common fields and dark villages were symbols of darkness and ignorance. Here, everyone's desire is limited to common pursuit. The people, here, are bound to their stake like animals. They decide to carry the grammarian's body to the mountain peak which symbolises light and learning.

The disciple chooses the topmost peak of the mountain which is lit by the light coming from a citadel. The place seemed to be suitable for a man with 'rarer' and 'intenser' thought. The leader of the disciples praises his master for his lofty thoughts. As the procession moves further the leader instructs other disciples to move with head held high because they were carrying a man who spent his life in honest pursuit for knowledge. There must be respect and honour shown to

this true learner. The speaker praises his master for his dedication with respect and sympathy. The scholar lost all his youth for the sake of learning. The grammarian possessed the beauty of Apollo, the Greek god of beauty and lyric, but he lost the grace due to his constant involvement in learning. He spends his life in learning and before he could realise about the spring of youth of his life, he was soon overtaken by winter, that is, old age. The lines below give an account of his life: He was a man born with thy face and throat,³⁶

The Scholar Gypsy

Summary

The speaker of "The Scholar-Gypsy" describes a beautiful rural setting in the pastures, with the town of Oxford lying in the distance. He watches the shepherd and reapers working amongst the field, and then tells the shepherd that he will remain out there until sundown, enjoying the scenery and studying the towers of Oxford. All the while, he will keep his book beside him.

His book tells the famous story by Joseph Glanvill, about an impoverished Oxford student who leaves his studies to join a band of gypsies. Once he was immersed within their community, he learned the secrets of their trade.

After a while, two of the Scholar-Gypsy's Oxford associates found him, and he told them about the traditional gypsy style of learning, which emphasizes powerful imagination. His plan was to remain with the gypsies until he learned everything he could, and then to tell their secrets to the world.

Regularly interjecting his own wonder into the telling, the speaker continues the scholar-gypsy's story. Every once in a while, people would claim to have seen him in the Berkshire moors. The

speaker imagines him as a shadowy figure who is waiting for the "spark from heaven," just like everyone else on Earth is. The speaker even claims to have seen the scholar-gipsy himself once, even though it has been over two hundred years since his story first resonated through the halls of Oxford.

Despite that length of time, the speaker does not believe the scholar-gipsy could have died, since he had renounced the life of mortal man, including those things that wear men out to death: "repeated shocks, again, again/exhaust the energy of strongest souls." Having chosen to repudiate this style of life, the scholar-gipsy does not suffer from such "shocks," but instead is "free from the sick fatigue, the languid doubt." He has escaped the perils of modern life, which are slowly creeping up and destroying men like a "strange disease."

The speaker finishes by imploring that the scholar-gipsy avoid everyone who suffers from this "disease," lest he become infected as well.

Analysis

Though this poem explores one of Arnold's signature themes - the depressing monotony and toil of modern life - it is unique in that it works through a narrative. There are in fact two levels of storytelling at work in the poem: that of the scholar-gipsy, and that of the speaker who is grappling with the ideas poised by that singular figure.

Both levels of story relay the same message: the scholar-gipsy has transcended life by escaping modern life. As he usually does, Arnold here criticizes modern life as wearing down even the strongest of men. His choice of the word "disease" is telling, since it implies that this lifestyle is contagious. Even those who try to avoid modern life will eventually become infected.

In this way, the poem makes a comment on the perils of conformity, as other poems in this collection do. What makes the scholar-gypsy so powerful is not only that he wishes to avoid modern life - many wish to do that. More importantly, he is willing to entirely repudiate normal society for the sake of his transcendence. There is a slightly pessimistic worldview implicit in that idea, since it is clearly not possible to revel in true individuality and still be a part of society. The scholar-gypsy has had to turn his back entirely on Oxford, which represents learning and modernity here, in order to become this great figure. And yet the poem overall is much more optimistic than many of Arnold's works, precisely because it suggests that we can transcend if we are willing to pay that cost. This makes it different from a poem like "A Summer Night," which explores the same theme but laments the cost of separation that individuality requires.

For all his admiration, the speaker clearly has not yet mustered the strength to repudiate the world. The setting helps establish his contradictory feelings. The poem begins with images of peaceful, serene rural life, a place where men act as they always have. They have been untouched by the perils of modernity. Pastoral imagery has always been associated in poetry with a type of innocence and purity, unfiltered humanity in touch with nature. The speaker is out in the field contemplating this type of life, the possibility of acting as the scholar-gypsy did.

And yet he is also studying the towers of Oxford, which (as mentioned above) represents the rapidly changing, strictly structured world that the scholar-gypsy renounced. Arnold deftly expresses the speaker's split priorities through this juxtaposition. At the same time that he admires the scholar-gypsy, he cannot fully turn his back on the modern world. It is the same contradiction that plagues the speaker of "A Summer Night."

Thus, the poem overall represents Arnold's inner conflict, his desire to live a transcendent life but inability to totally eschew society. At this point in his life, Arnold felt pulled in different directions by the world's demands. He was trying to resist the infection of modernization, but it was creeping up on him nevertheless, and the pressure to conform was negatively affecting his poetry. Undoubtedly, Arnold wished he could escape in the way the scholar-gipsy did; however, he was too tied down by responsibilities to ever dream of doing so.

The Waste Land

The Waste Land is a poem by T. S. Eliot, widely regarded as one of the most important poems of the 20th century and a central work of modernist poetry. Published in 1922, the 434-line poem first appeared in the United Kingdom in the October issue of Eliot's *The Criterion* and in the United States in the November issue of *The Dial*. It was published in book form in December 1922. Among its famous phrases are "April is the cruellest month", "I will show you fear in a handful of dust", and the mantra in the Sanskrit language "Shantihshantihshantih".

Eliot's poem combines the legend of the Holy Grail and the Fisher King with vignettes of contemporary British society. Eliot employs many literary and cultural allusions from the Western canon such as Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, as well as Shakespeare, Buddhism, and the Hindu Upanishads. The poem shifts between voices of satire and prophecy featuring abrupt and unannounced changes of speaker, location, and time and conjuring a vast and dissonant range of cultures and literatures.

The poem is divided into five sections. The first, "The Burial of the Dead", introduces the diverse themes of disillusionment and despair. The second, "A Game of Chess", employs alternating narrations, in which vignettes of several characters address those themes

experientially. "The Fire Sermon", the third section, offers a philosophical meditation in relation to the imagery of death and views of self-denial in juxtaposition, influenced by Augustine of Hippo and Eastern religions. After a fourth section, "Death by Water", which includes a brief lyrical petition, the culminating fifth section, "What the Thunder Said", concludes with an image of judgement.

Summary

The first section, "The Burial of the Dead," takes its title from the funeral rite of the Anglican Church. Appropriately, the poem introduces four brief evocative episodes that each create a feeling of emotional deadness. In the first episode, Marie, a wealthy German countess, recalls happy childhood memories of sledding in the Bavarian mountains. She is now old and alone. She spends her long days reading. She fears the fast approach of spring because the season's healing rains that coax open the blossoms compel her to more deeply feel her own emotional emptiness. She is unable to feel anything but bored and adrift in her past, unable to love, unwilling to live.

In the second episode, a nameless voice recalls a fleeting experience of emotional attachment, a young girl carrying a bundle of fresh hyacinths—a memory now lost. The voice in turn recounts the devastation of the modern world: a shattered world whose stark sterility is underscored by a relentless and unforgiving heat reducing the world to a stark and rotten waste land.

The third episode introduces Madame Sosostris, a fortune-teller renowned for her uncanny ability to read tarot cards to predict the future. Ailing from a lingering head cold, she

nevertheless reviews the cards displayed on the table. Each foretells a grim, empty future, suggested by her vision of crowds of blank-eyed people aimlessly walking in circles. She cautions to fear particularly death by drowning. The first section closes with an unidentified voice sharing a terrifying vision of a desolate London in the winter, shrouded in a chilly brown fog—its residents moving about like zombies with eyes fixed downward. The narrator momentarily thinks he glimpses the ghost of a man he served with in the army, Stetson, but he understands that unlike seeds, corpses planted do not sprout new life.

The second section, “A Game of Chess,” is divided into two narratives, each of which underscores the emptiness and sterility of the end game of contemporary love. In the first a neurotic wealthy woman nervously waits for her (presumable) lover to arrive. The woman, scented with rich oily lotions and wearing expensive jewelry, methodically brushes her hair, stroke after stroke. She waits in a lavishly decorated room including a carved dolphin on the mantel and a painting of Philomel—a figure from Greek mythology who was raped by a king, her brother-in-law, and whose tongue he cut out to ensure her silence. Philomel was turned into a nightingale known for its heartbreaking song. The woman’s nerves, she concedes, are bad tonight—she begs her lover to comfort her.

In the section’s second narrative, two working-class women in a seedy London dive about to close for the night discuss Lil, a friend whose husband, Albert, is coming home after four years in the army. Lil is suffering from bad teeth—a side-effect of pills she took to abort what would have been her sixth child. The delivery of her fifth child had nearly killed her, but her husband

would not leave her alone. The women fear that Lil's rotten teeth will put off her husband and that Lil should have been fitted for false teeth or her husband will most certainly cheat on her.

The third section, "The Fire Sermon," takes its name from a scathing homily delivered by Buddha railing against the temptations of passion. In this section, a man walking along the desolate bank of the oily and fetid River Thames amid scurrying rats and trash sees himself as the embodiment of the Greek mythological figure of Tiresias—a blind prophet who was turned by an angry goddess into a woman for seven years. Eliot's narrator recounts the story of an office typist having a lackluster late afternoon tryst with an unimaginative and uninspiring lover: a pompous and preening office clerk. The encounter is predictably listless. The sex is dull—the woman's mind wanders—but the man leaves feeling quite satisfied and quite happy with himself. When he finally departs, the woman puts a record on her gramophone, relieved to be alone again. The section closes with the narrator walking along the river and conceiving of a harrowing cascade of images suggesting broken and futile love; most notably, he imagines the Virgin Queen Elizabeth I on a barge on the same Thames awaiting her own disappointing lover, the Earl of Leicester. The section ends collapsing into a raging fire, representing the destructive energy of contemporary passion.

In a poem that has thus far dealt with emotional and spiritual death, the fourth section, "Death by Water," offers a stark reminder of the absolute reality of physical death. Here a young, strapping Phoenician sailor named Phlebas has fallen off his ship and drowned in turbulent seas. For two

weeks, his bloated body drifts along in the currents of the sea floor being nibbled by rapacious sea life. There is no regeneration, no redemption, no resurrection.

The fifth section, “What the Thunder Said,” returns to a stark and desiccated landscape. Two figures walk through a rocky and waterless waste land that stretches to a ragged line of mountains along a distant horizon. It is a post-apocalyptic world expanding to include all the capitals of more than a millennium of European civilization—Jerusalem, Athens, Alexandria, Vienna, London—a ruined world now deathly quiet save for the occasional dry rumbles of thunder. Focus particularly rests on a chapel in ruins: From its shattered roof, a single rooster crows an ironic salute to the break of dawn. With a flash of lightning, rain begins to fall, absurdly and pointlessly.

The poem shuttles across two continents to the Ganges River, sacred to the Hindi in India. Drawing on the Upanishads—a book of fables and parables sacred to the Hindu faith—the thunder appears now to echo a Hindu chant: “Datta, Dayadhvam, Damyata” (translated as Give, Sympathize, Control) (Line 432). The incantation offers a last-ditch strategy for maintaining inner tranquility—spiritual calm despite living in the waste land world that lacks generosity, spirit, or kindness; a world where no one gives, no one sympathizes, and a world where no one controls anything. That sense of dubious hope is underscored by the image of a king sitting upon the shore of a river, returning at last to a kingdom in ruins who is only beginning to grasp the enormous task of restoring it to order and is content, rather, to while away his time fishing in the dead waters of the river. The distinctly Eastern sense of inner peace, then, may be the only way

of moving toward the promise of spiritual invigoration in a shattered Western world, suggested—perhaps ironically, perhaps not—by the repeated chant “Shantih” (Line 433) which translates as “peace that surpasses understanding.”

Church Going

“Church Going” Summary

As soon as I'm positive that there's nothing happening inside the building, I enter and let the door close loudly behind me. I'm visiting yet another church: one with floor mats, pews, and stone architecture; displays of cut flowers that were laid out for Sunday services and are starting to brown; some brass objects and the like up near the altar; the trim little pipe organ; and an uncomfortable, stale-smelling, distracting silence, which has been settled here for ages. Since I don't have a hat to take off, I remove my bicycle clips as an awkward way of showing respect.

I move further inside and touch the rim of the special vessel for holy water. The church roof looks almost new from my vantage point, and I wonder if was recently cleaned or totally restored. I'm sure someone could answer that question, but I can't. Stepping up to the pulpit, I browse a few imposing, moralistic biblical verses and read out the words "Here endeth" with more volume than I'd anticipated. The sound of my voice echoing through the church briefly seems to mock me. Heading back out the front door, I sign the church's guestbook, drop a small Irish coin into the donation box, and think that it wasn't worth taking the time to go in.

And yet, that's exactly what I did; in fact, I stop by churches all the time. Each time I do, I end up feeling this same kind of uncertainty, wondering what I should be trying to find—and wondering what society will do with churches once people completely stop attending them. I wonder whether we'll leave a few of the grander ones around as tourist attractions—with their holy

documents, ceremonial plateware, and vessels for the Eucharist locked up in cases—and just let the others get taken over by sheep and the elements (i.e., let them decay). Will we steer clear of those churches, believing they bring bad luck?

Or will shady women visit them after dark to make their kids touch a certain stone for luck, pick herbs that are supposed to heal cancer, or wait around on some specific night they've been told that a ghost will show up? The power of the churches will endure in some form, in games, riddles, or other random-seeming ways. But superstition, like religious belief, has to end at some point—and what will be left of churches when even the need for active disbelief has ended? Just the grass, pavement with weeds poking through, prickly vines, some bits of the old buildings, and the sky above.

The decaying church's shape will be harder to recognize over time, its purpose harder to remember. I wonder who will be the absolute last person to seek this church out as a church. One of the history buffs who touch things curiously and jot notes and know what "rood-lofts" and other obscure parts of the church were? Someone who's hooked on visiting old ruins because they crave antique artifacts? Someone who loves Christmastime and hopes to catch a whiff of clerical garments, organ pipes, and fragrant incense?

Or will he be someone like me: bored, ignorant when it comes to religion, knowing that the church has no supernatural aura, yet gravitating past suburban shrubbery toward this spot because it held together—so long and so calmly—things that now exist only in scattered form? For example, marriage, birth, death, and thoughts of all these things—the very things this special container (the church) was built to hold? Because while I don't know what this decorated, stale-smelling, barn-like building is worth, I like quietly standing here.

This church is a serious and meaningful place, built on meaningful ground. Inside it, all our combined human instincts are acknowledged and dignified as fate. And that aspect of it, at least, can never die out, since someone, somewhere, will always discover in themselves a desire to grow more serious. And that desire will always lead them toward this spot, which they once heard was an appropriate place to seek wisdom—if only because it's surrounded by so many dead people.

“Church Going” Themes

The Role of Religion in Society

"Church Going" is a meditation on how society will (and won't) change when religion no longer holds any place in it. The speaker, a skeptic who visits a church while biking through the countryside, assumes that religion is dying and churches are sliding into irrelevance. Yet as he tries to imagine the fate of churches in a future without any religion at all, he decides that even non-believers like himself will still find some kind of power in what these buildings represented. Though old doctrines will fade, the poem suggests, some people will always seek out the "serious," ceremonious attitude that religion took toward life and death, because it's part of human nature to search for purpose and meaning.

The speaker visits an empty church despite being a non-believer, and his behavior in this setting shows a mix of respectful fascination and irreverence. He stops by as if on a whim, while cycling through the countryside, yet also admits that he does this "often." He removes "[his] cycle-clips in awkward reverence," a comic detail suggesting that he's not sure how to act in this setting, but feels some instinct toward respect even as a non-believer. He clowns around a bit in the empty church, but also leaves a donation—though it's essentially worthless. He describes his attitude

toward the church as "Bored, uninformed," and well aware that the place holds no "ghostly" aura. His actions, however, reveal ambivalence: even in his skepticism, he's drawn to the place.

The speaker's combined interest in and rejection of the church leads him to imagine a future in which religion has vanished, yet churches themselves still hold a peculiar appeal. In asking "When churches fall completely out of use / What we shall turn them into," he assumes that this change will happen: he's a modern skeptic who views religion as archaic and dying. He speculates about a future in which "belief," "superstition," and even "disbelief" are gone—that is, in which religion no longer holds any claim on human society, even as a rejected idea. Even then, however, he suggests that people like himself will still find power in the mere atmosphere of the church, which they may go so far as to seek out in defunct, decaying houses of worship.

Ultimately, the speaker identifies the primary power of the church (or religion) as its "serious[ness]," suggesting that this aspect will endure even after all the church's doctrines, rituals, and physical structures have crumbled. He admits that, for all his religious skepticism, he likes visiting the church because it's a "serious house on serious earth." That is, it's devoted to solemn respect for matters of life and death that may be trivialized elsewhere.

Though he does think that churches and organized religion will die out, he also sympathizes with their serious purpose and believes that some people will always share this sympathy. Thus, he asserts that this aspect of religious life "never can be obsolete," even as all others fade. Even unused churches will still draw some people, if only because their proximity to death (graveyards) makes them seem natural places to ponder the meaning of life.

While "Church Going" is sometimes irreverent in tone, it takes churches, and the human needs they're supposed to serve, very seriously. Though it never tips toward actual religious belief, it

assumes that those needs will live on even as churches die out and thoughtfully considers how society will respond.

The Desire for Human Connection

The speaker suggests that churches, besides offering a "serious" atmosphere, once played a vital role in uniting communities. While this communal spirit has largely deteriorated, according to the speaker, its lingering memory still attracts even skeptics. Though he himself (ironically) visits churches only when they're empty, he finds their communal purpose part of their appeal. "Church Going" concludes that, if nothing else, churches remain ideal places to contemplate what all human beings share in common, including their mortality.

The speaker's visit to the church suggests both an avoidance of and a subtle hunger for the company of others. He stops inside only "Once I am sure there's nothing going on"—that is, once he's sure the place is empty. Yet he immediately removes his cycle-clips as if in a social gesture of respect, thinks of a question "Someone" could answer if they were around, and half-jokingly reads from the lectern as if to an actual congregation. He also donates a small coin and signs the church's guestbook: subtle gestures of community.

In the end, the speaker acknowledges that people have long gone to churches precisely for this sense of community. He predicts that, even after religions have dispersed, people will seek out former sites of worship in order to contemplate their connection with the rest of humanity. He admits that churches appeal to him because they once brought communities together to honor marriage, birth, and other events now "found only in separation." He depicts them as unifying, equalizing places where "all our compulsions meet" and "are recognized" as part of a common humanity. As long as churches exist in some form, he argues, people will seek out this

communal atmosphere—if only by visiting the graveyards around them and contemplating our shared fragility.

Just as the poem reflects a tension between respect and irreverence, it reflects a tension between the desire for solitary contemplation and the desire for belonging. The speaker doesn't want to join a church, but he finds churches productive sites for thinking about what unites all people. He believes that this impulse toward connection will survive organized religion.

Blackberry Picking

"Blackberry-Picking" was written by the Irish poet Seamus Heaney and first published in 1966, in the collection *Death of a Naturalist*. The poem depicts a seemingly innocent childhood memory of picking blackberries in August. Written from an adult's point of view, the poem uses this experience of picking blackberries and watching them spoil as an extended metaphor for the painful process of growing up and losing childhood innocence.

“Blackberry-Picking” Summary

The speaker, looking back in time, describes a period in late August when, if there was enough heavy rain and sunshine, blackberries would ripen over a single one-week period. One would ripen first, before the others, resembling a shiny purple clump, contrasting with those that weren't yet ripe and still remained red, green, and very firm. The speaker addresses "you" (this could be the reader, the speaker, or an unspecified individual from the speaker's life). This "you" ate that first blackberry and it was sweet like wine that has started to ferment and thicken. The blackberry juice was like the essence of summer. The dark juice left stains on the tongues of those who ate the berries and the taste inspired a strong urge to pick more berries. The previously unripe red berries then also became ripe, gaining a dark color like ink. The blackberry pickers,

eager for more, went outside with their various containers for picking and into the prickly blackberry bushes, which scratched them while the wet grass left marks on their boots. The pickers crossed hayfields, cornfields, and potato drills (shallow ditches for growing potatoes). Throughout this journey, they picked berries until their containers were full and the bottom of each can, which made a tinkling sound when the blackberries dropped into it at first, was covered. They first picked the green, unripe blackberries, which sat at the bottom, and then the darker, riper berries. These darker ones remained on top and the speaker compares them to a plate of staring eyes. When they were done, the blackberry pickers' hands would be sprinkled with pricks of thorns from the blackberry bush briars and their palms would be sticky with blackberry juice. The speaker compares their sticky hands to those of Bluebeard (a fictional character known for murdering his wives).

The pickers stockpiled and saved the fresh berries in a barn, inside a bathtub, which they filled to the brim with berries. But then they discovered fuzzy gray mold taking over their valuable collection of blackberries. The blackberry juice would stink with the odor of fermentation and rot. After they had been picked, the berries would spoil and become sour. The loss of the berries always made the speaker want to cry, because it seemed unfair that the containers full of juicy, ripe berries ended up stinking and rotting. Every year, the speaker hoped the blackberries would stay fresh, even though they knew this was not possible.

“Blackberry-Picking” Themes

Growing Up and the Transience of Youth

In "Blackberry-Picking," the speaker describes a seemingly sweet childhood memory of picking blackberries in summer. The first stanza describes this act, building up a sense of anticipation,

while the second describes what happens after the blackberries have been picked and stored in the "byre" (a barn or shed): they get moldy and rot, resulting in bitter disappointment for the speaker. This experience of blackberry-picking serves as an extended metaphor for the tempestuous process of growing up, something that is just as inevitable as the blackberries getting moldy.

The poem sets the scene in late August, a time of year marked by transformation. Blackberries are ripening, a process that can be compared to a child maturing (people are often said to "ripen with age"). The time at which the poem is set indicates a point of seasonal change, comparable to the transition from childhood to adolescence. The reference to "summer's blood" also highlights the death of summer, implying the death of childhood, and the subsequent start of the harvest season. The poem itself then describes an act of harvest, which starts with the taste of a "sweet" berry ("that first one") and ends in "lovely canfuls [that] smelt of rot," mirroring the natural decay that eventually comes with aging.

The poem's first lines, however, still suggest a sense of hope and anticipation, as "for a full week, the blackberries would ripen." But the environment in which they do so is tempestuous: there's a mix of "heavy rain and sun," both of which are needed for the blackberries to ripen. This reflects the realities of life, which has its own rain and sun, figuratively speaking—moments of dark and light, bad and good, negative and positive. Both the "heavy rain and sun" of life help people grow and mature, just like the blackberries.

What's more, the process of blackberry-picking itself is shown in somewhat violent terms. This innocent childhood act is not as simple, easy, or painless as it might first seem, much like growing up itself. The language used to describe blackberry-picking is raw and aggressive: the

"briars scratched" and the "wet grass bleached our boots." Afterwards, the speaker's "hands were peppered / With thorn pricks." The children are left with physical marks. Similarly, eating the blackberries is described as "Leaving stains upon the tongue."

The violence of this language is made even more ominous by the description of the dark berries that "burned / Like a plate of eyes." The dark eyes watching appear to be threatening, a sense that is affirmed by the allusion to Bluebeard. The comparison of the children's blackberry-stained hands to those of Bluebeard, a murderer, suggests the children themselves are not so innocent as they may first appear. They are painted in animalistic terms as they eat the sweet "flesh" of the berries and are driven by a "lust for / Picking."

Ultimately, it's not the speaker's active choice to go blackberry picking. Rather, the speaker's hunger is the driver: "hunger / sent us out." The speaker's desire for the berries thus seems unavoidable, like a basic need for food. The fact that the speaker develops a "lust for / Picking" further suggests a lack of control. This mirrors the reality that people—although they may "hunger" for the knowledge and freedom of adulthood—really have no control over growing up. The simply will grow up in time and lose their youth whether they like it or not, just as the berries inevitably "turn sour."

Adult Wisdom and Acceptance

Growing up and getting older goes hand-in-hand with a loss of childhood innocence—a second major theme in the poem. The speaker of the poem describes a childhood memory from an adult's point of view. The poem's events all occur in the past, and this memory is thus painted with the knowledge of a person who is aware of the transience of youth, who no longer possesses

their own childhood innocence, and who is well acquainted with life's inevitable disappointments.

The second stanza of the poem delivers on the ominous promise made by the first. In the end, the experience of blackberry-picking is marred by the simple fact that the blackberries don't keep and instead get moldy. It's impossible to avoid such disappointments and losses in life, the poem suggests—a fact that people come to realize as they grow up and lose their childish innocence.

To that end, the process of decay is described in repulsive, negative terms. The mold on the berries is "a fur, / A rat-grey fungus." The smell is also bad: "The juice was stinking too," and "the lovely canfuls smelt of rot." The unsavory sense of taste is depicted with the phrase "the sweet flesh would turn sour." The second stanza thus provides a stark contrast to the image of innocent children cheerfully picking blackberries, speaking instead, through its vivid description of decay, to the trauma of that innocence being lost.

The end result of "Blackberry-Picking" (both the poem and the process) is one that can't be avoided—the rotting. This is made clear as the speaker emphasizes that this is an annual event, witnessed repeatedly: "I always felt like crying" and "Each year I hoped they'd keep, knew they would not." The outcome is always the same. The speaker's disillusionment takes time, however, as the speaker repeatedly witnesses with distress the inevitable cycle of harvesting and rotting. The speaker also notes that "It wasn't fair" that the blackberries rotted. This reflects the fact that there is an injustice that comes with getting older. It's not something people do because they want to, but because it's unavoidable.

One reading of the poem might interpret it as the speaker's ultimate acceptance of this inevitability. The poem itself marks a moment of resignation, as if the speaker is finally coming

to terms with the way youth's sweetness must come to an end. The epigraph sometimes published with the poem, "for Philip Hobsbaum," could also be interpreted as an adult's acceptance that life is filled with loss and disappointment. Hobsbaum was Seamus Heaney's teacher. Teachers are often heroes of a person's childhood. If the speaker is to be equated with Heaney himself, the poem might serve as his message to the teacher that he is now grown and understands adult realities.

In depicting a childhood memory from an adult's point of view, "Blackberry-Picking" shows how people come to resign themselves to life's disappointments as they grow up. Although this is both inevitable and natural, it is bittersweet as the innocence of childhood gives way to the wisdom of adulthood. The process of change (of growing up, ripening, maturing) is not a calm one, the poem implies, but the poem also suggests that this adult wisdom itself may be a reward of sorts. Accepting these inevitabilities instead of mourning them is one way to make peace with the harsh reality of life.

Hawk Roosting

Hughes included 'Hawk Roosting' in his second book of poetry called *Lupercal*, which was published in 1960. Hughes was met with almost instant acclaim in 1957 after his first book of poetry, 'The Hawk in the Rain', was published; it catapulted Hughes into the spotlight. Hughes was born in England in 1930; he received his formal education at Cambridge, and he even served in the Royal Air Force. Hughes married American poet Sylvia Plath in 1956. Hughes and Plath had two children, but the majority of their marriage was rocky and unstable. Plath ended her life in 1963. Hughes served as Poet Laureate from 1984 until his death of cancer in 1998. Birthday

Letters, the last book of poetry published before his death, explored the complex relationship he shared with Plath.

“Hawk Roosting” Summary

I, a hawk, sit at the top of the forest with my eyes shut. I'm doing nothing, holding no false dreams between my head's curved beak and the curved talons of my feet. In my sleep, I dream about killing my prey perfectly and eating them.

The trees are so well-suited to my way of being! The air I float on and the sun's light seem perfectly adapted to my way of life, and the earth faces the sky so I can inspect it.

My feet are gripped tightly to the branch. It took millions of years to make my foot, and every single feather. Sometimes, I hold other products of Creation in my foot when I catch them.

Other times I soar high into the sky, revolving the world around me as I spiral up in slow circles. I kill when and where I want, because the world belongs to me. I have no use for clever but false logical thinking: my politeness is ripping the heads off my prey—

That's how death gets dished out. And my one true way takes me straight through life, causing others to die. I need no logical justifications for my actions.

I fly between the earth and the sun, and it has always been this way. My gaze has not allowed anything to change. I will keep things like this forever.

“Hawk Roosting” Themes

Nature and Violence

In “Hawk Roosting,” Ted Hughes imagines the interior thoughts of one of the great birds of prey: the hawk. The poem is told entirely from the perspective of the hawk, which is personified as having the powers of conscious thought and a command of English. What the hawk lacks, however, are human qualities like mercy and remorse: it is ruthless and direct in its thoughts about hunting prey, though this violence is presented matter-of-factly, as simply part of who the hawk is. Imagining what goes on in the mind of the hawk facilitates a deeper meditation about nature, which the poem presents as both majestic and fearsome. Violence, the poem suggests, is just as much a part of nature as is beauty, and the natural world isn’t subject to human notions of morality.

The hawk is a killer, and part of the poem’s aim is to make clear just how natural this violence is. To that end, the opening line depicts the hawk sitting at the “top of the wood,” symbolizing its place at the top of its ecosystem. And the poem is graphic in its depiction of the bird’s violence throughout—the hawk refers to its “Manners” as “tearing off heads” and its flight path as “direct / Through the bones of the living.” The hawk’s life is literally governed the “allotment of death.” In other words, it is meant to kill.

The hawk knows this, and comments on the way that nature seems to be perfectly designed to facilitate the hawk’s hunting. Nature is “of advantage to me,” it says, and describes itself as the product of “the whole of Creation.” “Creation” here refers to both nature and the entirety of existence, while also alluding to a religious worldview. This religious element is relevant to the poem because much of human morality is based on or informed by religion (and vice versa). The

mention of Creation speaks to the hawk's prowess, but also to the incredible way that nature evolves to create the conditions for its creatures to flourish—even if those same creatures are essentially killing machines.

The hawk insists upon its rightful place within the natural order by describing the prey that it holds “in my foot” as part of “Creation” too. The hawk understands that both it and its prey have their roles to play, even if one seems easier to stomach than the other. In other words, the hawk's capacity for violence is as natural as things that seem more innocent: flowers or puppies, for example!

This understanding that killing and violence are an integral part of nature informs the hawk's attitude and personality. It rejects human understanding and morality, claiming that it has no need for “falsifying dream[s]” or “sophistry.” Sophistry is the use of clever but false arguments, which the hawk, acting in accordance with its true nature, has no need for. As such, humans are wrong to project their moral frameworks—especially the equation of violence with evil—onto the natural world. Nature, insists the hawk, is governed by its own laws.

That's why the hawk has only “one path”; its one true way is that of a killer—killing is its nature. And that's why the hawk states that “Nothing has changed since I began [...] I am going to keep things like this.” Its way of being is innate and natural, and it will continue to be this way, stoking fear in the hearts of its prey. The poem, then, explores nature by focusing on one small part of it, the hawk. Through giving voice to the hawk, the poem insists on the way in which nature is both miraculous and violent. It argues that violence and innocence, in the natural world at least, coexist in balance—and that human moral frameworks don't really apply accurately to creatures like the hawk.